

## Sign Language Interpreting

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Sign language interpreting is a broad term used to describe the facilitation of communication between a person who can hear and a deaf or hard-of-hearing person. It is in some ways very much the same as spoken language interpreting and in some ways distinct from it. Sign language interpreters work with a variety of languages and communication systems, work in many different settings, and have several of unique challenges compared to spoken language interpreters.

Sign language interpreting got its professional start in 1964 with the formation of the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID.) Today's interpreters follow a Code of Professional Conduct (CPC) developed by RID members and have certification options through RID. The CPC addresses issues such as confidentiality, functioning within one's own skill level, proper conduct during an assignment, respect for consumers and colleagues, proper business practices, and professional development. Once certified, an interpreter must follow the CPC and maintain certification through life-long learning by earning continuing education units (CEUs) at various workshops, college courses, or by individual research and study. Although RID certification is not required to practice sign language interpreting, more and more deaf people are requesting certified interpreters for their appointments and more agencies are contracting almost exclusively with credentialed interpreters (RID or otherwise certified.)

Sign language interpreters have a wide variety of communication methods they might use with a consumer. Interpreting occurs between English and American Sign Language (ASL.) This is the language that is native to the Deaf community and is a fully developed language, not simply a manual code or gestures for English. Deaf or hard-of-hearing consumers may use one or more of many manual or oral systems in order to communicate and interpreters will transliterate with one of these systems to facilitate communication. In the signed spectrum there are several systems that are used that break from ASL grammar and become more and more like English. In addition, there are two primary methods of interpreting that assist with lip-reading: one manual and one mainly using just the lips. Beyond these, several special methods of signing are used with deaf-blind consumers, most of these falling into the category of "tactile interpreting." This is a hands-on-hands approach to communication. Moreover, interpreters must be knowledgeable of Deaf culture and the Deaf community while interpreting between deaf and hearing people. Any one interpreter may be skilled in all or just a couple of these methods.

Any place a deaf person needs to communicate with a hearing person an interpreter could be used. In interpreter training programs, interpreters are taught to interpret in a multitude of settings including medical, mental health, legal, educational, religious, business, platform/conference, performance arts, and now through video to many of these settings or for video phone calls. Sign language interpreters are found at appointments with insurance agents, open house nights at schools, board meetings, Broadway productions, and routine physical exams in the doctor's office. There are laws currently in place guaranteeing deaf people (classified as "disabled") the right to an interpreter in many of these settings, usually paid for by the company, doctor's office, or school system. For situations in which the law does not apply, deaf people may hire their

own interpreters (weddings, shopping for an engagement ring, etc.) Some interpreters specialize in one or more of these settings; others are willing and able to interpret in almost any setting.

Because of the nature of sign language interpreting and working with deaf individuals, certain challenges must be addressed. Sign language interpreters are prone to injury due to overuse of the hand, arm, shoulder, neck, and back muscles and joints. There are several ways this is addressed. Interpreters are encouraged to stretch before and after assignments, evaluate the biomechanics of how they work and ergonomics of how they live, and keep their bodies generally in good shape with exercise. For lengthy (two hours or more) or intense assignments (ex. legal proceedings, deaf-blind interpreting), interpreters are paired into “teams” which take turns with one doing the signing and the other monitoring for accuracy and assisting with hearing the speaker for about 20 minutes, then swapping. Also, logistics of the meeting space or interpreting area are vital. Sufficient lighting and sight lines are necessary for the deaf participants to be able to see the interpreter. Interpreters must also be in a place where they can be heard by the hearing participants. Often a sign language interpreter sits or stands next to the speaker, not the deaf person, in order for the deaf person to be able to see both the speaker and the interpreter comfortably. Finally, there are times when a deaf interpreter is necessary in order to serve a deaf person with little understanding in any American language or communication system. This deaf interpreter is skilled in using natural gestures, props, or drawing pictures in order to facilitate communication for non-standard sign users, foreign sign language users, or deaf individuals with limited communication skills.

Although there are differences in where we have come from, who we serve, and how we serve those populations, sign language interpreters and spoken language interpreters are very similar. We both work with a variety of languages and regional forms of languages in multiple settings. Sign language interpreters have a few challenges due to the mode of communication we use and the population we serve, but spoken language interpreters have their own challenges. We may have different backgrounds, but in the end we all have the same goal: facilitated communication.