

How To Use a Sign Language Interpreter

by David Bareford

Do you have deaf clients, co-workers, audience members, or friends? Use a sign language interpreter for better communication, and learn how to do it effectively and professionally.

What Sign Language Interpreters Do

Statistics indicate that over 21 million Americans are deaf or hard-of-hearing. Members of this group might be encountered as customers, employers, clients, fellow employees, audience members, or in any social relationship imaginable. Differences in communication styles can make these interactions difficult.

Enter the sign language interpreter.

Sign language interpreters are professionals who bridge the gap between hearing members of society and deaf or hard-of-hearing members. They are fluent in one or more spoken languages (usually including English), and American Sign Language (ASL). The sign language interpreter allows easy communication between native English speakers and native users of ASL. Contrary to popular myth, ASL is not “English on the hands” but rather a full and complete visual-gestural language, grammatically and structurally different from spoken English.

In our daily lives, most of us are unfamiliar with the use of any kind of language interpreters, even less so with the specific protocols of ASL-English interpreters. Yet this process can become smooth and easy by following a few simple guidelines about effectively interacting with interpreters and deaf people.

Using An Interpreter

Let's imagine that you are a hearing businessperson responsible for a presentation at a client's office. The client informs you that one of the meeting participants is deaf, and that an interpreter will be provided. How will this change your presentation?

The Initial Meeting

The interpreter may come to the meeting independently or in the company of the deaf client. If they come together, don't fall into the trap of assuming that the two of them have worked together in the past; they may have only met moments before. In many cases, since the deaf and interpreting communities are small, the deaf client and the interpreter may be acquainted, but remember: you are also the interpreter's client, not only the deaf person. Interpreters are bound by professional codes of ethics to present a fair and accurate interpretation to both parties. The interpreter is not on one person's “side.”

If you have a few moments before the meeting begins, there are two things you should address with the interpreter:

- 1) discuss the interpreter's physical placement;

2) brief them about any special audio or visual presentations.

Physical Placement

The interpreter will need to stand or sit where the hearing client can be heard and the deaf client can see them and be seen. Usually, interpreters will try to position themselves near the speaker so that the deaf client need only shift their line of sight slightly to watch either the speaker or the interpreter. You don't want the deaf client to feel like they're watching a tennis match!

Special Presentations

If your presentation involves slides, audio or videotapes, whiteboards, or other visual or audio aids, alert the interpreter to these elements. Sometimes, the interpreter will want to adjust their position during these moments in the presentation to reduce the "tennis match" effect for the deaf client. Remember that the deaf client needs some amount of light to see the interpreter; completely darkening the room to watch a video can make the interpreter's work very difficult. If possible, always provide some area of light for the interpreter's work to be seen.

Conversing with a Deaf Person

While you are giving the presentation in our hypothetical example, the interpreter will be silently working away, simultaneously translating what you say. Your style of delivery during the presentation probably need not to altered at all. If your meeting is more interactive, however, or is a one-on-one session with the deaf client, there are a few things to keep in mind.

- 1) Understand Styles of Interpreting
- 2) Talk To the Deaf Person, Not At Them
- 3) Respect Their Access to Information
- 4) Show Cultural Awareness

Styles of Interpreting

During presentations where one person is speaking to a group of people, most sign language interpreters will perform simultaneous interpreting. This means that while you speak, the interpreter will listen to what you are saying and use their hands to reproduce your meaning in ASL, all the while listening for new information as you continue to speak. This style of interpreting is the most convenient for larger groups, but successful simultaneous interpreting requires a great deal of practice and concentration by the interpreter.

In one-on-one settings, many interpreters prefer consecutive interpreting. In this model, the speaker says one or more sentences, then pauses while the interpreter translates. Often the deaf person will respond with a similar "bite-sized chunk" of information, and the interpreter will wait until the client is finished before voicing the translation into spoken English. This style takes a little longer than simultaneous interpreting but it has the advantage of being more accurate, since the interpreter is not forced to receive one language and transmit another at the same time.

Talk To The Deaf Person, Not At Them

When speaking to a deaf person through an interpreter, remember that the deaf person is the target of your communication. If you address the interpreter with sentences like, “Tell him...,” the interpreter will translate this third-person address accurately, which may confuse or offend the deaf person. Instead, speak as though the interpreter was not involved in the conversation at all—address the deaf person directly.

Likewise, if there is information about the deaf person that you need to know, don’t ask the interpreter to supply it. Remember, the interpreter may have met this deaf person only moments before, or even at the same time you did. Afford the deaf person the respect they deserve and address your questions to them personally.

Respect Their Access to Information

A deaf person has the same right to information as anyone. If something is said that a hearing person in the room can hear, the interpreter will interpret it for their deaf client. Its relevance to the deaf person is not the issue: side conversations and even the audible side of phone conversations will likely be translated into ASL.

If there is something you feel should not be interpreted, be careful how you express it. Saying “Don’t interpret this...” will probably be translated before the sign language interpreter realizes what you are trying to say. If you have something to say you do not wish the deaf person to be aware of, step out of the room or move beyond the interpreter’s earshot. Extend the same level of courtesy to the deaf person as you would anyone else.

