University of Iowa captioning guide for public-facing content

Many colleges, departments, and units at Iowa regularly create videos and live-stream events that are available for viewing by audiences outside the university. But did you know that captioning is required for all university-created public-facing content?

Use this guide to learn more about the importance of captions and how to implement them.

Captioning policies and practices
Iowa is proud of its commitment to accessibility for faculty, staff, students, and all audiences who might read or view content on digital platforms. Iowa requires that all public-facing videos or live streams (including Facebook Live events) produced by the university include captioning. **(For the purpose of this document, public-facing is defined as content that is available to audiences outside the university. It does not include academic or course material content.)** All campus groups producing public-facing video media must ensure that the video is accessible to the deaf or hard of hearing, as is required by law (within the Americans with Disabilities Act) and according to university policy.

All university web resources are required to follow the IT accessibility policy. Visit Information Technology Services' IT accessibility page to learn more about captioning and other topics related to IT accessibility.

Note: Auto-generated captions do not yet meet federal or university accessibility requirements.

What is a video caption?
Video captions are lines of text that accompany a video. They move at the same speed as the video and should be written in easy-to-read sentences or segments of text. They are displayed in the media player *along with* the accompanying audio.

Captions also should include timing notation, descriptions of sound effects, and/or the identity of the speaker. Captions should not be confused with subtitles, which generally only include spoken text.

Added value
Most people know that video captions enable people who are deaf or hard of hearing to experience dialog and other sounds in the video, but captions also serve other important purposes.

- Captions can help dual-language and low-literacy users better understand the video.
- Users in noisy or distracting environments can use captions when they can't play audio.
- Users learning about specialized or technical content can refer to captions to clarify new, difficult, or industry-specific terminology.
- Captions make video content more searchable. This is especially important to make your content findable by Google, Bing, etc.

How to caption web video

Live captioning

1. **Schedule the live stream** on the platform you intend to use to stream the event (e.g., Wowza, Facebook, YouTube). Doing so will determine your stream information. On some platforms

(Wowza, for example), you will be able to create your own stream key/ID. On others (like Facebook Live), these will be randomly generated.

2. **Determine the live-captioning service** you will partner with. Many options are available online, most with rates averaging about $125 per hour of content.

3. **Provide stream details** to the live-captioning service you've selected.

   Example: The Office of Strategic Communication is live-streaming commencement ceremonies. What information should be provided to the live-captioning service ahead of time?
   - **Event name**
   - **Event date and time**
   - **Probable duration**
   - **Contact** (The person your caption service will call to check in with at the time of the event to confirm things are working or communicate problems)
   - **Stream page** (URL where the stream will be available to viewers)
   - **Caption code** (The code or key to allow the caption service to add captions—part of your stream info selected or generated in Step 1)

4. **Pass along any relevant information** that will help your caption service prepare for the event ahead of time. Providing lists of speakers or graduate names, an event program, or a glossary of technical terms that may be used in a lecture will all help improve the quality of the live captions accompanying your event.

For more information and advice about live captioning, contact osc-video-requests@uiowa.edu.

Note: For most captioning platforms, you will need to stream the event from a computer rather than a smartphone. Currently, phones aren't able to provide the stream key that a captioning service must access in order to synchronize their work with your event.

Captioning pre-recorded content

DIY captioning
If you choose to create captions for your own content, follow these basic steps:

1. Create a transcript for your video content.
2. Synchronize the transcript with your video.
   - **Tools to use** for this step include Camtasia, MovieCaptioner, SubtitleEdit, and Annotation Edit.
   - Another option is to use YouTube's automated annotations, **but you will need to manually proof and edit them**.
3. Publish your video on the media server (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo).
   - **Note:** Once your video is published, it is subject to [ADA](#) and [university policy requirements](#), so be sure to publish only when you're ready to complete the next steps in quick succession.
4. Export your caption in the appropriate file format. (Most at the University of Iowa use .SRT.)

5. Publish your caption file to the media server, associating the caption file with your uploaded media.

Paid captioning

Captioning services can provide quality captions for as little as $1 per media minute, and prices generally top out at $2.65 per media minute.

