

WORKING WITH A SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETER

Few individuals have been exposed to sign language interpreters. This brochure is designed to educate professors, parents and students about the role of the interpreter in a classroom setting. The interpreters at the Office of Disability Services have a variety of working experience and have varied educational backgrounds. Some have received degrees in interpreting: associate, bachelors and /or masters. Many are seeking and/or have certifications from national organizations for interpreters, such as the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf and the National Association for the Deaf. Please take a few minutes to learn about us so that together we can ensure that our Deaf and hard of hearing students have an equal opportunity to obtain the best possible education here at the University of Tennessee.

The Role of the Interpreter

An interpreter is simply one who interprets between sign language (a manual language) and spoken English (an auditory language). When the teacher or a classmate speaks, the interpreter translates the spoken words into sign language. The Deaf student likewise participates in the class by signing the information and the interpreter voices it (talks) for the class to hear. The interpreter is not meant to be a participant in the class, but a communication facilitator, making sure that communication is easily accessible for the Deaf and hearing populations equally.

You may wonder, “What exactly is interpreted?” Good question! Most everything you hear, the interpreter strives to communicate to the deaf students. What is accessible to the hearing students should also be accessible to the Deaf student. You know that student who continues to whisper or cough throughout the class causing a disturbance? The Deaf student should know that too. If comments are made in class that may be offensive, they are still interpreted. Likewise, any comments/questions made by the Deaf student are interpreted (voiced), so that the class also has equal access to that information.

Sign language interpreters often work in teams of two. At the university level, class content and material are often very dense, and the interpreter has to mentally process all of the information s/he hears. Turn taking helps fight mental fatigue and helps keep interpreters mentally fresh. And, although only one interpreter signs at a time, the other interpreter is still working hard—s/he is responsible for information that may be missed by the team member. The teaming philosophy also helps prevent interpreters from over working themselves and causing repetitive motion injuries.

Common Misconceptions About Interpreters

The interpreter serves as a tutor/personal aide for the deaf student. Interpreters at the postsecondary level rarely tutor students. It is not our role to provide tutoring services. Most universities offer formal tutoring services, and Deaf and hard of hearing students can use these services if necessary. Interpreters do not serve as personal aides either. We are professionals that work to facilitate communication.

The interpreter might interject his or her opinions during class or tell others what goes on in my classroom. The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, the national professional organization for sign language interpreters, has established a code of ethics that emphasizes confidentiality. UT interpreters work hard to abide by this code. Personal opinions are not interjected into the interpreted message.

The interpreter works with blind students and knows Braille. This may be true, but often is not the case. Students who are Deaf and those who are blind require extremely different services. Interpreters are only trained in sign language interpreting services.

Suggestions for Teachers to Help the Interpreting Process

- Textbooks, class syllabus, handouts, lecture notes are all extremely important materials that can aid the interpreter. These materials help the interpreter to become familiar with the topics that will be discussed, and it helps when spelling key vocabulary words. If possible, please give the interpreter(s) a copy of each of these items
- Please inform the interpreter of any films/videos that will be shown in your class. If possible, choose films that have closed captioning. For the Deaf and hard of hearing students, captioning is easier to watch (read) than watching the interpreter.
- Be sensitive to the fact that when the lights are completely off in a classroom, the Deaf or hard of hearing student cannot see the interpreter.
- When addressing the Deaf or hard of hearing student, look and speak directly to him/her. Avoid saying, “Tell him/her...” or “Ask him/her”
- Be aware that the interpreter is trying hard to interpret the lecture with accuracy. If the speed of the lecture or conversation becomes too rapid, the interpreter may ask for clarification.
- **MOST IMPORTANTLY, IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS, PLEASE ASK US.**