

# Sign Language Interpreters: An Introduction

## Overview

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The role of the interpreter appears to be very straightforward – to effectively facilitate communication between deaf individuals and those who are hearing. However, the complexities of the task, the varieties or types of visual interpreting, and the enormous range of qualifications brought by the interpreter make it anything but simple.

Interpreting requires a high level of fluency in two or more languages, keen ability to focus on what is being said, broad-based world knowledge, and professional, ethical conduct. Interpreters cannot interpret what they do not understand.

Interpreters serve all parties in the communication exchange. While we often think of the deaf person as the requestor of interpreter services, the reality is, all parties have an equal and mutual need for the interpreter.

## What does visual interpreting entail?

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The act of facilitating communication between a visual communicator and an auditory communicator is accomplished using a number of modalities, with the modality of choice identified by the visual learner, in this case, the deaf individual.

- **ASL Interpretation:** the most prominent type of interpreting used today. Interpreters interpret between two distinct languages—American Sign Language (ASL) and English. In order to be effective, interpreters must have fluency in both languages. ASL interpreting occurs in two ways: simultaneously and consecutively. According to the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), simultaneous interpreting requires interpreters to listen and sign, or watch and speak, at the same time. The interpreter begins to convey a sentence in the target language while listening or watching the message being delivered in the source language.” Consecutive interpreting “... begins only after the speaker has spoken or signed a sentence or paragraph. Interpreters may take notes to help create a coherent and accurate translation.”<sup>1</sup>
- **Transliteration:** also a prominent mode of interpreting. Interpreters transliterate between spoken English and a sign representation of English. Often times, elements of ASL interpreting are incorporated but overall it follows an English word order.
- **Tactile Interpretation:** a method of interpreting utilized by individuals who are deaf-blind. In this mode, an interpreter creates signs in the person’s hand, while using other tactile cues to describe affect and the environment.
- **Oral Transliteration:** a less commonly used visual access system. Oral transliterators silently repeat the English being spoken, while using specialized techniques to supplement the mouthing (e.g., gestures, pointing, etc.).
- **Cued Speech Transliteration:** a less commonly used visual access system. A unique system whereby the transliterator uses handshapes situated in different locations near the mouth to represent English phonetic markers.

## If someone knows ASL are they qualified to interpret?

Fluency in ASL is only one of several competencies needed to effectively interpret. Interpreters must also know how to assess the communication preferences or language level of the deaf individual and then adapt their interpretation to meet these needs. They must understand the meaning and intentions expressed in one language and express those meanings and intentions in the other language. Interpreters must be able to retain information and manage the flow of the communication, most often in real time (simultaneously). They must understand and manage the cultural nuances of the environment, and engage in professional and ethical standards consistent with the professional association, which is the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID).

Individuals who have taken sign language classes or are heritage speakers of ASL and have not received formal training in interpreting tend not to have the full array of competencies needed to provide a well-produced interpretation.

However, graduates from interpreter education programs most often do not possess abilities in all of the required competencies and are usually not ready to sit for professional certification. This trend does not imply that recent graduates should not be hired, only that mindful care should be taken when pairing an interpreter with an interpreting assignment.

### Achieving Certification

According to the NCIEC, on average, it takes BA/ BS degree students 19 to 24 months post-graduation to achieve national certification; while for AA/AAS program graduates, the average time to national certification is 25 to 36 months.<sup>2</sup>

## Is it true that some interpreters are deaf?

The use of deaf interpreters becomes more prevalent everyday as institutions and the private sector strive to meet the letter and spirit of the ADA as it pertains to “effective communication.” Deaf interpreters engage in the same tasks as hearing interpreters, and most often work as part of a deaf/hearing team. They are trained specialists with a keen understanding of the complexities of the communication exchange.

While deaf interpreters should be considered alongside, if not first, with hearing interpreters, they are often employed in high-risk situations, such as legal and healthcare. They are also often utilized in situations where the hearing interpreter does not possess adequate interpreting skills to meet the specific communication needs of the individual. This often occurs when the deaf individual uses a signed language that is not ASL, or has little or no proficiency in any language. Deaf interpreters are also utilized when the deaf interpreter possesses greater understanding of the complexities of the vocabulary or content to be conveyed in English and/or ASL than the hearing interpreter.

While formal studies have not been conducted, anecdotal evidence suggests that because of the overall efficacy and efficiency of deaf/hearing interpreting teams, the expense of hiring such a team are lower in the long term than the costs resulting from miscommunications and misunderstandings.<sup>2</sup> Always consider the use of a deaf interpreter whenever possible.

## Why is a team of interpreters often necessary?

There are many factors that influence how long one interpreter can interpret without experiencing mental and physical fatigue, and risking repetitive stress injuries. Team interpreting is designed to

mitigate overuse injury and interpreter error. Factors that determine the use of a team include the following:<sup>1</sup>

- **Length and complexity of the assignment:** As a general rule, a class over one hour should be teamed. However, the content and structure of the class must be considered. An hour-long class with technical terminology and complex content may require a team. Conversely, a three-hour class that is light lecture and mostly independent work may require only a single interpreter.
- **Unique needs and preferred communication mode of the individual:** Tactile interpreting is labor intensive and often requires a team, regardless of the topic and length of time. Interpreting for individuals with weak language proficiency is another such example.

## Additional Resources

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- Hiring Qualified Sign Language Interpreters:  
[www.nationaldeafcenter.org/hiringsli](http://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/hiringsli)
- Sign Language Interpreters in the Classroom:  
[www.nationaldeafcenter.org/classroominterpreters](http://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/classroominterpreters)
- Interpreters as a Reasonable Accommodation for Testing:  
[www.nationaldeafcenter.org/interpreterstesting](http://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/interpreterstesting)
- Dual Accommodations: Interpreters and Speech-to-Text Services:  
[www.nationaldeafcenter.org/dualservices](http://www.nationaldeafcenter.org/dualservices)
- Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID):  
[www.rid.org](http://www.rid.org)
- National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC):  
[www.interpretereducation.org](http://www.interpretereducation.org)
- Discover Interpreting:  
[www.discoverinterpreting.com](http://www.discoverinterpreting.com)
- American with Disabilities Act:  
[www.ada.gov](http://www.ada.gov)

Additional resources on this subject may be available at [www.NationalDeafCenter.org](http://www.NationalDeafCenter.org).

## References

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- <sup>1</sup> "Professional Sign Language Interpreting." Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Standard Practice Papers. Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc., 2007. Web.  
[www.tinyurl.com/interpretingSPP](http://www.tinyurl.com/interpretingSPP)
- <sup>2</sup> Cogen, Cathy, and Denis Cokely. "Preparing Interpreters for Tomorrow: Report on a Study of Emerging Trends in interpreting and Implications for Interpreter Education." Consortium- Unpublished.

