



Digital Television and Captioning Questions and Answers

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For more than 50 years, broadcasts of analog signals have sent pictures to our television sets over radio waves. Now more and more television programs are available through digital technology, and television in the U.S. will become completely digital on February 17, 2009.

Q: Why are television broadcasts switching from analog to digital?

A: Michael Grebb of WIRED explains that analog waves often degrade on the way to your TV set, which creates interference. Digital technology can largely eliminate interference and degradation, and it can pack more information into a smaller space. The transition to digital will free up more spectrum for advanced wireless services and public safety use.

Q: How do I get digital broadcasts?

A: If you subscribe to cable or satellite for your television programs, your provider's equipment will take care of getting digital broadcasts to you. But if you have are one of the estimated 14% of U.S. households that still watch television over-the-air by antenna, you will need to purchase an analog-to-digital converter box.

Q: How do I get a converter box?

A: Converter boxes will be available in stores and may also be available for purchase on the Internet. To help with the cost, Congress gave \$990 million to the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) for a Digital-to-Analog Converter Box Program. The money is to be spent for the distribution of \$40 coupons to help pay for these converter boxes.

Q: When can I get a coupon, and how do I request it?

A: Coupons became available in January, 2008. All U.S. households will be eligible to request up to two coupons. You will be able to request coupons from the NTIA by phone, in the mail, or through the NTIA website at www.ntiadtv.gov.

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Q: Can I use the coupon to help with the cost of digital TV or combine two coupons to pay for one converter box?

A: Coupons can be used only to purchase a converter box, and only one coupon can be used for each converter box.



CAPTIONING

Q: Are there captioning-related problems with digital television?

A: Yes; the number of problems reported has increased dramatically in the past year. There are problems with the products, problems with retailers when buying a digital television, problems in setting up the television, and problems with the caption quality. NVRC has been collecting stories from people who have had problems. Please let us know if you have experienced any difficulty.

Q: What kinds of problems are there with the products?

A: One common problem has been ensuring that the television, display or tuner has the captioning feature. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) requires digital TV closed captions capability in:

- Digital TV sets with integrated widescreen displays at least 7.8" vertically
- Digital TV sets with conventional displays at least 13" vertically
- Stand-alone digital TV tuners even if they are not marketed with display screens

The second common problem reported by consumers is finding the caption feature. On July 21, 2000 the FCC put a new industry standard for digital TV closed captioning known as EIA-708-D in its rules. This standard allows a choice of color, size and font for captions. Many consumers have reported frustration in locating these caption features. It's rare to find a caption button on the front of a TV, display, tuner, or on the device's remote control.

Q: What are some problems in buying a digital TV, display or tuner?

A: There have been many, many reports from consumers and their families about not being able to test the captioning feature before purchasing the equipment. Many stores show a tape which has no captions. This tape is fed to all the televisions and displays, so there is no live broadcast. Many salespeople are unfamiliar with captioning or unwilling to set the equipment up to display it.

Q: What about problems in setting up the digital TV, display or tuner?

A: Consumers have become used to "plug and play" in electronics equipment. Un-

fortunately most consumers do not find it quick or easy to set up the captioning.

Q: What are the problems with caption quality?

A: Most of the problems mirror the same problems experienced with captioning in the past. Some are inaccuracies in captioning that are the fault of the captioning provider, such as misspelled words. Other problems are technical and related to the transmission, reception or the equipment used to display the captions. Examples are captions that are garbled or missing.

Q: Will all TV programs be captioned digitally?

A: Since January 1, 2006, 100% of new television programs, both analog and digital, were required to be closed captioned, but there are some exceptions to the requirements.

Q: What are the exceptions?

A: No captioning is required for most programs shown from 1 to 6 am local time, commercials of less than 5 minutes, local programs of parades and school sports, local public TV programs for grades K-12 or postsecondary schools, programs in languages other than Spanish and English, public service announcements and ads of less than 10 minutes, programs on new networks for their first 4 years, and programs by providers with an annual gross revenue under \$3 million. Also, not all programs in English or Spanish first shown before July 1, 2002 or new Spanish language programs must be captioned.

SENDING A COMPLAINT

1. Put it in Writing

The Federal Communications Commission oversees and enforces the regulations for TV closed captioning. You must send a complaint by writing to your TV "distributor".

2. Your Distributor: Who to Write, Where to Send the Complaint

- If you use an antenna to receive your TV signal, write to General Manager of the TV station that the program came from. You can find the address of the station in your telephone book.
- If you use cable or satellite TV service, write to the General Manager of the cable or satellite company. The address should be on your cable or satellite bill.

3. What to Put in the Complaint

Give as much detail as you can. This will help identify what needs to be fixed. Here are some things to include:

- Start the letter with, "This letter is sent in regard to FCC rules at 47 CFR Part 79.1"
- Give your full address, daytime phone or TTY number, email address.
- List the TV shows that were not captioned or had a captioning problem, with the TV channel name and number. Also include the date and time of the shows.

Examples:

- 1) CSI had no captioning on WBX 4 on January 4, 2006 from 9-10 pm.
- 2) American Idol on WNYC 12 lost captions from 8:45 to 9 pm on January 6, 2006.
- 3) Desperate Housewives on WKSR 9 captions disappeared during the first advertisement at 9:10 pm.
- 4) CNN did not have captioning from 12 pm to 1 pm even though it always has, and the TV Guide said it would be captioned.

Note:

NVRC tracks captioning complaints so it can follow up with the providers. Please send a copy to us too.

4. What to Do After Sending the Complaint

If you do not have a satisfactory response in 45 days, contact the FCC with a copy of the written complaint that you sent to the TV distributor. Include a copy of their distributor's response, if any. Send both letters to the FCC at 445 12th Street S.W., Washington, DC 20554, Attn. CICD/CGB.