

# Guidelines for working with interpreters

Joan Laurion and Rose Skora



## & simultaneous interpretation equipment

“Whether it’s 1 or 100 people who need interpretation, take it seriously. Interpretation is their only link to the conference or the educational event. The quality of the interpretation determines the quality of their experience.” [DONNA VUKELICH, INTERPRETER]

Simultaneous interpretation equipment is one of the most powerful tools that can be used to ensure that individuals who speak a variety of languages can all learn and hear the same message. This guide is designed primarily for educators and other individuals who might make use of interpreters and this equipment to present information to a group of people.

Generally consisting of a transmitter and a set of headsets and receivers, simultaneous interpretation equipment can be used both indoors and outdoors in a variety of ways:

- To help hard-of-hearing learners participate fully
- To enable a teacher to talk very quietly when necessary
- To allow people who speak different languages to hear a presentation at the same time as English language speakers

The first two activities do not require another person to interpret the program. It is only in the last example that using a bilingual interpreter is necessary.

Interpreters use interpretation equipment to share what a speaker is saying with participants who speak a different language, generally speaking at the same time as the presenter is saying the words. This is called **simultaneous interpretation**, and it is different from simply going back and forth between two languages, as a bilingual presenter might do.

An example of simultaneous interpretation would be a presenter speaking in English while an interpreter talks into a small transmitter, interpreting the presentation immediately into Spanish. Spanish speakers then hear the interpreted presentation with their small headsets and receivers. In this way, both the English and the Spanish speakers in the group hear the program at the same time in their preferred language.

The following guidelines are designed to give you tips on working with a bilingual interpreter when using simultaneous interpretation equipment.

## Things to do before an interpreted event

### Reserve the equipment.

**1** Find out where the equipment currently is in your district and reserve it for the date of your event. Arrange to pick it up. Set it up and try it out beforehand to be sure that you know how to use it.

### Choose an interpreter.

**2** When considering a candidate, ensure that he or she has been trained as an interpreter. Being bilingual does not necessarily qualify a person to be an interpreter. Other factors to consider:

- Interpreters should have specializations (medical, agriculture, judicial, business, etc).
- Interpreters are generally trained in **simultaneous interpretation**, which involves speaking at the same time as the presenter, or **consecutive interpretation**, repeating what the presenter says after he or she has stopped speaking. If your event requires simultaneous interpretation, make sure your interpreter has previous experience and has used simultaneous interpretation equipment.
- Interpreters should conduct themselves appropriately. Make sure that your candidate understands that interpreters may not advocate, change a message, or add to or remove content from a message. Simply put, a professional interpreter does not insert his or her own views or biases in the message. Your interpreter should let you know that he or she understands these important concepts.

- If your program is over 2 hours long, you'll need to hire two interpreters so they can switch off every 20 minutes or so. For a 2-day event, you'll need three interpreters. Keep in mind that if you have multiple interpreters, the interpreters who are not interpreting are still paying attention and listening. They need to know what is going on during the program so they can take over.

- Options for finding interpreters include: The American Translators Association: [www.atanet.org](http://www.atanet.org)  
The Midwest Association of Translators and Interpreters: [www.matiata.org](http://www.matiata.org)

### Give important resources to your interpreter.

**3** Provide them with the following as soon as possible:

- Handouts, speaker notes, and PowerPoint presentations. The more information interpreters have in advance, the more successful the interpretation will be. This will allow them to look up rare or technical words or phrases before the program.
- Written names of speakers, sponsors, and people who will be acknowledged. Include the speaker's biographical information.
- The type of event they will be interpreting: outdoors, indoors, keynote, or workshop.
- The total number of participants and the number of people needing interpretation
- The size of the room(s).
- Whether a sound system will be available. It is important to ensure that the interpreter can adequately hear what the speaker is saying.

“The speaker has to be not just audible but VERY audible. I have to be able to hear over myself talking.”

[STEVE HERRICK, INTERPRETER]

### Translate written materials.

**4** Prepare the handouts and post-program surveys for all participants.

- Plan well in advance for translation of written materials. Not all interpreters are competent translators nor do all interpreters enjoy translating. Translation requires a set of specialized skills, so you may be hiring another person to do the translation.
- Your interpreter may be willing to translate the handouts and post-program surveys as well as the results into English after the program is finished. Make the interpreter aware of this request ahead of time, as he or she will need adequate time to translate the materials. Include a place for the people who were listening to the interpretation to comment on the quality of the interpreter's work in the translated version of the evaluation.
- Do not let the lack of translated written materials stop you from offering simultaneous interpretation at the event. Often, people who need verbal interpretation can read English well enough to use the handouts and answer a survey in English. They might also have another person translate the written materials for them. Remember to encourage all participants to fill out the session evaluation in their most fluent language.

