

So... You Wanna Caption a Show?

First of all, congratulations!

Providing open captioning is an excellent way to allow otherwise excluded audience members to engage with a performance or to engage with it more fully and authentically. One of the many beauties of open captioning is that, unlike many accessibility practices, if handled properly, it benefits audience members without necessarily requiring them to self-identify as being Deaf, deaf, or hearing impaired or asking them to engage in any alienating interactions. Many of us benefit from the practice of open captioning, even if we do not identify within the disabled community.

In my experience, open captioning is the opposite of a thankless job. Countless patrons across the spectrum of hearing abilities appreciate the inclusion of captions in programming and are expressive of that upon leaving the theatre. Whether it's a major institution, an educational program, or a small community gathering, open captioning is an important step towards broadened inclusivity in the theatre. It is my hope that this packet provide insight into the logistics of introducing open captioning to your theatrical programs, give helpful instructions on creating the captions, and help you to foresee the many pratfalls which may lie in your way.

I write this packet having designed and implemented captions for several professional, educational, and community theatre endeavors. In my time at Brandeis University, I have been thrilled to introduce captioning to the theater arts department's season. However, as I prepare to graduate, I want to provide resources in order for the department to continue this vital work. I began this packet as a resource for future students who are interested in engaging with this work but unsure of how to start. As I worked, I made revisions in order to hopefully reach a broader range of theatre practitioners interested in starting to engage with accessibility legwork. This packet is mainly intended for groups looking to start at the beginning—- with a projector, a screen, and a few internal go-getters. However, I feel it is important to acknowledge that professional groups can be hired to entirely coordinate captioning for performances and programs and equipment can be purchased or rented. It is my intention, though, to disclose the ways in which groups may provide captioning services without breaking the bank or traipsing too far into unfamiliar territory.

Sincerely,
Andrew Child

What is open captioning?

Open captions are similar to opera supertitles or translation subtitles in that they visually describe every auditory element of a performance. Dialogue, sound effects, musical cues, and sometimes sign language are transcribed and, generally, projected so that the audience can read along with the performance. When you are watching tv, Netflix, or online videos, you are often given the option to turn on closed captioning. The terms 'closed' vs. 'open' captioning refer to whether or not the subtitles need to be activated by an audience member in order to be seen. In the theatre, we generally rely on open captioning as opposed to closed because any audience member in the theatre is able to see and benefit from the captions.

How do I begin?

Early considerations for captioning, as with any theatrical endeavor, include identifying the right artists to take on each job. Let's talk about who you need on your team to successfully and effectively provide open captions for a performance.

Who do I need?

Caption Designer

In order to caption, unless you are outsourcing to a professional company (of which there are several, which may be a good option pending budget), you will need to employ someone to design the captions. This artist will create what is eventually projected. As someone who has designed captions for several different productions, I feel it is important to stress the word design. While the artist in this position will be responsible mainly for transcribing the text from a script, there is always a level of theatrical knowledge and descriptive ability required to successfully describe a performance. A successfully designed presentation will require little work on behalf of the audience to interpret the rhythms, beats, and nuance of the soundscape of a show. Note that this position will require many hours of labor and (in my opinion) attendance at several rehearsals and even production meetings in order to be entirely accurate in transcription. Keep this fact in mind when determining the designer's fee or means of reimbursement.

Caption Operator

The caption operator should be held to the same standards as the light board or sound board operator. Accordingly, they should be present for technical rehearsals in order to become familiar with the performance. The main difference between this position and those of the other board operators is that they will generally not be responding to cues from the stage manager, but rather following the pacing of the performance in order to operate. Because of their need to follow along with the auditory elements of the show, the individual entrusted with operating the captions should either be able to hear or read lips proficiently. It is also important that they have a fundamental understanding of the language in which all parts of the performance are being communicated.

Technical Support

This role may be a pre-contracted master electrician or technical director, but it is important that the conversation be had early on with the individual responsible for hanging, installing, or focusing the projector and projection screen. Make sure all technical speculations are taken into consideration.

There is a possibility that the aforementioned roles could be taken on by one person, but it is important that the division of labor and expectation of responsibilities are clearly laid out early on in the process.

What do I need?

