

## Why captions?

It has become standard practice for many theaters to offer ASL-interpreted performances for deaf/hard of hearing patrons. This is fabulous, but doesn't help the large number of people who are deaf/hard of hearing but not fluent in ASL. This includes people who were late-deafened (through accident, illness, or old age) – as with any language, it's harder to learn ASL as an adult, so many people don't. This also includes deaf/hard of hearing people who've been mainstreamed and who get by with a combination of hearing aids and lip-reading – both useful devices, but not practical for following the dialogue onstage.

Captions provide a way for the audience member to see the text of the play on a screen of some sort, in synchronicity with the actors' speaking the text. There are a variety of ways this can be accomplished:

A real-time captioner can be hired – he/she will bring CART equipment (computer-aided-real-time). These folks are fairly expensive – it's the same technique used in court-reporting, with the special keyboard. Good if the show contains improv, or for live unscripted events. Quality depends greatly on typing speed and accuracy of operator. I've seen the display done with an LED-screen (short and wide, with streaming red letters) sitting on the edge of the stage. A good local source for this is Paradigm Reporting - [www.paradigmreporting.com](http://www.paradigmreporting.com).

For scripts available in advance, they can be entered into a PowerPoint document, line by line. The results can be displayed on a supertitle screen (like you've seen at the opera), onto a screen at the side of the stage, or onto a monitor located in the audience. When I've done the script this way, I've stripped out stage directions and added in indicators of sound cues, music underscoring, etc.

This is the cheapest/easiest way to go, but once the script is entered, there's no room for change – if the actors skip a section, or change their lines, there's nothing you can do to adjust gracefully.

Technology also exists to beam the captions into a handheld device such as a PalmPilot. This would require a greater investment in equipment, but would be a really cool, unobtrusive way to do captions. An example: [www.personalcaptioning.com/index.htm](http://www.personalcaptioning.com/index.htm).

### Benefits to captioning:

Many people, not just those with hearing impairments, can benefit from seeing the text – if an actor speaks with a heavy accent, or very quickly, or softly, or facing upstage, or over music, he/she can be very difficult to understand clearly.

Captions open up a whole new market of older people who used to go to the theater, but have stopped because they're increasingly hard-of-hearing.

One key note – people who fall into the categories above may or may not consider themselves “disabled.” This should be kept in mind when you market this service.