
Interpreter Fatigue and Team Interpreting

by Beth Schoenberg, January 1999

One of the most common questions asked of sign language interpreters and interpreting agencies regards the use of two (or more) interpreters for one assignment. This practice, called team interpreting, is a necessary part of our practice, though little understood. Here are answers to some common questions:

1) Why do I need to hire two interpreters?

Interpreting is both a mentally and physically taxing task. Over the years, many interpreters have suffered debilitating RMIs or Repeated Motion Injuries. Some have consequently had to leave the profession. With the scarcity of interpreters already an issue, this is something we can ill afford. More significantly, research has shown that both spoken language and sign language interpreters begin to experience mental fatigue after approximately 20 minutes of work, leading to errors in production (Brasel, B. The effects of fatigue on the competence of interpreters for the deaf. In Selected Readings in the Integration of Deaf Students at CSUN, ed. H. Murphy. Northridge, CA: California State University. 1976) Even worse, they show diminished ability to recognize errors. So, not only are they making mistakes, they don't realize it.

When you are hiring sign language interpreters, you deserve to have information conveyed accurately. An interpreter who is mentally or physically fatigued will not be able to do this. Thus, for longer assignments, interpreters will take turns so that they have time to recover, both mind and body.

2) When do I need two interpreters?

There is no hard and fast rule about how long one interpreter can continue to work alone. Two interpreters should be considered for any assignment over one hour; however, many one hour jobs - or even significantly longer jobs - can be done by one person. Things to consider are the number of speakers (deaf and hearing); the complexity of information conveyed; the use of media (e.g. videos) and whether that media is accessible without an interpreter (e.g. captioning provided on videos); and speed and duration of information. A three hour computer lab might only require one interpreter; a one hour, highly technical staff meeting might require two interpreters. Some assignments, because of complexity of setting, audience, and information, may require even more interpreters. When in doubt, consult with the SignOn scheduler. The more information you have about the setting, agenda, and participants, the better we can advise you as to what is needed.

3) What is a deaf interpreter and why might I need one?

There may be certain situations where a deaf interpreter, or a relay interpreter, is requested. A relay interpreter is a deaf or hard of hearing person who has special skill and training in acting as an intermediary and cultural guide for a deaf person whose communication needs are especially complex. This person may be from another country, have limited early exposure to language, or have disabilities that interfere with language production/comprehension. A relay interpreter works with a hearing sign language interpreter as a team to make sure communication occurs smoothly and

accurately. Because information has to be conveyed between four parties, rather than three, situations using a relay interpreter can be expected to take more time. SignOn

does work with a number of certified and qualified Deaf interpreters and may request that they be part of a unique communication situation.