

What Is A Qualified Interpreter . . . And How Do I Get One?

Debra C. Brenner

Bruce D. Finkbone
University of Georgia
Athens, Georgia

Abstract

The recent passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) brings the issue of disability access to the forefront at institutions of higher education. An emerging group of students with disabilities on college campuses today is students who are Deaf. Although there are several institutions that have a specific charter to serve Deaf students, these students are now applying to colleges and universities that have never before had a Deaf student enrolled. All institutions of higher education, whether or not they are "specialized" colleges for the Deaf, are required to provide accommodations that will meet the communication needs of student who are Deaf.

To assure equal opportunity to all programs and activities, institutions are required to provide what the ADA refers to as "auxiliary aids." The ADA specifically recognizes the request for a sign language interpreter as an auxiliary aid and defines a "qualified interpreter" as "an interpreter who is able to interpret effectively, accurately, and impartially both receptively and expressively using any necessary specialized vocabulary." Due to the national shortage of qualified interpreters and the high demand for their time, service providers are struggling to find qualified interpreters to meet the needs of students at their institutions who are Deaf.

The purpose of this paper is two-fold. One goal is to examine the definition "qualified interpreter" as outlined in the federal regulations. State and national certification does not necessarily imply that the interpreter is competent in the classroom. Many hold credentials but still need to be evaluated to see if they have the experience and skills to satisfy the definition of "qualified interpreter." By the same token, there may be interpreters who have adequate skills but lack the credentials. A process is needed to identify and assess these individuals.

The second goal of this paper is to propose a model for interviewing and assessing interpreters. Rather than relying on non-standardized state assessment instruments and self-reported past experiences and skills, the presenters propose an alternate means of determining qualifications of interpreters.

Other questions the authors will consider include: Is the educational institution meeting the ADA requirements by hiring someone who can sign, but not interpret? How does reasonable accommodation fit into the picture?

In summary, the paper will both define "qualified interpreter" as it applies to the postsecondary setting and provide a model for interview and assessment of potential service providers and staff interpreters.

* * * * *

The University of Georgia's Office of Disability Services has been providing interpreter services to students who are Deaf for many years; however, in 1993 five staff interpreter positions and a Coordinator of Interpreter Services were approved and added to the existing professional staff. With this addition came the concerns about: 1) how to determine which interpreter qualifications are essential for the needs of the student population that utilize sign language interpreters and, 2) once these criteria have been established, how to locate qualified applicants for those positions.

Numerous definitions of "qualified sign language interpreter" exist. The Americans with Disabilities Act, the National Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc., and the Georgia Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. have all proposed definitions of "qualified interpreter." Many other definitions have been developed, but all vary to some degree.

Before delineating those applicants who may be "qualified," it is important to first determine who may not be appropriate for your consideration. Many students entering college are products of mainstream, public school programs. Often these students utilize a signing system other than American Sign Language (ASL). The skills of the interpreter must meet the needs of the student population. It is therefore imperative that interpreters providing services to these students have the capability to *transliterate* which is taking the spoken message and rendering it in an English-like fashion *and* recognizing a message signed in a more English-like manner and voicing it in appropriate English.

It is often assumed that individuals from the following categories have appropriate skills to interpret in an educational environment. The categories include: 1) Children of Deaf Adults (CODAs), 2) graduates from Interpreter Training Programs (ITPs), 3) family members of the student who is Deaf, 4) students of American Sign Language, and 5) persons who possess a Quality Assurance level (a state level interpreter assessment).

It is often assumed that a CODA, whose parents are Deaf, is innately qualified as an interpreter. However, both parents may be products of the state residential school for the Deaf, be active within the local Deaf Community, and possess American Sign Language as their language of choice. The CODA may grow up with little or no exposure to any of the signed codes for English. Although these individuals *may* have the sophisticated skills of signing and *interpreting* (the ability to relay information between two very different languages - ASL and English), they may have no competence with transliteration.

The majority of Interpreter Training Programs are two-year programs (some are of lesser duration) and offer an Associate of Arts degree in Sign Language Interpreting. As with any other language, two years is not a sufficient amount of time to master both the language and acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to interpret/transliterate using that language. Upon completion of a recognized ITP, graduates are considered to possess a minimum level of proficiency and *may* be ready to work under the tutelage of an experienced interpreter.

While family members may possess the interpreting/transliterating skills required by your students, it is suggested that interpreters not be placed in situations that could possibly compromise ethical behavior. Having one's relative present in the postsecondary academic setting may prove to be detrimental to both the student who is Deaf as well as the interpreter.

Individuals who enroll in American Sign Language classes are extremely eager and motivated to put themselves in situations where they are "interpreting" in order to "help out." As previously stated, however, to become proficient in another language requires years of commitment. In addition, ASL students must practice, not only with their hearing classmates, but within the Deaf community. Unfortunately, the misconception that a sign language student equates with an interpreter still exists. For example, in a recent week-long workshop for currently working educational interpreters in the public schools, a survey was taken to determine qualifications and professional preparation of those in attendance. Those attending the conference reflected a cross-section of interpreters working in public schools. It was discovered that approximately 80% of working interpreters had no more than two sign language classes prior to beginning their careers as educational interpreters.

