
ASLIA Deafblind Interpreting Guidelines

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Deafblind Interpreting Guidelines

Currently, there are no accredited courses in Australia specific to deafblind interpreting. When a person who is deafblind requests an interpreter, there is a high probability that the interpreter (for Deaf) will never have had experience in deafblind interpreting. This situation is further compounded by the fact that there are a number of diverse and adapted forms of AUSLAN, sign language and fingerspelling used by individuals who are deafblind, including the following most commonly used forms:

Visual Frame (Box Signing)

Signs are made within a more confined space or box, at upper chest level and between interpreter's shoulders; distance from client depends upon client's individual preference.

Close Vision

Same as above; but with interpreter directly in front of client, within very close proximity.

Tracking

Client holds wrist(s) of interpreter to keep signs within field of vision and to gain information from interpreter's movements.

Tactile Signing

Client places hands over hands of interpreter to read signs through touch and movement. (See Section 8 for more information.)

Tactile Fingerspelling (Deafblind Alphabet)

The two-hand manual alphabet is adapted to fingerspell letters onto palm of client's hand. There is a one-hand method, used primarily in the USA.

Short-cut Signs

Key signs that can be signed onto palm of client's hand are used as a supplement to tactile fingerspelling; generally used in English word order.

Even an interpreter who has had experience with one client, who is deafblind, may be unaware of the methods and requirements of other individuals who are deafblind.

Although many of the principles regarding interpreting for people who are deafblind will be the same as for people who are Deaf, (eg. Confidentiality, Professionalism) it is essential that interpreters, and booking agents, be made aware of the unique disability of deafblindness, and its implications for interpreting.

The minimum prerequisite to interpreting for a client who is deafblind should be a deafblind awareness course, including hands-on demonstration of the various communication adaptations used by deafblind people, and sighted guide techniques.

Until such time that specific training in deafblind interpreting becomes a reality in Australia, the following Guidelines can

assist in making the interpreting situation as effective as possible:

1. PRE-INTERPRETING PREPARATION

a. The booking agent will be responsible for informing the interpreter of any unique needs of a client who is deafblind, and for organising any special requirements as much as possible, eg. arranging a taxi for client after the assignment; however, it is essential that interpreters wishing to work with people who are deafblind familiarise themselves with the information contained within these Guidelines. A booking agent may organise an assignment well, but it is always possible that unexpected circumstances may require an interpreter to assist a client who is deafblind in areas that are generally not felt to be the responsibility of the interpreter, eg. assisting client with obtaining morning tea before taking own break, or guiding to a taxi rank after a meeting.

[Note: It is acceptable for the interpreter to indicate to the client in an agreed upon way that the formal interpreting role has temporarily ceased (eg. signing 'interpreting, finished') before role changes to one of providing assistance. When formal interpreting recommences, this can be indicated in a similar way (eg. signing 'interpreting, now').]

b. Arrange to meet prior to the assignment to discuss requirements, as described in these Guidelines.

c. Fifteen minutes prior to starting time would be standard practice; however, if new to the client, more pre-interpreting preparation may be necessary.

2. MAKING CONTACT

a. Always let the client who is deafblind know you are there.

b. Approach from the front and gradually move to the side to give the client the opportunity to use any residual central or peripheral vision that there may be.

c. Place your hand on the client's hand or arm and leave it there so that s/he can easily locate you. Avoid tapping, which can be startling.

d. At this point the client may respond by raising a hand to receive tactile fingerspelling, or by placing his/her hands over yours to read signs tactually; the client may respond by using his/her preferred method of communication to greet you.

e. Introduce yourself using the client's preferred method of communication, of which you will have been informed by the booking agent.

3. COMMUNICATION MODES

a. What is the client's preferred mode of communication?

b. What modes of communication are shared by both the client and interpreter in the event of a change to another mode being required? (eg., poor lighting, lights dimmed for a video, or a black out)

c. If using tactile fingerspelling, are abbreviations or short cuts acceptable to the individual? If so, what are they?

d. Determine the rate or speed of interpreting the client prefers.

