

Ofcom's Accessibility Best Practice Guidelines – Plain English Summary

Ofcom provides best practice guidelines which give advice to broadcasters and video-on-demand providers (“VoD providers”) on making access services which are high-quality and easy to use.

This document is a summary only and is aimed at audiences. The full guidelines can be found on [our website](#).

Our guidelines include general guidance and guidance on specific access services (subtitling, audio description and signing). In this document we use “providers” to mean broadcasters and providers of VoD services.

General Guidance

Audiences

Ofcom encourages providers to make programmes accessible to all disabled people, and particularly those with sight and hearing loss. We understand that different audiences may have different preferences (for example, people with sight and hearing loss may prefer larger subtitles). We encourage providers to offer customisation options (for example in subtitle size/ colour/ font) and choice for viewers, where possible. Providers should also allow viewers to use multiple access services at the same time on a programme.

Strategies

We want providers to think not just about creating more access services for their programmes, but also about making sure these are of good quality. Where practical, we encourage providers and content makers to include access services that have already been made when selling or buying content.

Along with subtitling, audio description and signing, we encourage providers to consider different ways of making programmes accessible, for example making programmes in Makaton for people with learning disabilities and improving the audibility of dialogue in programmes. We also encourage providers to help make adverts accessible.

Providers need to plan carefully how to improve the accessibility of their services, and so we encourage them to make action plans, talking to audiences about what these should include.

Prioritising Programmes

We encourage providers to ask user groups which programmes are most important to make accessible. Providers should also make sure that:

- Access services are included in all programmes in a series;
- Information about national and local emergencies is subtitled, signed and audible;
- Occasions of national importance are made accessible; and
- Access services are added to on-demand programmes before they are released.

Communicating about availability

Providers should make audiences aware of the availability of access services. This includes communicating with audiences quickly if something goes wrong and communicating in different ways, including making announcements both on television and online.

Providers of on-demand services should make accessible programmes easy to find on these services, for example by adding categories for audio described and signed content. Providers should also give instructions to help audiences understand how to find programmes with access services on on-demand services.

Making accessible programmes

We encourage providers to consider accessibility not only when creating access services, but also when making programmes. For example, providers could make programmes more accessible for people with sight loss by having presenters read out on-screen text (such as scores in sports programmes or results in quiz shows).

Disabled people reflect the make-up of UK society with a range of experiences and backgrounds. Providers should make sure that teams involved in making accessible programmes, including audio describers and signers, reflect the diversity of their audiences. This will mean that accessible programmes better serve their audiences.

Monitoring for quality

Providers should monitor the quality of their access services, including using specific tools to help monitor subtitling quality, for example tools that help to measure the accuracy of their subtitles. Providers should also seek feedback from audiences proactively on the quality of their programmes, rather than only relying on complaints. Ways of providing feedback should also be accessible (for example, by offering a variety of ways to complain such as email/ phone/ post/ video relay and responding to feedback in plain language).

Subtitling

Subtitling Accuracy, Synchronisation and Speeds

Subtitles should be accurate and should generally be synchronised with the speech as closely as possible. We know this might not be possible all the time and occasionally, for example where the talking is very fast, subtitles might need to be summarised. Subtitles should remain on the screen long enough so that they can be read, but not so long that they are distracting.

Live Programmes

Subtitles should flow as smoothly as possible in live programmes. We recommend that live subtitles should have an average delay of no more than 4.5 seconds. We know that the delay can be sometimes longer for programmes like fast-paced chat shows or sports programmes. Accuracy may be more of a priority for important information such as emergency announcements broadcast on TV.

Sound and music descriptions

Speakers should be clearly identified, and sound/ music effects should be clearly described, for example stating the mood of music. Off-screen sounds should be indicated and unexpected pauses or muffled voices should be explained. Italic writing or capital letters can show emphasis or emotion.

Song lyrics should be subtitled if possible. Song titles and artists' names are also useful.

Subtitle Presentation

Subtitles should be easy to read, clearly visible against the background, and should not cover the speaker's mouth/ other important information. We give

some examples of appropriate fonts (such as Tiresias and Helvetica) and a reminder that larger font sizes are important for people with sight loss.

Language of subtitling

Subtitles should be in the language preferred by the programme's intended audience in the UK. This is usually the same language as the main spoken language of the programme but may not be the case if audiences say that they prefer the subtitles to be in a different language.

Audio Description

Style of AD

Providers should think about different styles of AD (for example more neutral and more informal styles), taking account of the type of programme and making sure they ask their audiences what they want. Providers should also try to have the same person describing the programme for each episode in a series.

AD should be easy to hear and understand – it should be loud enough to hear alongside the other programme sounds.

What should be described

AD should describe visual information that is relevant to the plot, but it should not describe information that is obvious from listening to the speaking or sound effects, such as door slams. It can also be important to describe other things as well, such as the diversity of characters and presenters – things like race, disability and gender. Like everybody else, people with sight loss from different backgrounds might want to know when people like them are represented on screen.

What else can help

For some types of programmes AD is not so useful. For example, where there is a lot of talk, it is difficult to find space to describe what else is going on.

We encourage providers to think about other ways they can make sure that people with sight loss and blind people can follow programmes. For example:

- Using 'audio introductions' which describe characters at the start of the programme. They are most useful for series with characters that appear regularly.

- Using 'extended audio description' where you can pause the video to fit in more AD before the programme starts up again.
- Making sure that where there is a lot of talk, any on-screen text is also read out (for example, by the presenter in quiz shows).
- In news programmes, making sure that any foreign language subtitles are also read out.

Signing

Types of signing

Broadcasters who must provide sign language should use British Sign Language (BSL) for their legal requirements. Irish Sign Language (ISL) may also be used for audiences in Northern Ireland.

Sign-interpretation is when a programme is translated into sign-language by a signer in the corner of the screen. It lets Deaf people enjoy popular programming made in other languages (including English) and might be especially useful for news and current affairs programmes. Sign-presented programming is when everyone in the programme uses sign-language and it allows Deaf people to watch programmes in their first language and see their community on-screen. It can be easier to understand for young children who are learning sign language.

VoD providers should ask their audiences which kind of signed programmes they would prefer.

Providers should try to include BSL speakers in other programmes too, including programmes that are mainly in English. When they do this, the BSL users' hands and face should be kept in shot so that they can be understood.

Signed programmes should also be subtitled where possible.

Quality of signed programmes

Sign-interpretation should be in time with the language being spoken as far as possible, and the signer should show who is speaking and important sound effects. The signing should be accurate, easy to understand and give a sense of the speaker's tone.

The sign-interpreter should be easy to see, for example by wearing plain clothing that is a different colour to the programme screen. They should take

up at least 1/6th of the screen – they should be large enough to see their upper body, hands and face, but not so big they get in the way of the programme. Providers should consider tools to change the size of the signer where possible and remember that their programmes might be viewed on different size screens (for example, on mobile phones or very large home screens).

Providers should also try to have the same sign-interpreter on each episode of a series.