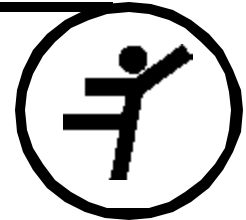


Sign Language Interpreters



Occupational Brief Title Codes:

- D.O.T.: 137.267-014
- G.O.E.: 01.03.02
- S.O.C.: 27-3091
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Work Classification Based Related

D.O.T. Occupations:

- Editorial Assistants
- Interpreters
- Program Coordinators
- Translators

Interests Based Related

G.O.E. Occupations:

- Actors
- Clowns
- Impersonators
- Mimes

Skills Based Related

O*NET Occupations:

- Caption Writers
- Elementary School Teachers
- Immigration and Customs Inspectors
- Tour Guides and Escorts

Noteworthy Quote:

"...beautiful and complex, American Sign Language [is] the country's third most common language...The job of an interpreter is incredibly varied—in where you work and with whom you work...A sign language interpreter could interpret in drug court, for Sesame Street®, at a business meeting, at an Alcoholic Anonymous meeting, and at the birth of a child...all in one day!...Sign language interpreters are working to make America a barrier-free environment for the approximately 2.5 million men, women, and children who live in every community in the country. This is, indeed, a noble and unique profession!"

Daniel D. Burch, Ph.D., CSC
Sign Language Interpreter
Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Sign language interpreters ('sign 'lan-guage in'ter-pret-ers) use manual sign language to translate spoken words for people who are deaf or hard of hearing, and voice sign language for hearing individuals.

There are millions of men, women, and children around the world who are deaf. Some are born deaf. Others lose their hearing gradually or suddenly, as children or as adults. Degrees of hearing loss vary widely among people who are deaf.. People who are profoundly deaf hear nothing or almost nothing at all. They represent about 1/4 of the people whose hearing is impaired. Still, whatever their hearing loss, and however it occurred, many of these people have difficulty understanding speech or have trouble being understood when they themselves have something to say. This can cause a serious break down in communication between people who can hear and those who are deaf.

Since the sixteenth century educators have worked to develop communication methods which have included gestures, signs, finger spelling, and speech reading. This is called sign language. Each country has its own sign language. In America it is known as American Sign Language (ASL). Although the use of sign language has grown tremendously, it is not typically taught to hearing people as a second language the way spoken languages are. Sign language is generally as foreign to hearing people as sound is to the deaf, or Chinese is to English speaking people. Today, it is not uncommon to see interpreters working with hearing and hearing impaired people to help them communicate.



Sign language interpreters bridge the gap between persons who cannot hear and persons who can.
 Photo by Chuck Haupt

Work Performed

Sign language interpreters and *oral transliterators* (or *oral interpreters*) bridge the gap between persons who cannot hear and persons who can. Most interpreters for people who have impaired hearing use sign language.

Sign language interpreters working with deaf or hard of hearing individuals often use American Sign Language (ASL). An estimated 500,000 people use ASL in the United States. It is the most widely used language outside of English and Spanish. Individuals who are deaf and hard of hearing routinely use this language when communicating with each other.

The American education system has spawned a variety of sign systems in order to represent the English language. These sign systems, or American Sign Vernacular (ASV), have been traditionally called Pidgin Sign English (PSE), Signed English (SE), Manually Coded English (MCE), Signing Exact English (SEE), Conceptual Accurate Signed English (CASE), and contact signing. These systems generally follow English word order, and many use specific signs to represent verb tense, prefixes, and suffixes.

American Sign Vernacular is used mainly in educational settings or at professional meetings. However, the predominant language used by the Deaf community remains American Sign Language. Professional interpreters must be able to adjust to a broad range of deaf consumer preferences and/or needs for interpretation. They are expected to work comfortably along the wide spectrum.

Sign language interpreters listen to spoken words and then use their hands, facial expression, and body language to interpret them into American Sign Language (ASL). This is voice-to-sign interpreting. Interpreters also interpret messages from ASL into spoken English or, in some instances, other languages. This is called sign-to-voice interpreting. In both cases, interpreters need to be aware of, and sensitive to, ethnic/cultural and linguistic concerns.

Interpreters should be equally skilled in both sign language and voicing for individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing. Interpreters should also be skilled in mimicry (mime) and gesturing. Nonmanual or facial expressions, such as raised eyebrows and head nods, are like the tone of voice in spoken words or like punctuation marks in written work. Sign language interpreters must also adapt their technique to different circumstances. In platform interpreting (for an audience) interpreters use large, clear signs. In one-on-one interpreting they work face-to-face with the client.

