



Vertical Video Subtitling: Guidelines and Considerations

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Introduction: The Case for Vertical Videos

The vertical video format has seen a lot of pushback from almost everyone involved in marketing and audiovisual production; however, there is no denying that, with apps like Snapchat, Instagram (Stories and IGTV), TikTok, and Facebook (Stories), these format has become more widely used and, more importantly, more widely accepted.

The case for the traditional horizontal format stems from two, very compelling reasons: first, our eyes are placed horizontally on our face, which makes it anatomically easier to digest horizontal videos and, second, screens have traditionally been horizontal, so taking advantage of the space in a TV or computer screen was a main goal. Nevertheless, with the arrival of smartphones, which are more commonly held vertically, a new type of video format was born. This led to the production of vertical videos, which has received a lot of pushback, especially because it can be a real strain to watch a vertical video on a horizontal screen. This last point illustrates that we need to assume that the users are lazy ([Drummond-Butt, 2019](#)) and that they are not even willing to turn around their smartphone to take a video, so why would anyone expect them to turn it around to watch it?

Keeping in mind that there is a new audience watching vertical videos and not willing to turn their vertical screens to a horizontal format to watch a horizontal video, it could be argued that a lot of screen space is wasted most of the time. Because smartphones are portable, they are one of the devices in which people spend the most time. In fact, 3 out of 5 videos are believed to be watched in smartphones and people hold their smartphones vertically 94% of the time ([Miller, 2020](#)).

Captions and Subtitles in Vertical Videos: Are they Worth It?

Marketing and advertising agencies have already begun to set guidelines for vertical video production and even encourage their use for specific situations. I visited different apps and business accounts and realized that a lot of larger-scale companies are already captioning their IGTV (Instagram) videos and the vertical video contents in their apps, like Spotify's vertical music videos. I also find a couple of examples from apps using subtitles for their vertical videos, like the previews in the mobile Netflix app and some teaching videos for language learning and cooking apps. There was no consistency in the way every app or brand is doing their captioning, I can imagine they are aiming for aesthetically pleasing designs as most of them are marketing and learning materials.

Closed-Captioning: Beyond Accessibility

Videos watched in smartphones come mainly from social media apps, where closed captioning could have a much broader purpose than accessibility. Because people are using their smartphones all the time and



in all sorts of places, turning the volume of the videos they are watching down is a common practice, in fact, according to [Patel](#) (2016) 85% of videos on Facebook are watched with no sound. Youtube, for instance, is well aware of this and will automatically apply captions when the device is muted ([Malik, 2019](#)). Using closed captioning for vertical contents is a great idea for brands and apps that want to achieve more exposure in a wider array of settings.

Subtitling Vertical Videos

Most of the samples I found had to do with captions and not subtitles. I believe the case for this is that apps like Instagram, Snapchat, Facebook, and TikTok do not yet include any type of subtitling functionality like Youtube's. The examples of subtitling I found, were within language learning apps, which makes a lot of sense for them. However, I believe it is not too farfetched to believe that, in this globalized world, international apps like those mentioned previously will soon consider their international audiences when thinking of video contents. Also, regardless of the app's functionality, many brands have different accounts for the different regions they target, so subtitling their videos for these accounts could help their content reach wider audiences.

The Technical Guidelines

Because I consider the [Netflix Timed Text Style Guides](#) to be some of the strictest in the industry, I will draw upon these and adapt them to the best of my knowledge to account for the differences in format, as these guidelines were created for horizontal (9:16 and 3:2 ratios, mostly) and we will be dealing here with vertical screens, which tend to have a ratio of 16:9, following that of common screens and accounting for the fact that most HD content is produced for horizontal 9:16 screens ([Olamide, 2019](#)).

For the purpose of this guide, I will focus broadly on English, Spanish, French, Portuguese, and Italian, and will not include any different specifications for each of them. Because I will strictly focus on the technical aspects of vertical video subtitling and not go any deeper into other grammatical and language-specific differences, these languages are a perfect choice, as they share a common alphabet and follow identical timing conventions, with the slight exception on reading speed for English).