Show Cultural Awareness

Deaf Americans have their own culture, like people from any other language group. There are several small ways to respect Deaf Culture and ease your interactions with deaf individuals:

- 1) Respect ASL as a true language
- 2) Increase eye contact
- 3) Understand deaf “labels”

Respect ASL As a True Language

Linguists have proven American Sign Language to be as complex, structured, and powerful as any spoken language, and many deaf people take great pride in their mastery of it. Show respect for the deaf person’s native language by speaking of ASL in the same manner you would speak of French or Spanish: as a language that is different but equal to English.

Increase Eye Contact

Because ASL is a visual language, eye contact is much more important to deaf individuals than it is to hearing people, since the best way to ignore someone signing is to look away from them! When addressing a deaf person, maintain much more eye contact than you would with a hearing person. The deaf person will probably spend some amount of time watching the interpreter, but will “check in” with you regularly, as much of the emotion behind your words can be transmitted visually.

Understand Deaf “Labels”

Over the years, the hearing majority has attached many labels to the deaf and hard-of-hearing: deaf and dumb, deaf-mute, hearing-impaired, hearing-disabled, and many others. These labels are sometimes inaccurate and often demeaning, and are largely rejected by the very communities whom they supposedly describe.

The terms “Deaf” and “Hard-of-hearing” were chosen by the members of those communities, and should be used in preference to other labels created by hearing culture.

Using the Interpreter Effectively

Now that you understand the basics of conversing with a deaf person, here are four tips to maximize the effectiveness of your interpreter:

- 1) Keep direct interpreter address to a minimum;
- 2) Don't use the interpreter as a human model;
- 3) Respect interpreter breaks.

Keep Direct Interpreter Address to a Minimum

Asking the interpreter direct questions like, “Where did you learn sign language?” and “Am I speaking too fast for you?” should be kept to a minimum while the interpreter is working. Such questions are fine while chatting before the meeting begins, but are distracting during the interpreter's normal work. It can be difficult for the deaf client to tell when the presenter is speaking to the interpreter and when he or she is speaking to the group or the deaf person themselves, especially since the interpreter may be expected to answer the question in their own words, rather than interpreting a response from the deaf client.

Don't Use the Interpreter As a Human Model

If your presentation involves a demonstration or something related to the body, resist the urge to use the interpreter as your “volunteer from the audience,” even though they are close at hand. Interpreters relate stories of presenters asking to use them as clothes mannequins, anatomical models, and even CPR dummies! Get someone else for the demonstration, and let the interpreter do their primary job.

Respect Interpreter Breaks

Longer meetings may have breaks in the middle; remember that interpreters need their breaks too! Interpreting is mentally and physically taxing, and it isn't fair to the interpreter to make them work over their break because you want to talk one-on-one with the deaf client. During breaks, use pencil and paper to write notes or find some other way to communicate with the deaf person to whom you wish to speak.

Do I Really Need An Interpreter?

Despite the more prevalent use of sign language interpreters, many hearing people wonder if they are truly necessary: after all, can't deaf people read lips?

Reading lips, or speechreading, is a complex and difficult skill that takes years of practice to attain proficiency – and not every deaf person can do it. Some have likened speechreading to singing: after all, can't every hearing person sing?

As anyone who has heard amateur karaoke can attest, all hearing people are certainly not accomplished singers. Likewise, there are deaf and hard-of-hearing people who excel at speechreading, and others who have never acquired the knack. But even the best speechreaders cannot catch every word: it is estimated that less than 70% of spoken English is visible on the lips and mouth. This means even expert speechreaders must make educated guesses about 30% of the speaker's meaning; most people cannot reach even that degree of accuracy.

Can't written communication replace an interpreter? At first, it seems logical that simply writing notes back and forth could enable easy communication between the hearing and the deaf. Remember, however, that ASL is not English and is, in fact, a very different language. Many deaf people are bilingual in both ASL and written English, but this is not necessarily true. English is replete with idioms, proverbs, and other constructions that make it difficult for a non-native user to understand. Writing notes to each other is probably better than nothing, but it cannot match the clarity of communication possible when English speech is interpreted into the deaf person's native language.

Finding an Interpreter

Once you know that you will need an interpreter, where will you find one? One of the best places to start is at the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, online at www.rid.org. Their website offers searches by state or zip code, which listed certified interpreters in your area; you can also search their site for local referral agencies.

Interpreter referral agencies (which might also be contacted through your local yellow pages) will help you find an interpreter with the right qualifications for your particular needs. They will ask a few questions to determine the nature of the interpreting assignment, then handle all the details of ensuring a qualified interpreter shows up on time and ready to work.

Conclusion

Using sign language interpreters for the deaf is easier than you might think, and could open up your business to a whole new clientele. Deaf and hard-of-hearing people have the same right to information access as any other person; using a sign language interpreter helps to guarantee that right.