

Impact of subtitling quality on comprehension and engagement

Research data shows that:



The quality of subtitles significantly influences viewer reception, engagement, and enjoyment.



Viewers value clarity and accuracy in subtitles, as this affects both understanding and emotional connection.



Subtitle design and adequate timing play a crucial role in optimising comprehension and avoiding mental strain.



Viewer frustration and higher levels of effort can reduce immersion.



Subtitle synchronisation and visual integration impact comprehension, attention, and user experience.



Machine-translated subtitles need careful editing to be adequate and avoid known pitfalls.

What do viewers say?

- A 2021 survey with 15,000 consumers found that 65% had stopped watching a movie or TV show due to poor localisation quality. A more recent 2025 survey confirms that 60% feel frustrated when faced with poor subtitling.
- The top problems viewers complain about are: out-of-sync subtitles, inaccurate translation, fast subtitles, subtitles with grammatical and spelling errors, subtitles covering important elements, and missing subtitles.
- Majority of viewers agree that subtitle quality significantly impacts their viewing experience.
- Viewers increasingly use subtitles to help them understand content better.
- Poor subtitles frustrate viewers. While most keep watching, about a third say they stop. Some even complain to the provider or post negative comments online.

- Viewers are more likely to watch similar content if they enjoyed watching content in that language before.

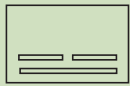
References: BBC 2022, EGA 2021; OFCOM 2006 and 2019; Netflix 2019; Russel and Levy 2012. Stagertext 2019, Szarkowska et al. 2024, UKSAN survey 2025, YouGov 2024.

What does research say about film immersion and enjoyment?

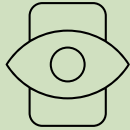
- People enjoy and understand films more when they feel immersed — when they feel part of the story and emotionally connected to it.
- Feeling involved in the story, seeing the film as “real,” and staying focused all work together. If one of these is strong, the others usually are too.

References: Bilandzic and Busselle 2011, Hammond et al. 2023, Kruger et al. 2017.

What happens when subtitles are used?



When subtitles are on screen, viewers tend to spend a third of the time reading them.



Good-quality subtitles can actually make the film feel more real and help viewers connect with the characters.



Creative subtitles are increasingly being used in social media. Research has shown that in films and television series, these can make the viewing experience more engaging and enjoyable.

References: Kruger et al 2017, Leveridge et al. 2024, Szarkowska and Bogucka 2019, Szarkowska et al. 2024, Wu 2025.

What about machine-generated subtitles?

- Viewers generally prefer human-made subtitles or machine-generated subtitles that have been checked and corrected by a person. These tend to feel more natural and enjoyable.
- Research shows a higher level of enjoyment when viewers are exposed to human-made subtitles.
- Subtitles work best when adapted to the type of film and how/when/where people are watching – Machine Translation cannot make these kinds of judgements.

References: Guerberof-Arenas et al. 2024.



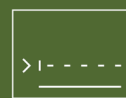
What can disrupt immersion?



Frustration: Anything that annoys or confuses viewers (like poor subtitles) breaks their sense of being in the story.



Mismatches: When what's said and what's written in the subtitles don't match, it can confuse viewers and make the film harder to enjoy.



Asynchrony: Unsynchronised subtitles break can easily break the link between audio and text. They make dialogue harder to follow, frustrate viewers and undermine accessibility for those relying on lip reading.



Speed: If subtitles don't stay for enough time on screen, viewers can't read them fully, making it harder to follow the film.



Line breaks: Line breaks that follow natural pauses in speech are easier to read and understand.



Cultural specific elements: Jokes and cultural details need to be carefully translated to make sense to viewers from different backgrounds.



Visual details: Understanding a film isn't just about words. Visual cues and sounds also matter. Viewers need help interpreting both.

References: Alfaify and Ramos Pinto 2021, Chen 2018, Filizzola 2018, Kruger et al. 2022, Künzli and Ehrensberger-Dow 2011, Ramos Pinto 2025, Szarkowska and Gerber-Morón 2018, Szarkowska and Silva 2021, Szarkowska et al 2024.

Innovation and future directions in subtitling

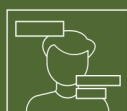
New research is exploring ways to make subtitles more engaging, clear, and accessible.



Aesthetically integrated subtitles:
Subtitles that match the film's visual style and are often placed near speakers or within the scene help viewers follow who's speaking and notice more visual details. They enhance viewers' immersion and emotional connection. They work well for dialogue-heavy films, dramas, romances, and musicals.



Tailored social media subtitles:
To capture attention online, subtitles often drop punctuation, use creative fonts, capital letters, and emojis, making content more engaging and easier to follow.

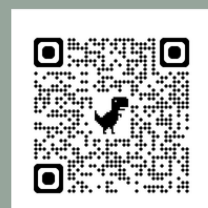


Extratitles: Extra subtitles that explain important visual or sound information. Though they increase mental effort, they reduce confusion and can boost enjoyment and interest.

References: Caption with Intention: <https://www.captionwithintention.org/>, Duraj and Szarkowska 2025, Künzli and Ehrensberger-Dow 2011, Leveridge et al. 2024, Ramos Pinto 2025, Szarkowska et al. 2024.

Details on studies reviewed for this report as well as their methodologies, can be found here.

Visit the **Subtitling Audiences Network** [website](#)



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