Methodology

I gathered technical information for Netflix' [Timed Text Guide Lines: General Requirements](#) and the specific reading speeds for the languages introduced above. I also used Agulló García's [vertical subtitling guidelines](#) (n/d) to some extent and for some very helpful information and resources.



To adapt the guidelines to the 16:9 vertical aspect ratios, I simply conducted a rule of thirds for character counts and other aspects related to the visual interface. For timing, shot changes, and reading speeds, I kept the original recommendations, since I believe the theory is still applicable to this format.

The Math

In 16:9 aspect ratios, subtitles and captions often appear in the lowest third of the screen, so the same rule should apply to vertical 9:16 ratios. This is an area 43% taller but 56% narrower. These numbers should have a significant impact on line and character limitations, but timing conventions should remain.

See Figure 1 and Figure 2:

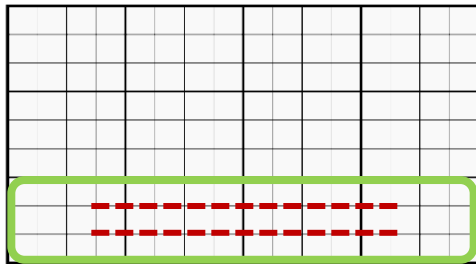


Figure 1: Represents the horizontal 16:9 aspect ratio, the area marked in green shows the lower third of the screen where text is usually placed. This third has a 16:3 ratio. The red line represents the common placement for text.

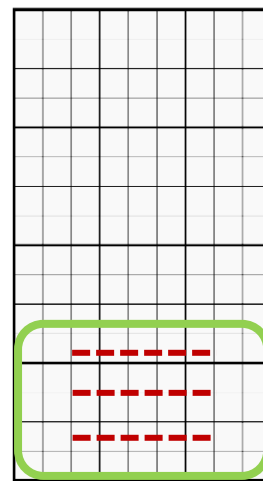


Figure 2: Represents the vertical 9:16 aspect ratio, the area marked in green shows the lower third of the screen where text should be placed. This third has a 5.3:16 ratio. This area is 43% taller but 56% narrower than the third part in a 16:9 aspect ratio. The red lines represent the potential subtitle placement for 9:19 aspect ratios.

Timing

- Timed text begins with the audio or maximum three frames before. To account for reading speeds, the text can end up to 12 frames after audio stops, provided it does not overlap with another shot, audio, or subtitle
- Keep text separated by at least 2 frames from shot changes, if audio encompasses multiple shots, text should be adjusted to be at the shot or 12 frames from it

Positioning

- At the bottom center of the screen. If there is embedded text in the same position, subtitles can be moved to the top center of the screen
- Leading should be enough so that lines do not overlap, and the text remains pleasant to read. Leading should not be excessive as to make the maximum line numbers overflow the lower third of the screen

Line and Character Limitations

- Characters per second should follow Netflix guidelines of 17 CPS for adult audiences



- 24 characters per line: 57% less than the usual 42 for horizontal formats following the same conversion rules
- Maximum of three lines thanks to the significantly taller format
- Because this format is narrower and more limited in space, use keywords and simplify sentences to comply with the limitations

Font Considerations

- Arial preferably
- White with thin black outline for readability
- Size depends on type of content, but should allow for 24 characters per line

Closing Remarks

Whether we like it or not, vertical videos are here and growing in popularity. Although I am certain they will not have the ability to replace the horizontal format and high definition content will certainly be produced mainly for 16:9 horizontal aspect ratios, it is evident how they can be great marketing tool. The advantage of vertical videos is certainly their wider reach, as they tend to be more available through social media and mobile apps. Due to this increase in popularity, considering the adhesion to new guidelines for this format is a logical next step. Content produced for these platforms is bound to become international soon, if most of it is not already, and achieving the same level of consistency that exists now in most horizontal platforms would result in a better user experience.



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