The Quality Assurance (QA) state level interpreter assessment is a measure of interpreting/transliterating skills that tend to be somewhat less stringent than the evaluation offered by the national Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. States that currently utilize the QA process often develop the testing procedures, materials, and criteria independent of other interpreter assessments. It follows that the level of interpreting/transliterating skill reflected in a Level III awarded in one state may be equivalent to a Level I in another state. One's level of measured interpreting proficiency should not be accepted blindly. Rather, all applicants should undergo an in-house assessment of interpreting/transliterating competence.

Determining Qualifications

Applicants for the position of staff interpreter at the University of Georgia are interviewed and assessed by the Coordinator of Interpreter Services and a Disability Specialist who are both nationally certified by RID. The principal evaluator, the Coordinator of Interpreter Services, has received training at both the state and national levels to evaluate both interpreting and transliterating proficiency. Materials utilized during the skills assessment part of the interview are of two kinds; some are produced in-house while others are obtained through distributors of sign language/interpreting books and videotapes.

A ready supply of assessment materials can be obtained fairly easily by arranging with professors and instructors to audio-tape classroom lectures and discussions. These recordings, in turn, can be employed during the skills assessment segment of the interview process. Additionally, current staff interpreters should be encouraged to incorporate these same tapes into their skills enhancement activities.

In seeking qualified individuals to provide interpreting services to students who are Deaf, there are additional characteristics that are essential for staff interpreters to possess.

Stamina -- How long can one interpret at a given time without compromising the content of the interpreted message and/or developing Overuse Syndrome or Carpal Tunnel Syndrome? A recommended maximum of twenty five hours of in-class interpreting per week has been established at the University of Georgia. This number includes situations in which the interpreter is working alone as well as situations where there is another member of the interpreting staff assisting which are referred to as teamed situations.

Flexibility -- How capable is the interpreter at going into new situations and performing both professionally and with the desired level of proficiency? At times, due to illness or other conflicts, an interpreter may be asked to interpret a class that is not part of his/her regular schedule. Does the interpreter possess the interpreting/transliterating competence to enter a new situation, often at a moment's notice, and relay information accurately and appropriately?

Attitude -- Many applicants may come from a freelance interpreting background. Freelance/independent interpreters might have enjoyed the luxury of being able to accept and reject assignments based on particular interest and/or monetary need. In the capacity of freelance interpreter, the individual acts as his/her own "boss" and manages his/her own time and schedule. The adjustment to becoming a staff member with a supervisor can be overwhelming for some and this point should be discussed openly during the interview.

Interpersonal Skills -- Working as a staff member, it is essential that applicants possess the ability to work cooperatively with other professional staff within the Office as well as other staff interpreters in a team interpreted situation. Additionally, because our program is relatively new, most professors have never experienced having a student who is Deaf and an interpreter present in the classroom. This situation requires the interpreter and/or Disability Services staff to adequately explain the interpreter's function within the classroom setting and to overcome possible pre-existing attitudes and/or stereotypes.

Knowledge -- While we can all be reasonably assured that an interpreter at the elementary level possesses knowledge in the areas of study at this level such as primary colors, basic geography skills, fundamental principles of science and mathematics, the course content at the postsecondary level is as varied as the number of students enrolled in these courses. The sign language interpreter/transliterator must often be aware of current world events in general, be knowledgeable of current of political events and leaders, and be aware of new economic trends. While the additional duties often assigned to interpreters in the public schools decline, an increased responsibility for course content occurs at the college/university level (refer to Figures 1 and 2).

Interpreter Profiles

The interpreter profiles (refer to Figure 3) illustrate the similarities as well as the differences in criteria utilized when hiring qualified individuals. Each candidate was interviewed and thoroughly assessed for sign-to-voice and voice-to-sign interpreting and transliterating (refer to Figures 4 and 5). Each applicant was determined to be qualified to provide interpreting and/or transliterating services for students who are Deaf.

Before "qualified" can be satisfactorily determined, the following areas warrant careful examination. Of primary importance is the number of classroom hours to be interpreted and how those hours are blocked, including consecutive classes or those staggered throughout the day. Other areas to consider include: a) the

number of students requiring interpreting services, b) the level of involvement of Deaf students with extracurricular activities, c) the particular language preference(s)/communication style(s) of students who are Deaf, d) course content, e) level of difficulty of particular course, f) the rate/speed of delivery within individual classes, and g) the educational level of applicants. By assessing these areas, you can better determine not only the number of interpreters necessary to provide quality services, but which interpreter characteristics will best meet your program's unique situation. Once these particular aspects have been defined, appropriate personnel can be sought, assessed and, if suitable for your specific needs, be employed.