Again, there are countless options available for professional captioning services, programs, and equipment. However, on a small budget, captioning can be handled with the following checklist:

- a projector (some affordable options do not project text well— check reviews!)
- a computer or laptop with Microsoft PowerPoint (I have worked with Keynote and Google Slides as well. PowerPoint is my preference. I will talk about why in the ‘Design’ section.)
- a screen or smooth, non-porous surface upon which captions can be projected (This can be a pre-existing wall in an indoor space, a part of a proscenium arch, or even a designed element of the set.)

Now, before rehearsals begin...



The Big Kahuna of Road Blocks

One of the regular stumbling blocks for captioning is inevitably introduced when a designer or director voices concerns that the captions will be ‘distracting’ or will ‘take audiences out of the world of the show’. Remind artists that captions are becoming more and more common, meaning those who do not rely on them are learning to accept them as a standard theatrical convention. Additionally, if the producing organization is taking steps toward making their programming more accessible, it is not an artists’ place to refute that. Just because a play takes place in the 1840s doesn’t mean you deactivate the elevator helping patrons up to the mezzanine because it doesn’t belong in the world of the show.

Inaccessibility and exclusion should never be intentional artistic decisions.

Who Should I Talk To?

Part I

PRODUCER OR PRODUCTION MANAGER

- The caption designer needs to have a copy of the script as it currently stands. If possible, a digital copy as a reproducible word document or PDF would be preferable, but a scanned copy or hard copy are also workable.
- Is there a chance the script will change? If this piece is being devised or written, is there a cut-off date set for script changes? Are discussions being had with the playwright's estate or licensing group about cuts or alternate versions?

SET DESIGNER

- Especially if the show is being staged outside, in a black box, or in another non-proscenium theatre space, the set designer may have thoughts about what the projection screens look like.
- Some set designers may want to weigh in on the font being used for captions, as they do affect the overall look of the show.
- Discuss sightlines as they pertain to the projection screens. If sightlines are limited, a conversation needs to be had with front of house regarding seating and ticket sales. Potentially, a section of the house will need to be set aside as an open caption section. (Note that the Commonwealth Shakespeare Company successfully marks an outdoor section on the Boston common each summer for those who need to see captioning. Even unusual theatre spaces can be made accessible for captioning!)

Who Should I Talk To?

Part II

STAGE MANAGER OR TECHNICAL DIRECTOR

- Where will captions be operated from? Make sure the operator is in a place where they are able to hear the show clearly at all times (so preferably not sitting immediately next to a stage manager who will be calling cues consistently). If there are captions for ASL interactions, the operator must also have a clear view of the actors' or interpreters' hands.
- Ask the stage manager to be included on rehearsal reports if there is a chance that the script will be undergoing rewrites.

SOUND DESIGNER

- Talk to them about the sound plot for the show. What kind of underscoring or transition music are they planning to use? Are they using familiar songs? If so, you should include the titles of those songs. If they are generating their own instrumental music, you need to describe it. Ask to be included when music files and sound plot are shared.

LIGHTING DESIGNER

- Ensure that the lighting designer is aware of where the captions will be. They should prepare to treat the projected captions as they would projections utilized in the show.
- Ask if the lighting designer would like projectors to be shuttered during blackouts. If transitions are underscored, this may not be possible, but even a projector projecting a black screen still gives off light.

FRONT OF HOUSE

- If sightlines to the projection screens are limited, ensure that front of house is prepared to seat patrons requesting access to the captions in seats where they are visible.

DESIGN

The most important rule to keep in mind when designing captions for a show is that you are attempting to accurately transcribe a performance, not the text of a play. Avoid theatrical notations that may be meaningless to an audience of laypeople—- dashes representing interruptions, italicized words representing emphasis, and stage directions in general.

I prefer to caption using PowerPoint. Generally, I will create a template for the show or work with one of PowerPoint's pre-made templates. By using a template, should something need to change (ie. the font size is too large and spills over the edge of the projection screen), you can select all text within the presentation and make adjustments uniformly.

Throughout the design process, you may run into specific instances of confusion. I move forward in a case by case basis regarding representing overlapping text, improvised sections, or super-specific auditory sequences.