4. MOBILITY AND ACCESS

- a. Learn basic sighted guide techniques, as sighted guide may be required by some clients in some situations.
- b. Sighted guide is when a sighted person accompanies a client who is deafblind to guide them safely to a destination.
- c. Ask if the client will require sighted guide; do not assume s/he will.
- d. Offer sighted guide by placing your hand on the back of the client's hand; if the client requires sighted guide s/he will generally move his/her hand up your arm to your elbow and grip your arm just above the elbow joint. This grip will position the client a safe half-pace behind you. Alternatively, some clients may prefer resting their arm on your forearm, linking arms, or putting their hand on your shoulder. Ask for, and respect, individual preferences.
- e. A client, who does not require sighted guide in good lighting or during the day, may require sighted guide at night or in dark or changing light conditions.
- f. Never grab the client's hand or arm to pull or steer him/her; and never push the client in front of you.
- g. Advise client of any dangerous obstacles, steps, or narrow passages; does the client have any particular signals for this kind of information?
- h. Avoid interpreting or communicating while walking or using sighted guide as this can be distracting and dangerous; if interpreting is required in transit, stop, communicate, then resume walking when the communication has ceased.
- i. Are there any transport needs such as organising a taxi after the session?
- j. Is there wheelchair access, if required?
- k. Are there any guide dog requirements, such as a relief area?
[Remember that a guide dog is a working animal and is not to be distracted, by patting or calling, while in harness.]
- l. Although the above requirements should be prearranged by the booking agent, it is essential that interpreters working with people who are deafblind be aware of these unique issues.

5. LENGTH OF ASSIGNMENT AND BREAKS

- a. Two interpreters would be required, to allow for breaking, if the assignment is for more than one hour.
- b. It is very important to remember that the client may also require a break.

c. Tactile interpreting can be very tiring both mentally and physically; the interpreter may need to move away from the client to ensure a real break, as 'chatting' to the client during the break may defeat the purpose of the break. However, let the client know where you will be during the break, if s/he should need to find you.

d. Remember, deafblindness can be very isolating for an individual; ask if the client would prefer to sit with others during breaks.

e. A general rule is a minimum of five minutes break every twenty minutes for both the interpreter and the client; this may vary with individual preferences and should be agreed upon at pre-interpreting session.

f. If there is only one interpreter and/or the client requires a break, the proceedings must stop until the break is over.

6. INTERPRETING THE ENVIRONMENT

a. Physical and visual information, as well as auditory information, must be conveyed.

b. Establish what kinds of incidental information the client would like, to help to create a 'picture' of the environment, eg. layout of room(s) or area; or types of objects or items in the room?

c. Location of other participants should be explained, eg. go around the table or room and introduce or identify who is sitting at one o'clock, three o'clock, etc., as on a clock face.

d. Inform client of any new arrivals, people leaving, or other changes in physical environment.

e. Interpret emotional overtones, dynamics, head nods, body postures, etc.

f. Indicate who is speaking by name, not pointing; if you do not already know everyone's names, name tags or a seating chart could assist with this, and should be organised by booking agent, if possible, prior to assignment.

g. Indicate when a question is directed to the client.

h. When directing the client to an object, such as a water glass, gently place your hand under the hand of the client and move hands together in direction of the glass. When you make contact with the glass, slowly slide your hand away to allow the client to locate glass. Do not pick up the object and put it in the client's hand unless it has been agreed previously that this is acceptable to the client. Your other hand can be used to steady the glass, if necessary.

i. Locating a chair can be done in this same manner, by guiding one hand to the back of the chair and the other hand to the seat.

7. SPECIAL NEEDS

a. Any of the following special individual needs should be clarified and prearranged by the booking agent, but it is essential that interpreters working with people who are deafblind are aware of unique needs and issues.

b. How will the client access restroom facilities in an unfamiliar environment? Arrangements may need to be made for assistance in locating facilities.

c. Are there any medical considerations or food requirements?

d. Are alternative formats (large print, Braille) required to enable access to information if overheads, whiteboards and/or handouts are used.

8. CODES AND ADAPTATIONS FOR TACTILE INTERPRETING

a. Individual codes, or cues, may be agreed upon to represent various situations, such as fingerspelling 'hahaha' when there is laughing, or tapping on the arm to indicate, "Please repeat that".

b. When tactile signing, allow the client to follow your hands - do not hold onto the client's hands, or grab client's thumbs or fingers.

c. Signs must be clear and distinct.

d. Information that would normally be conveyed through facial expression can be conveyed through speed of signing, hand tension, gentle strokes, squeezes, brisk

taps, etc.

e. Nods, shaking the head and frowns are all forms of facial grammar that can completely change the meaning of identical signs, eg. the signs 'cake', 'like', and 'you' can mean three different things: 'don't you like cake?' if signed with a frown and shake of the head; 'you really like that cake!' if signed with a nod and a smile; or 'do you like the cake?', if signed with raised eyebrows and wide eyes. Facial grammar will need to be supplemented with more tactile information for the client who is deafblind.

f. Put expressions, feelings, and body language into your hands.

g. Your hands can convey your moods and even your personality!

h. Location and placement of signs need to be considered - pointing to something that cannot be seen is meaningless.

i. Fingerspelling may need to be used more frequently to clarify signs normally dependent upon location and space.

j. Signs difficult to discriminate between tactually may need to be fingerspelled, eg. 'what' and 'today'.

k. Signs that can generally be differentiated by lipreading will need to be fingerspelled, eg. 'fight' and 'competition'.

l. To enable participation in discussions, establish what signal will be used, and whether it will be initiated by client or interpreter, eg. client signs 'ex' as signal

for interpreter to say, "Excuse me, I'd like to say something".

m. Enforce breaks, as tactile signing and fingerspelling are mentally and physically tiring for both client and interpreter.

