

How to Work with Sign Language Interpreters

Interpreters are professionals with skills, training, and a professional code of ethics. The interpreter's role is to be a neutral party and to facilitate communication relaying the message accurately with true meaning and intent. The following list has been compiled to assist you in working with sign language interpreters.

Provide interpreters with an overview of the requirements of the task. In advance, if possible, provide a written list of specialized vocabulary. Make sure that the interpreter knows the theme or topic of the meeting or session. For example, tell them "This will be a social history interview."

Speak directly to the Deaf person, not to the interpreter. Avoid directing comments to the interpreter such as "Tell him" or "Ask her." The Deaf person will watch the interpreter to understand what you are saying and will then communicate back to you. Everything spoken will be signed. The interpreter is not permitted to edit the content of a message. Do not ask the interpreter to censor any portion of the conversation.

Speak naturally. Speak at your normal pace. Interpreters will ask you to slow down or repeat information as necessary. Interpreters are listening for concepts and ideas, not just words, in order to render an accurate interpretation.

Allow only one individual to speak at a time. If you are facilitating a group meeting, and will be asking people to introduce themselves, be sure to ask that they pause briefly before going to the next person.

Realize that the interpreter conversation may require more time. It is helpful to wait for the interpreter to convey the message and wait for the response before talking again. Since the individual cannot receive more than one visual message at a time, please do not speak while also asking for the individual to read.

Confidentiality is important. Everything communicated during an event or meeting is treated as confidential by the interpreter.

Sign language interpreting is physically and cognitively demanding. If there is only one interpreter, schedule breaks. Provide a 10-minute break every hour. If you have a team of interpreters, special breaks are not always necessary.

Room set-up is important. Make sure there is adequate lighting and line-of-sight. If a deaf person cannot see an interpreter clearly, interpreting will not work and you will not be providing access.

Ask the Deaf consumer what arrangements work best for him/her.

Make sure seating is arranged so that the interpreter can either stand or sit beside the speaker in a direct line of sight for the deaf consumer.

Make sure the distance between the interpreter and deaf consumer is no more than about 15 feet. Allow for some flexibility in this distance to meet the unique needs of the deaf consumer.

Make sure that lighting is adequate and that the interpreter is "lit" if the lights go down for a video, PowerPoint, or other presentation.

Make sure there is no bright light source, like glass doors, a window, or a projection screen, directly behind the interpreter, because this will place the interpreter in silhouette and the deaf consumer will not be able to see the interpreter.

Make sure the speaker or others do not frequently need to cross between the interpreter and the deaf person.