## Tell guest speakers that their session will be interpreted.

**5** Gently coach speakers on how to successfully work with interpreters.

- Suggest that they speak a little slower than usual and that they use short and concise sentences as much as possible.

“It is really frustrating and difficult when speakers talk really fast or when they use long, rambling sentences.”

[STEVE HERRICK, INTERPRETER]

- Remind them to minimize the use of colloquialisms or sayings, such as the expression “shooting yourself in the foot.” Competent interpreters will not interpret this expression literally but will interpret the speaker’s meaning instead. Still, it would be easier for the interpreter if the speaker instead said: “not working to your own advantage.”

## Arrange payment for interpreters.

**6** They should be paid fairly and not be expected to work for free.

- Check with community organizations or other partners to see if they will help support the interpretation costs.
- Tell your interpreters or interpreting agencies of mileage and food reimbursement limits.
- Inform interpreters that you will need to receive an invoice for the services as soon as possible after the event.

## Things to do during an interpreted event

### Carefully distribute the equipment.

**1** Designate a committee member to be in charge of the interpretation equipment. It is not the interpreters’ job (unless they bring their own equipment) to hand out equipment and check batteries.

- Lay out the receivers near the registration table.
- Check that the batteries are working.
- Be sure that every participant signs out his or her particular receiver with name and phone contact information.

### Make space for the interpreter.

**2** Try to arrange the space so that the interpreters are on the side or in the back of the room. As much as possible, keep them away from participants who do not need interpretation. If done well, simultaneous interpretation should not distract anyone.

### Support the interpreter.

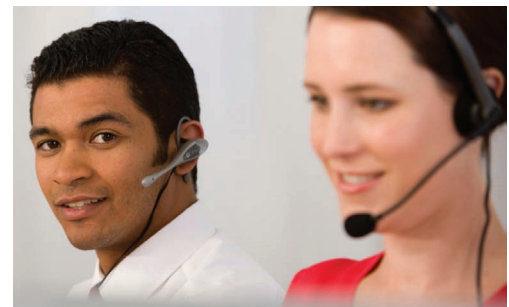
**3** Designate a committee member to be in charge of working with the interpreters.

- Show the interpreter where he or she will be sitting.
- Make sure the interpreter has the session materials in both languages.
- Introduce the interpreter to the speaker(s).
- Throughout the event, continue to check with the interpreter. Does he or she need something to drink? Can the speaker be heard?

### Support the speaker.

**4** Show the speaker(s) where the interpreter will be sitting. Ask the speaker if he or she has any experience with working with interpreters and if there are any questions you can answer.

- Ask the speaker to occasionally check in visually with the interpreter about speed and clarity.
- Encourage the speaker and interpreter to work out a signal so the speaker knows if he or she is speaking too quickly.
- Tell them both that the interpreter may interrupt the speaker to say, “Interpreter requests clarification on a word.”
- Ask the speaker to allow for extra time during the Q & A period so that interpretation may occur. If possible, use two interpreters during this time period (one for the Q & A and the other to continue the program with the speaker).
- Remind the speaker that the interpreter will not be able to interpret when two individuals are speaking at the same time.



“When two speakers talk at the same time, I just stop. It is not possible to interpret two people at one time. I just wait until the flurry of overlapping comments is over.”

[STEVE HERRICK, INTERPRETER]

## Support the participants.

**5** In your introductory remarks make all participants aware that interpretation is part of the program. Be sure to make the announcement in both (all) languages.

## Plan for short breaks.

**6** Interpreters should get a break every 20 minutes or so. They can only work for 2 hours by themselves.

- There should be short breaks every 20 minutes if you have one interpreter. If the event is over 2 hours, you'll need to hire two interpreters.

“I can do 1½ hours by myself but after 2 hours interpreting, I can’t speak English or Spanish!”

[STEVE HERRICK, INTERPRETER]

“I have been at events where people thought that we were just chatting away impolitely in the back. They were understandably irritated because they didn’t realize that we were interpreting.”

[DONNA VUKELICH, INTERPRETER]

## Things to do after an interpreted event

1. Pay the interpreter or tell the interpreter when he or she can expect payment.
2. Check the equipment to see that it is all properly packed up.
3. Return the equipment to the appropriate office.
4. If a community partner is not supporting the interpretation, ask for an invoice from the interpreter. Check the invoice for accuracy and submit it to the responsible agency or department for processing.
5. Evaluate the use of interpretation for the program and the results of the post-program survey and problem-solve any issues that may have arisen. Share responses about the effectiveness of the interpretation with the interpreter.
6. Begin a list of qualified interpreters and/or interpretation agencies for future programs.



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**Our thanks to:** Jennifer Flamboe, interpreter, for graciously providing an external review of this publication.

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