- n. Keep your signing low whenever possible to reduce fatigue.
- o. When tactile fingerspelling, establish whether a light or a firmer touch is preferred.

9. SEATING

- a. Comfortable seating with good back support is extremely important, to keep any stress on shoulders and backs to a minimum.
- b. Some clients prefer sitting face to face with elbows resting on a table; others prefer side by side, or corner to corner. Ask for seating preferences.
- c. Cushions can be placed under elbows for long sessions.
- d. A special interpreting table can be used - a portable, narrow table placed between client and interpreter that can be adjusted to optimum height.

10. CLOTHING

- a. Good contrast between skin colour and clothing is important, to distinguish signs clearly against background, eg. the two most acceptable colours for an interpreter with light-coloured skin are black and navy blue.
- b. Tops must be plain with no designs of any sort and without zippers, brooches or shiny buttons. A dark top must completely cover any lighter clothing which might be worn underneath.
- c. For tactile interpreting, pants may be preferable, as skirts and dresses may not allow interpreter to sit comfortably at the close proximity required.
- d. Remove all jewellery including rings, bracelets and earrings. This is regardless of the communication style used; when using tactile methods, rings (even ones which feel smooth) can cut and chafe and earrings can be pulled because of close proximity. If the client is relying on residual vision, any jewellery can be visually distracting and may affect the client's concentration.
- e. Long fingernails can be a problem; keep nails smooth and trimmed.

11. LIGHTING

- a. Appropriate lighting can be a critical issue for clients relying on residual vision.
- b. Avoid glare, cluttered backgrounds and spotlights.

- c. Lighting is generally preferred to illuminate interpreter's face and hands, but ask what the preference is.
- d. Beware of audio-visual presentations where lights are dimmed or turned off; this can be very distressing for a client who has night-blindness or other eye conditions affected by changes in lighting.
- e. A pre-interpreting session would allow the client to be involved in the seating arrangements and any possible lighting modifications.

12. BREAKS AND SOCIAL SITUATIONS

- a. Discuss expectations regarding breaks at pre-interpreting session.
- b. Interpreter may be required to assist client in accessing refreshments or restroom facilities, if necessary, before taking own break.
- c. During breaks, will the interpreter interpret conversation, or facilitate communication with others? When appropriate and agreed upon, the interpreter could introduce the client to others, including people who are Deaf, to extend social contact and provide an opportunity for others to learn to communicate with people who are deafblind.
- d. As noted in section on Pre-interpreting Preparation, a useful technique to be used in a situation where the interpreter's role may need to temporarily shift to that of a support person is to indicate when the role changes by simply signing, 'interpreting, finished' or similar; when role as interpreter resumes, indicate by signing 'interpreting now'.
- e. Morning tea or lunch breaks may be good opportunities for the client to discuss issues or share information; but avoid communicating while eating, especially
with tactile methods of communication.
- f. When you leave for a break, always let the client know you are leaving; it is embarrassing to discover you've been chatting to an empty chair!
- g. Never leave the client standing in the middle of an open space, or alone in unfamiliar surroundings.
- h. If the interpreter must leave, even for a moment, make sure there is somewhere for the client to sit, or something stationary to have contact with, such as a wall or
table.
- i. Always let the client know when you have returned.
- j. Make a conscious effort to say hello and goodbye, as the client may be unaware of people coming and going unless physically approached.

13. PERSONAL HYGIENE

- a. This sensitive area requires special consideration, from both the point of view of the client and the interpreter, as one to one tactile interpreting requires such close proximity and contact.
- b. Smoke, perspiration odour or strong food odours such as garlic or onions, can be particularly distracting for the client or for the interpreter.
- c. Strong perfumes or aftershave should be avoided.
- d. An unscented or lightly scented hand lotion may be applied during breaks to help keep hands from chapping and becoming rough and distracting to the client.
- e. When possible, interpreter's and client's hands should be washed frequently.
- f. Good hygiene, especially keeping hands clean, is extremely important.

14. REMEMBER

- a. All clients are individuals, and individual needs, including interpreting requirements, may vary immensely.
- b. Every attempt should be made to go into the interpreting situation with adequate information about the client's preferences and requirements, and the appropriate communication skills.
- c. If in doubt, ASK the client.

15. CODE OF ETHICS

- a. The Code of Ethics followed by AUSLAN Interpreters was developed by AUSIT (Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators Inc.) and has been endorsed by NAATI (National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters). This same Code of Ethics is to be observed by interpreters for people who are deafblind.
- b. A Code of Practice, or Deafblind Interpreting Guidelines, is necessary to clarify the role of the interpreter working with individuals who are deafblind.

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