



Working With A Sign Language Interpreter

Working with a sign language interpreters is not difficult but it does take a little practice and knowledge. The following points are designed to assist your interaction with the Deaf person.

General rules

- **Maintain eye contact and conversation with the Deaf person.** Avoid saying to the interpreter, “Tell him/her....” Talk to the Deaf person as you would any other person.
- **Position the interpreter appropriately.** Ask the Deaf person and the interpreter where they would like to sit or stand in the room or if they have any special requirements. It is usual for the interpreter to be situated next to the main speaker so that both are able to be seen by the Deaf person at the same time as well as any visual aids.
- **Don’t make “asides” that you don’t want interpreted.** The interpreter is required to interpret everything that the Deaf person would have heard if they could hear spoken English.
- **Avoid asking the interpreter for their opinion.** The interpreter is bound by a code of ethics that specifies that their role is to facilitate communication and not to contribute personal beliefs or opinions.
- **Speak clearly and at a normal speed.** It is easier for the interpreter to establish the context and a natural signing flow if you speak normally. Jumping between topics or pausing unnecessarily at the end of every sentence, for example, makes it hard for the interpreter to maintain an even flow. If the speaker is talking too quickly to be interpreted accurately, the interpreter will let the speaker know.
- **Be aware that the interpreter will not be translating each spoken word into a sign.** The interpreter is translating spoken English into Auslan (Australian Sign Language). Auslan is as different to English as English is to any other spoken language. It has a different sentence structure, its own grammar and idioms. The interpreter will be translating the meaning from one language into the other.
- **Give a little extra time for a Deaf person to answer any questions you have asked.** The interpreter must understand the context of a message before it can be interpreted. The Deaf person, therefore, will get the interpreted message slightly later than other participants. This is especially important to note for group discussions.

- **Allow time for the Deaf person to take notes or read any printed material before you resume speaking.** It is impossible to watch an interpreter and read and write at the same time.
- **Be aware that humour does not always translate well from one language to another.** Many English jokes are based on a play on words or the humour lies in the way something is said. Do not be offended if the Deaf person does not laugh at these jokes.
- **Relax!** Deaf people and interpreters are used to working with people who have never worked with an interpreter before. It is normal to make mistakes in new situations. Just behave naturally and everything should go smoothly.

Tips for presenters/chairpersons

- **Try to spend time with the interpreter before you start.** Explain any jargon or specialised language you will use. If possible give the interpreter a copy of your notes when you book them so that they can be familiar with the topic and language. A copy of the agenda and the names and titles of participants would also be useful if these are referred to during training.
- **Schedule regular breaks.** Interpreting is physically and mentally draining. For lecture style presentations, schedule a break every hour for ten minutes when an interpreter is working without a teammate. This will also benefit the participants! If interpretation for an assignment is in excess of two hours duration, two interpreters will normally be required, and will alternate every 20–30 minutes. This is necessary to:
 - Ensure continual flow of accurate information
 - Reduce interpreter fatigue
 - Reduce the likelihood of Occupational Overuse Syndrome
- **Ensure participants speak one at a time.** It is impossible to interpret more than one person at a time. Establish turn taking rules for speaking at the start.

Booking an interpreter

- **Book an interpreter as early as possible.** At least two weeks may be required to find an available and appropriate interpreter. Booking fees are sometimes applied to late notice bookings.
- **Specify the nature of the assignment when booking an interpreter.** Be specific about the assignment and any special skills or knowledge you think the person will need. This will ensure an appropriate interpreter is assigned.
- **Keep cancellation charges in mind**
Interpreting agencies and freelance interpreters will usually charge cancellation fees. This can extend to up to five working days before the booking hence it is important to cancel interpreters as soon as you are aware that they are not needed to avoid unnecessary charges.