
Department of American Sign Language & Interpreting Studies

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Essential Functions of an American Sign Language – English Interpreter

People working as American Sign Language – English interpreters must possess specific skills, experience, education and abilities required to successfully provide professional services. This includes the ability to perform essential job functions. The ASL English Interpretation (ASLEI) program in the ASL & Interpreting Studies (ASLIS) department at the University of Northern Colorado (UNC) has gathered the following list of essential functions for sign language interpreters. This information is informed by the state of Texas Board for the Evaluation of Interpreters, which is referenced at the end of this document.

Essential Physical Abilities

The essential physical abilities of a nonintermediary, or nondeaf, interpreter are:

Hearing: the ability to hear, identify, and understand the speech of another person without relying on visual assistance.

Speech: the ability to speak clearly so that the speech is understandable to a listener.

Vision: the ability to see details of another person's hand shapes, hand movements, and facial expressions from a distance of three to six feet.

Facial expression: the ability to control the muscles of the face in order to manipulate the eyebrows, cheeks, mouth, and nose.

Manual dexterity: the ability to quickly make coordinated movements of one hand, a hand together with its arm, two hands, or two hands together with arms

Finger dexterity: the ability to make precisely coordinated movements of the fingers of one or both hands.

Wrist-finger speed: the ability to make fast, simple, repeated movements of the fingers, hands, and wrists.

Limb movement: the ability to move the arms to place the hands slightly above the head, and to extend the arms away from the front of the body and to the sides of the body.

Limb movement speed: the ability to quickly move the arms.

Dual-limb coordination: the ability to coordinate movements of both arms while sitting or standing.

Head: the ability to control the head in order to nod and to turn it from side to side.

Physical stamina: the ability to endure moderate physical exertion without getting winded or out-of-breath for at least 30 minutes.

Essential Cognitive Abilities

The essential cognitive abilities of a nonintermediary, nondeaf interpreter are:

Critical thinking: the ability to use logic and analysis to assess communication in order to make adjustments in approaches to interpretation.

Self-monitoring: the ability to monitor and assess the interpretation during and after a task.

Selective attention: the ability to concentrate and be undistracted while performing a task, and to sustain that attention over a period of time.

Auditory attention: the ability to focus on a single source of auditory information in the presence of other distracting sounds.

Visual attention: the ability to focus on a single source of visual information in the presence of other distracting movements in the surrounding area.

Mental stamina: the ability to sustain a significant amount of mental processing without fatigue or breakdown for at least 30 minutes.

Working memory: the ability to remember information such as concepts, words, and numbers for a brief time while interpreting.

Information ordering: the ability to track and arrange information in a certain order.

Pattern inference: the ability to quickly make sense of information even when parts of that information may appear to be missing.

Time sharing: the ability to efficiently shift between two or more activities or tasks, and between two or more sources of information.

Problem sensitivity: the ability to recognize when something is wrong or is likely to go wrong.

Fluency of ideas: the ability to generate a number of ideas about a given topic. (This concerns the number of ideas produced and not the quality, correctness, or creativity of the ideas.)

Breadth of knowledge: an acquaintance or understanding, at the introductory level or higher, of a broad variety of topics and fields of interest.

Essential Cultural Knowledge and Linguistic Abilities

The essential cultural knowledge and linguistic abilities of a nonintermediary, nondeaf interpreter are:

English language

- Knowledge of the structure and content of the English language including the meaning and spelling of words, rules of composition, and grammar.
- The ability to listen to and understand information and ideas presented through spoken words, sentences and paragraphs.
- The ability to communicate information and ideas by speaking so that others will understand.

Written English comprehension

- Read and understand information and ideas presented in writing.
- Communicate information and ideas in writing so that others will understand.

American Sign Language

- Knowledge of the structure and content of American Sign Language including the meaning of lexical and phrasal items, rules of grammar, and articulation.
- The ability to watch and understand information and ideas presented through signs, gestures, classifiers, and finger spelling.
- The ability to communicate information and ideas through signs, gestures, classifiers, and fingerspelling so that others will understand.

Culture

ASL English interpreters must have an in-depth understanding of the cultural norms and mores of the American English-speaking and the American D/deaf communities.

Essential Professional Attributes

The essential professional attributes of a nonintermediary, nondeaf interpreter are:

Social perceptiveness: the ability to be aware of and sensitive to others' reactions, and the ability to understand why others react as they do.

Independence: the ability to develop independent approaches to doing things and to work with little or no supervision.

Interpersonal relationships: the ability to develop constructive and cooperative working relationships with others, and to maintain them over time.

Adaptability and flexibility: the ability to adapt to considerable variety in the workplace and be flexible and accepting of positive and negative change.

Emotional well-being: the ability to exercise emotional control and stability in order to fully use intellectual abilities and good judgment.

Self-control: the ability to maintain composure, keep emotions in check, control anger, and avoid aggressive behavior, even in difficult situations.

Professional decorum: the ability to show respect and act in a professional manner during all interactions.

Problem solving: the ability to make complex decisions, including the ability to identify problems, collect information, establish facts, and draw valid conclusions.

Organizing, planning, and prioritizing work: the ability to develop specific goals and plans, and to prioritize, organize, and accomplish goals.

Conflict resolution: the ability to identify and resolve conflicts related to the meanings of words, concepts, practices, or behaviors.

Time management: the ability to manage time well and to respect the time of others.

Ethical standards: the ability to follow the *Code of Professional Conduct as set forth by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. The seven tenets of the code are as follows:

1. Interpreters adhere to standards of confidential communication.
2. Interpreters possess the professional skills and knowledge required for the specific interpreting situation.
3. Interpreters conduct themselves in a manner appropriate to the specific interpreting situation.
4. Interpreters demonstrate respect for consumers.
5. Interpreters demonstrate respect for colleagues, interns, and students of the profession.
6. Interpreters maintain ethical business practices.
7. Interpreters engage in professional development.

*For a complete explanation of the Code of Professional Conduct, see www.RID.org.

Sources:

Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. (2005). *RID code of professional conduct*.
<https://rid.org/ethics/code-of-professional-conduct/>

Texas Board for the Evaluation of Interpreters. (2020). *Essential abilities and attributes of nonintermediary or nondeaf interpreters*. Texas Health and Human Services.
<https://hhs.texas.gov/laws-regulations/handbooks/bei/chapter-1-bei-general-interpreter-certification-policies-procedures/1-3-1-essential-abilities-attributes-nonintermediary-or-nondeaf-interpreters>