

A guide to working with interpreters

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Overview

The role of a language interpreter is to restate spoken communication from one language to another. There are two types of language interpreters: telephone interpreters and on-site interpreters.

Preparing for a meeting with on-site interpreters

- 1 **DO** find out what **language and/or dialect of language** is required before booking an interpreter.
- 2 **DO** ask if there is a **preference for an interpreter from** a particular country. For example an Arabic speaking person from Lebanon will speak a different dialect to a person from Egypt. Also consider the importance of these questions for clients who come from countries and regions where there is, or has been, political unrest and conflict.
- 3 **DO** ask your client if they prefer a **male or female** interpreter. The client may be bound by cultural or religious practice.
- 4 **DO** allow for the **extra time** required for the interpreting process to take place. An estimate is usually double the usual interview time.
- 5 **DO** consider a client's request for **strict confidentiality** when using an interpreter especially on matters of a private nature such as sexual harassment or sexual orientation. For this reason, the client may want to use an interpreter that they do not know and is not well known to their community. Interstate interpreters are available over the phone.
- 6 **DO NOT make assumptions** on the language your client speaks. Always ask your client what language interpreter they prefer. For example, a Vietnamese-born person may speak Chinese not Vietnamese.
- 7 **DO NOT use children**, relatives, and unqualified bilingual staff as interpreters. The issue of linguistic competence, proficiency, impartiality, confidentiality and professionalism must always be taken into account.

Prior to meeting with on-site interpreters

- 1 **DO** brief the interpreter on the matter beforehand.
- 2 **DO reach an agreement** with the interpreter as to how you will work with them and how the meeting will be conducted.
- 3 **DO brief all parties involved** in a conference where an interpreter will be used.
 - i. Ensure that all parties are aware of the **role of an interpreter** and how the **conference will be conducted** with the interpreter.
 - ii. **Set rules** on keeping statements short, delivering statements in segments, and allowing for the interpreter to interpret everything before a new point is introduced.
 - iii. Take note of the **interpreter's method** of signalling you that your comments/ questions are too long and allow the interpreter to do the same with the non-English speaking client.
 - iv. The interpreter should **interpret all** aspects of the conversations between the parties (even casual/side comments).
 - v. When an interpreter is used for either party ensure they are **not seen or used as that party's advocate** (a problem that may arise due to language/ cultural affinity).
- 4 **DO** ensure that the interpreter is not sitting in the room with you before the client arrives as this may assist the client to see that the **interpreter is an independent party**.





During a meeting with on-site interpreters

- 1 **DO take control** of the meeting. Introduce yourself to the client and interpreter and then introduce the interpreter to the client.
- 2 **DO explain to the client** the role of the interpreter.
- 3 **DO** explain **who** you are, the **purpose of the meeting** and **how** it will be conducted.
- 4 **DO** ensure that you are **sitting facing the client** and that the interpreter is equidistant (e.g., 3 points of a triangle). Always sit the interpreter next to the client and ensure that you can speak directly to all parties involved.
- 5 **DO talk to the client in the first person.** E.g., use "Can you tell me..." NOT "interpreter can you ask the client to tell me..."
- 6 **DO** be aware of any **technical legal language** use and **avoid** the use of **acronyms**.
- 7 **DO** ask the client whether you are speaking at an appropriate pace or if any **clarification** is required.
- 8 **DO** ask for **feedback** during the meeting to ensure that the **client is satisfied** with the interpreting process.
- 9 **DO** remember **if you are not satisfied with the interpreter** that you can cease the meeting at any time. Explain to the client your reasons and seek to have the interview rescheduled with another interpreter at no extra cost.
- 10 **DON'T** face the interpreter when speaking to the client. **Look directly at the client.**
- 11 **DON'T expect the interpreter to be a walking dictionary.** There may be times when the interpreter will have to consult a dictionary or ask you to explain a term or concept. Use simple language.

Working with a telephone interpreter

Ask the client a number of questions to identify the type of interpreter that best suits them. This may initially be a difficult task should your client have limited English. Your client may only be able to tell you the language of the interpreter they require. This may just be enough for you to engage an interpreter and then utilise the interpreter to clarify other language related needs prior to the formal discussion.

- 1 **Identify the language** interpreter required by asking the client. Ask if the person speaks a dialect and inform the client that you may be able to get an interpreter who speaks the same dialect.
- 2 **Ask the client if they prefer a female or male interpreter or an interpreter they know (or do not know).** There may be situations where a client would prefer to know the identity of an interpreter, especially in situations where the client feels that the matter is private.
- 3 **Ring the interpreting company.** The company will ask your name, company name, and booking number, language required, name of client, and client phone number. Also request other client requirements.
- 4 **The process.** The Interpreting Service establishes a three-way conversation between you, the interpreter and the client. First, the interpreting service connects a line with the interpreter and you will get a chance to brief the interpreter. **Second**, the interpreting service will call the client (you will hear this happening). A three-way line will be established between the parties. **Finally**, the interpreter will introduce themselves to the client and then turn the conversation over to you. The service may also check the line for problems intermittently during the conversation.
- 5 **Speak directly to the client in the first person.** Do not say "Interpreter can you ask the client..." Remember the conversation is between you and the client, the interpreter is the communication tool that enables this.

* Some of this material is adapted from work undertaken by the ECOV Multicultural Program.