When you upload your video or audio file to a captioning service, you will receive synchronized, proofread captions that are ready for publication. Captions are available in any format, and there is no additional charge for receiving captions in multiple formats. Turnaround time can be three to four business days, and for some services, captions for content of 30 minutes or less may be completed within 24 hours. Lengthier videos may have longer turnaround times.

After the captioning is complete, you will receive an email telling you how to access your caption file(s). Make sure to review the captions before publishing them to your media server.

Using a captioning service is the easiest way to caption video and is recommended for videos longer than 15 minutes—especially those with multiple speakers, dense dialogue, or other complicated factors.

Note: If all you need is a transcript, many captioning services also provide a transcription option. The process is similar to the one described above, except you receive only a clean text transcript of your media's audio track, rather than captions synchronized to your video.

Learn more about creating accessible captioning on [Information Technology Services' IT accessibility page](#).

Email [itaccessibility@uiowa.edu](#) for additional guidance about captioning pre-recorded content.

Captioning best practices

The basics
- **Left-justify the text** in your captions and center them in the bottom portion of the screen. However, sometimes captions obscure important parts of the video. If this is the case, move the captions to a less-intrusive place.
- **Use no more than 32 characters per line**—usually four to eight words—and use no more than two lines per caption.
- **Use proper punctuation** at all times.
- **Take care to match what the speaker says exactly**; however, minor tweaks or omissions are acceptable. If the speaker uses "um" or "ah" a lot, feel free to omit those.
- **Use spell check** before publishing.

Sound and silence
If there's a long period of silence in your video, there's no need for the preceding caption to linger on the screen. Unless the speech is too quick and/or clipped in a way that makes reading the captions difficult, your captions should match the timing of the speech in the video. Insert nonverbal sounds such as **[Gasps!]** or **[Wind blowing]** if they are necessary for the user to understand the video. But in general, if there is a long period of silence, insert **[Silence]** for its duration.

Music
When your video includes music, especially music with lyrics, captioning can get a bit more difficult. If there is only instrumental music, use **[Music playing – no lyrics]** or **[Quiet music playing in background]**.

If music with no lyrics plays for a long time, you can use ♪ and leave it on the screen after using **[Music playing – no lyrics]**.

If you know what kind of music is playing, indicate it: **[Pop music playing]**, **[Beethoven's Ninth Symphony playing]**.

If the music includes lyrics, input and synchronize the lyrics with a music note before and at the end of each line.

FAQ

Will my college or unit be responsible for the cost of captioning?
Yes. Each unit is responsible for the cost of captioning its content. However, captioning doesn't have to be costly. Writing your own captions in-house is one option. Paid services also start as low as $1 per media minute. See the "How to caption web video" section for more details.

Does closed captioning need to appear on every public facing video or live-stream event produced?
Yes. University of Iowa policies require all public-facing video content to include captions. See the university's IT accessibility policies here.

Can I use auto-generated captions on my content?
No. Auto-generated captions do not generally meet ADA or University of Iowa accessibility standards. Captions on public-facing university video content must either be created by your unit or an outside captioning service. You can create accurate captions by beginning with auto-generated captions and then editing for accuracy before publishing.

Is captioning required for Facebook Live events?
Yes. All university public-facing web video, including Facebook Live events, must be captioned. However, note that it isn't currently possible to send Facebook Live data to a third-party live-captioning service via a smartphone; the stream will instead need to be sent from a computer.

Why are we required to do this?
All campus groups producing public-facing video media must ensure that their media is accessible to the deaf or hard of hearing, as required by law according to the Americans with Disabilities Act and reflected in University of Iowa policy.

Do we need to retroactively caption videos that were produced in the past and are still published on our websites?
All published University of Iowa web video must include captions. If a video is still available for public viewing, it needs to include captions in order to comply with university policy and the Americans with Disabilities Act.

Will we be asked to unpublish a video if it's not captioned?
All public-facing video content on University of Iowa websites must include captions. If you are unable to add captions to a video, it is best to remove it from your website.

Who can I contact for more help?
If you have specific questions that aren't covered in this guide, you can reach out to the following people:

- Email itaccessibility@uiowa.edu for additional guidance about captioning pre-recorded content or other questions about the UI's IT Accessibility policy.
- Email osc-video-request@uiowa.edu for questions about how to caption a public-facing video.