a:t:a:a
association
des traducteurs
adaptateurs
de l'audiovisuel

FRENCH SUBTITLING STANDARDS

The goal of subtitles is to allow viewers to watch a programme and discover the story themselves. Subtitles are not there to guide viewers but rather to preserve their experience by enabling them to stay focused on and immersed in the programme. Subtitles must be as discrete as possible and not a constant reminder to the viewer that they're there. Screams, sighs and exclamations are not translated. Repetitions and phatic speech is avoided.

Professional subtitling is a multi-step process which includes timespotting, translating and adapting, and verifying those first two steps through simulation. The third and final phase, simulation, should always be carried out in tandem with an experienced audiovisual translation professional alongside the author.

The standards shown below are purely technical guidelines that are necessary to produce professional subtitles. However, simply following them will not ensure a quality adaptation. The author's creativity, experience and talent ultimately determine the final quality.

SPOTTING

Minimum gap between two subtitles:	4 frames
Minimum gap with scene changes:	4 to 6 frames (3|1 - 3|2 - 4|1 - 4|2)
Minimum subtitle length, for one or two words:	16 frames
Maximum subtitle length, excluding songs:	5 seconds

Number of characters per line:

- Cinema: 40-41

- Online streaming: 40-42

- Video production: 38-40

- Television/Broadcast: 36-37

READING SPEED

On average, the reading speed for the French is 14 to 15 characters per second.

A reading speed of 16 or 17 characters per second is too fast and will tire the eyes after just a few minutes.

POSITION

Horizontal: Centred, can be left or right justified when there is a title on screen

Vertical: At the bottom of the screen, or slightly above an on-screen title

Systematically placing subtitles at the top of the screen every time a title appears ruins the viewing experience and must be avoided at all costs: viewers will not notice the subtitle at the top of the screen and will miss it because they are simply used to looking at the bottom. Only subtitles that really appear over a title should be moved up or, when the system is technically incapable of that, placed at the top of the screen.

ITALICS

Italics are used in the following situations:

- Filtered voice (loudspeaker, telephone, television, radio, microphone)

- Narration or internal thoughts/dialogue

- Inserts and titles

- Titles (book, newspaper, artwork, musical album, film, program, plays)

- Song lyrics (only if cited)

- Foreign words, scientific terms in Latin

- Excerpts of a film or archival footage in DVD bonus features or a documentary

Italics are never used to add emphasis, nor are they used for **a character who is off camera**.

QUOTATION MARKS

- English or straight quotation marks are used without spaces → **"Bonjour"**, not **« Bonjour »**

- Used for song titles → "La vie en rose"

- Lyrics from a song that's not sung or a passage from a book that's read aloud

There are two ways to place the opening and closing quotation marks:

- Open quotation marks at the beginning of each subtitle containing a long quote and close quotation marks at the end of the last subtitle containing the end of the quote.

    "I walked into the room
    "and saw the zombies
    "who were hungry."

- Open quotation marks at the beginning of each subtitle containing the quote and close quotation marks at the end.

    "I walked into the room

    and saw hungry zombies."

There are two situations where quotation marks and punctuation come into play:

- The punctuation is **outside** the quotation marks when a few words are cited:

    I said "goodbye" three times.

- The punctuation is **inside** the quotation marks when an entire sentence is cited:

I told him,

"You will definitely eat!"

INSERTS & TITLES / FORCED NARRATIVES

Translating dialogue always takes priority over on-screen texts.

Only on-screen texts that are necessary to understanding the scene are translated.

Inserts and titles are written in lowercase italics.

The title of the programme is written in capital letters.

Inserts > Written narrative elements present in the programme: newspaper headlines or clippings, excerpts from magazines or books, text messages, instant messages, social media messages or posts, signs, posters, handwritten notes, etc.

Titles > On-screen text added during postproduction: locations, dates, chapter titles, special mentions like "Previously", etc.

CAPITAL LETTERS

Accentuated capitals are preferred.

LIVRÉS À EUX-MÊMES

DIALOGUES

- The second line must reply to the first.

- Each line starts with a capital letter and is a complete sentence.

- Dialogues are to be used sparingly and never over a scene change.

LINE BREAKS

- A two-line subtitle must follow certain linguistic and grammatical conventions.

   Examples:

   - Don't separate a subject from its verb

   She told him he   →   She told him

   had to leave.   he had to leave.

   - Don't separate a preposition from an infinitive

   He really didn't want to   →   He really didn't want

   accept the idea.   to accept the idea.

   - Avoid placing a relative pronoun at the end of a line

   I didn't want to give him   →   I didn't want

   back his book.   to give him back his book.

   - Don't hyphenate words at the end of a line

   My grandma was extre-   →   My grandma was
                                                         extremely happy to see me.
   mely happy to see me.

ELLIPSIS

- Used for a character who is hesitating, who doesn't finish a sentence, or who is interrupted.

- Never used to indicate a sentence that continues in the next subtitle.

DASHES

- Only used for dialogues.

- A single dash at the beginning of each line, followed by a space.

OTHER CHARACTERS

- Exclamation marks are to be used sparingly.

- Semi-colons and parentheses are not to be used.

- Certain special characters may be used depending on client technical specifications such as Ceefax or broadcast standards for Arte.

SIGNATURE

- In accordance with Article L. 132-11 of the French Intellectual Property Code, to protect an author's moral rights, unless the author expressly requests not be mentioned, the author's name must be mentioned at the beginning of the closing credits.

- The signature can be followed by a subtitle mentioning the name of the lab that handled this step of post-production.