PROBLEM SOLVING

- One play I captioned introduced a strange female character under a fake name who was then revealed to another character (and the audience) as a familiar male character in disguise. In order to keep the surprise reveal a surprise for the full audience, lines spoken before the reveal were accredited in the captions to the fake woman's name.
- Annie Baker's Circle Mirror Transformation, a realistic drama about an adult acting class, features an improvised game sequence. In captioning it, I simply created a slide that read 'various sounds' which appeared on the screen for the duration of the sequence.

GENERAL FORMATTING

- All slides should be typed as black text against a white background or white text against a black background (the latter being more common than the former) and should be consistent throughout
- All fonts should be sans-serif and consistent throughout
- Lines of dialogue should be limited to two lines per slide: either two full lines of text spoken by one character or one line spoken each by a different character
- Think about where the text should fall on the slide in order to fit onto the projection screen and still fall within natural sightlines of audience members watching the show. If the text all appears in the upper third of the slide and the projection screens are placed high up on a proscenium, will audiences be straining their necks looking up and reading captions rather than watching the performance?
- Decide how you will differentiate and express dialogue vs. sound effects and speaking vs. singing. Italics. Parenthesis. Bold face. Whatever you decide, be simple and be consistent.
- Blank slides should be inserted for even brief moments of silence. This will help prevent brief phrases from being projected for extended periods of time. Attendance at rehearsals will help you familiarize yourself with how often actors are pausing or taking silent beats.
- Different actors may add silences for different reasons: some are generous in their interpretations of playwrights' ellipses, others may struggle with doors on the set. If you observe an early run through at a rehearsal, try simultaneously clicking through the PowerPoint presentation. You will begin to notice how frequently the actors pause. Check in with the director, casually gauging how close the pacing of the show is to where they would like it to be come performance time. If the pacing is markedly slower than what they are hoping for come tech week, don't necessarily make pacing adjustments based on the run.

DESCRIBING INCIDENTAL MUSIC

Unless the music is a recognizable piece that can be named and accredited to a composer or performer, incidental music should be described. Crack open your thesaurus and use those obnoxious adjectives. Words like 'ethereal', 'brutal', or 'seraphic', are more helpful at setting a tone than simply saying 'a piano plays'.

Check your biases when describing music. A high voice does not necessarily belong to a woman and a low voice is not implicitly a man's.

(a deep voice humming under soprano tones)

(an electronic jazz rhythm)

Beautiful World by Colin Hay plays

OPERATING CAPTIONS

Once you are in place to caption the show, it may seem like your work is done. However, the caption operator is largely responsible for the precision and accuracy of what the audience sees.

- Captions should appear a split second after a sound happens. Hearing the sound is the caption operator's cue to 'go'. This is to prevent the spoiling of punchlines or literally the jumping of the gun sound cue.
- In PowerPoint's presenter mode, the operator should be able to see both the slide currently being projected and the next slide in the presentation. If the next slide is a blank slide (silence), the operator should allow the current slide to project until all the text can be read before clicking to the blank slide.
- If technical difficulties occur, it is helpful for the caption operator to have the capability to shutter the projector. This way, a missed sound cue is not announced to the audience.
- If a caption fires early, the operator should not go back a slide. The flickering back and forth of text can be distracting and confusing.
- If lines are dropped, preferably, the operator can shutter the projector and find where in the script the actors may have jumped to.

Frequently Asked Questions

What if we can only afford to caption select performances?

Operate on a case by case basis. If costs of hiring an additional board operator for a full run are prohibitive, this is work that is being underutilized, and therefore appreciated even in limited capacities. However, it is all too common for theatres to offer tokenizing “accessible” performances on nights expected to be poorly attended. Make sure to avoid making your “accessible” performances inaccessible by timing them for a weekday matinee or a Sunday evening.

What if we can only caption select shows in our season?

This is vitally important work. Push yourself to engage with it as much as possible, but if you can only caption certain shows in your season because of costs or technical constraints, just make sure it is clear which shows will offer this service.

Is this service actually reliably used?

If you genuinely feel like no one who would rely upon this service is in regular attendance at your performances, acknowledge the swathes of population you are actively excluding from engaging with your work.