In oral transliteration people who are deaf or hard of hearing lip-read the clearly defined lip movements of the interpreter who is repeating (without voicing them aloud) the words of a speaker. Sometimes oral interpreters replace a word with one which conveys the same meaning but is easier to lip-read. Some hard of hearing persons prefer this kind of interpreting either because they do not know sign language and/or because they are skillful lip readers. Deaf or hard of hearing individuals may also use the speechreading (lipreading) services of oral transliterators to voice their silent or difficult to understand speech. This is called voice interpreting.

An important part of an interpreter's work is to understand a person's intentions and meanings. It takes skill to convey exact shades of meaning. Interpreters do not add their own ideas or comments. They interpret as precisely as possible what each person says or signs, although some concepts are not exactly the same in different cultural contexts.

Sign language and oral interpreters must also understand the subjects under discussion. For instance, those who work in engineering schools should have the scientific and mathematical background to understand what they are

interpreting. Interpreters in medical clinics must know the meaning of medical terms and procedures. Those who work in courts and law enforcement agencies must understand legal terms and protocol (procedures). In general, interpreters need to be well-informed on many topics. Otherwise, they should be careful to accept only assignments on subjects or materials in which they are knowledgeable.

Working Conditions

As a rule, sign language and oral interpreters work indoors in comfortable surroundings. Their working conditions are similar to those of others employed in the same work environment. Generally, one interpreter works face-to-face with just one or a few deaf or hard of hearing persons at a time. However, interpreters who work for television do not see their audience. Those who interpret in church, or at other public gatherings, serve a large audience. These interpreters must be sensitive to audience response. In addition, interpreters sometimes employ a team approach when on an assignment consisting of long sessions (over an hour in length) of work, especially when covering complex material.

Hours and Earnings

Many sign language and oral interpreters do free-lance work in different settings. Some have a private practice. Others list their names and skills with local health and rehabilitation agencies, or service agencies, and work when needed. Free-lance or private practice interpreters may work on short notice, and they may work evenings or weekends. They may have some steady clients.

Increasingly, interpreters are working as regularly scheduled staff in any place at least one deaf person is employed or regularly attends. They may work full time or part time. For example, some sign language and oral interpreters work full time in schools, colleges, and universities where they interpret for students with a hearing loss. In these cases, they work the same hours as the teachers or faculty. They may also attend evening meetings or seminars in order to interpret for deaf or hard of hearing parents or students. In school systems with only a few students who are deaf or hard of hearing, and in many television stations, interpreters may work part time.

Full-time sign language and oral interpreters receive a salary that varies with geographic location, education, experience, certification, and qualifications. For example, interpreters certified by a national or state certifying agency usually get better pay than those who are not certified. Overall, earnings may range from as low as \$15,000 a year up to \$60,000 a year. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, in 2000, most interpreters and translators earned between \$18,000 and \$53,000 a year. Mid-range earnings ranged from \$23,000 to \$40,000 a year. The average wage was around \$30,000 a year.

Free-lance interpreters usually get paid by the hour. Rates range anywhere from \$10 to \$45 an hour, and vary with skills and with the complexity of the assignment. Interpreters employed by schools or health services routinely start at \$15 to \$30 an hour.

Education and Training

Sign language and oral interpreting is a professional service. As such, sign language and oral interpreters should have a wide background that prepares them to express ideas and facts from a wide range of human endeavors. Interpreters qualified to serve in several fields or settings have a broader scope for advancement than those whose learning and knowledge are limited. In the interpreting field, there is an ever stronger movement toward requiring a college degree for full-time employment. Many states already require a bachelor's degree or other credential for interpreting in public school systems.

Interpreters must be fluent in both spoken language and sign language. Hearing children of deaf or hard of hearing parents may have an advantage in becoming competent interpreters. They learn sign language as naturally as other children learn to speak English. Deaf or hard of hearing persons who lost their hearing after they learned spoken language skills also may serve as interpreters. Most interpreters, however, learn interpreting skills from classes and workshops.

Those who plan to learn sign language in order to enter a career in interpreting should take a specific program of study and training in American Sign Language and in American Sign Vernacular. It should be explicitly understood that the learning of a sign language precedes and is not a part of interpreter training. Interpreter training starts after one acquires skill in a sign language.

Throughout the United States and Canada there are around 147 colleges, universities, and vocational schools that offer a degree for completion of a program of study in sign language interpreting. Most programs offer a two-year associate degree in interpreting, but the number of four-year bachelor degree programs is growing. A few schools even offer a master's degree program in interpreting. Programs consist of classes and supervised experience. Courses include orientation to interpreting, methods, ethics and law, public speaking, psychology and sociology of deaf persons, and a core of general subjects such as English. The supervised experience is essential to every program because skill and fluency come with constant practice.

Certification and Professional Societies

Credentials act as evidence of a sign language or oral interpreters' skills and fluency. The standard credential is certification through the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. (RID). Some states offer their own certification, but accept RID certification. Although interpreters may not need to be certified to get and hold a job, employers often specify or prefer certified applicants.

Other credentials employers look for may include involvement in a professional organization. Sign language and oral interpreters may belong, for example, to the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), the American Sign Language Teachers Association (ALTA), the Conference of Interpreter Trainers (CIT), the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (AGBell), or National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA). These organizations promote activities that will safeguard the accessibility and civil rights of Americans who are deaf and hard of hearing. They also promote activities that further the profession of interpretation and transliteration of American Sign Language and English. These activities include professional and educational policy and standard development; hosting conferences, workshops, seminars, and conventions; public awareness efforts; publication and distribution of deafness-related information; and legal assistance and advocacy.

Personal Qualifications

Interpreters must be alert and attentive when serving as communicators. They must have excellent English and listening skills. A gift for mimicry (mime) is an excellent asset. For example, a shrug or a lift of an eyebrow can convey a nuance essential to the message. Energy is required to concentrate closely and to translate simultaneously.

Other vital traits are self-control, patience, and a sense of humor. Interpreters should be able to stay calm in tense or confused moments. Interpreters cannot give advice or opinions. They must remain impartial. They should accept assignments only on subjects for which they have the knowledge to interpret correctly and effectively.

The ability to gain the trust of persons who are deaf or hard of hearing is important. Although most people are cooperative and eager to work with interpreters, some may be reserved. Individuals who are deaf or hard of hearing may have had frustrating or unhappy experiences with hearing people owing to prejudice, discrimination, or stereotypical attitudes. They also may not be so willing to share their privacy with an outside person.

Sign language interpreters must be careful in interpreting messages correctly. Maintaining confidentiality in all interpreted communications is absolutely essential. If a deaf or hard of hearing person discusses a personal matter with any individual, the interpreter must never repeat any part of the discussion to anyone.

Occupations can be adapted for workers with disabilities. Persons should consult their school or employment counselors, their state office of vocational rehabilitation, or their state department of labor to explore fully their individual needs and requirements as well as the requirements of the occupation.

Where Employed

Interpreters for persons with a hearing or vocal loss work in all parts of the United States. The majority, however,

work in heavily populated regions. Interpreters also work in many fields. They serve in public health agencies, employment agencies, hearing and speech clinics, hospitals, and rehabilitation centers. Others work in public schools, trade and technical schools, and colleges and universities. Interpreters serve in industry and business. They are employed in government agencies, theatres, television stations, churches and religious agencies, law enforcement agencies, and courts.

Employment Outlook

Both private and public efforts in the past thirty years have greatly helped individuals with disabilities to acquire education and employment. Those with a hearing loss are among these individuals. This trend has created a need for sign language interpreters and occasionally oral interpreters. This demand will not only continue, but grow.

The federal government sponsors job training and education for persons who are deaf, hard of or hearing of all ages. Recent legislation, directing aid to Americans with disabilities mandates that interpreters be available for persons who are deaf or hard of hearing throughout the public and private sectors such as in health centers, courts, schools, and other agencies. More opportunities are available in metropolitan regions, however, where there are generally larger concentrations of individuals who are hearing impaired.

Entry Methods

Interpreters who wish to find employment can find the names of agencies that serve deaf or hard of hearing persons in the Yellow Pages of the telephone book. Staff in these agencies can give information on where the jobs are.

In large metropolitan areas interpreter service providers coordinate the interpreting needs of their region and schedule the assignments of interpreters. County health departments and the special education departments of school systems may have job leads. Organizations, such as RID, also offer support programs and services, including job information, to their members.

Advancement

To advance, interpreters must upgrade their skills and qualifications. They can work toward general or specific certification. Some interpreters obtain advanced degrees in related fields such as linguistics or cultural studies. Many interpreters combine another skill with interpreting. They may become professionals in other fields that serve or work with deaf or hard of hearing people. They may go into teaching, administration, or rehabilitation. They may go to work for social services, government, or industry.

For Further Research

Alpha Books, 6771 Wilson Boulevard, Falls Church, VA 22044.

Guide to Learning Sign Language. Susan Shelly, Jim Schneck, and Karen B. Turner. 304 pages. \$16.95.

Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 333 Commerce Street, Alexandria, VA 22314. Web site: www.rid.org

Fingerspelling in ASL. Brenda E. Cartwright and Suellen J. Bahleda. 136 pages. \$29.95.

Encounters with Reality: 1001 Interpreter Scenarios. Brenda Cartwright. 214 pages. \$29.95.

Interpreting: An Introduction. Nancy Frishberg. 244 pages. \$22.50.

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