Programs that do not have professionals with sign language interpreting and skills assessment expertise should contact one of the professional organizations and agencies from the list located in the Appendix. This resource is provided to aid you in contacting specialists who may assist with interpreter evaluation and interview procedures.

Media Resources

Below are listed some possible resources that may assist you in the evaluation process of potential educational interpreters.

Sign Media, Inc.
Burtonsville Commerce Center
4020 Blackburn Lane
Burtonsville, MD 20866-1167
Phone: 800 - 475-4756 (V/TTY)
FAX: 301-421-0270

Live at SMI - series of six videotapes of Deaf individuals signing a variety of stories

Sign Enhancers
1320 Edgewater NW
Suite B10, Room C2
Salem, OR 97304
Phone: 800 - 76-SIGN-1 (V/TTY)

Still More Deaf Children Signers! - ages 13 to 18 years

Sign-to-Voice series (tapes 4A, 4B, 4C, 4D, 4E, 4F) - each videotape consists of a different Deaf adult signing an array of stories

Deaf Culture Autobiography series (tapes 8A, 8B, 8C, 8D, 8E, 8F, 8G, 8H) - description similar to above series

Figure 1

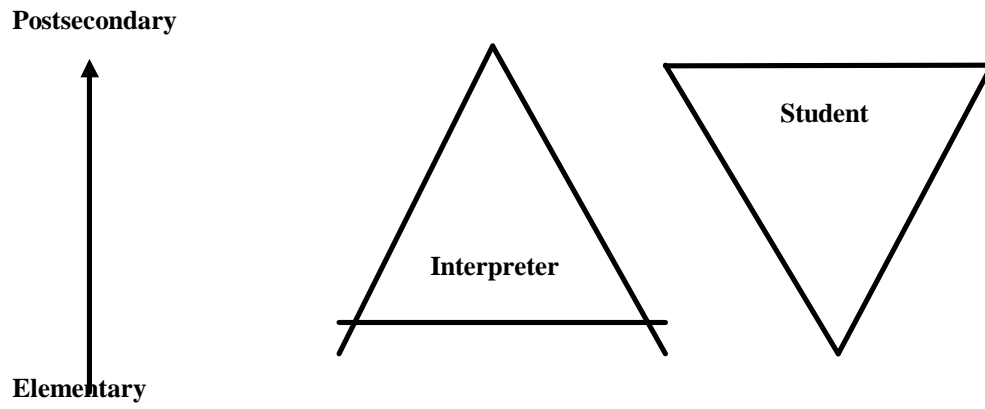
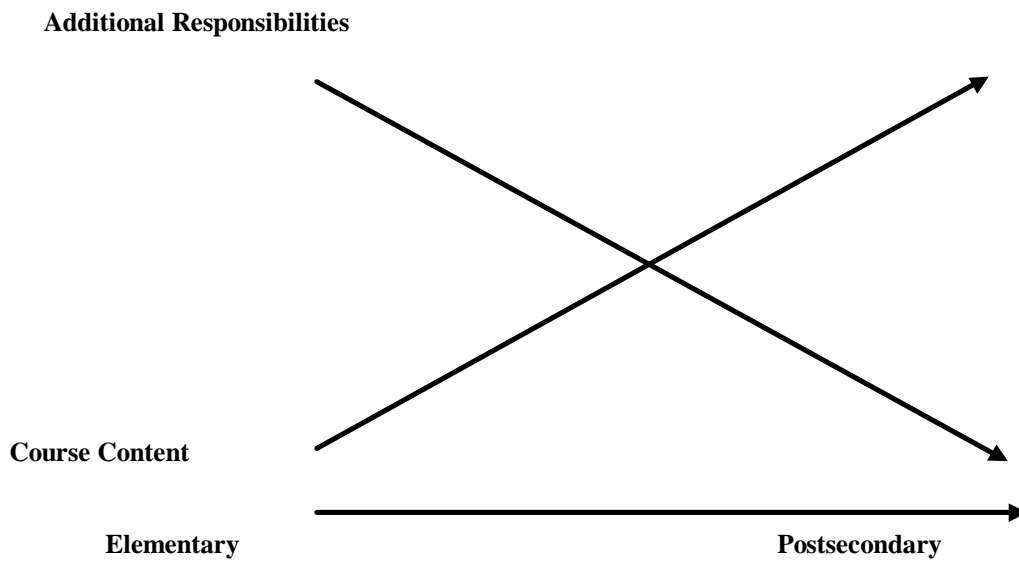


Figure 2



(Graphics courtesy of Marie Griffin, UT)

Figure 3

Interpreter: A

Sign Language Acquisition: *ITP, interaction with Deaf people*

Years Experience working with Deaf people: *13*

Years Interpreting Experience: Prior to professional training - *none*
After professional training - *2*

Years Educational interpreting Experience: *6 months*

Degrees: *AA - Liberal Arts, BA - Sign Language Interpreting*

QA or National Certification: *Has passed the RID written evaluation.
RID performance exam - March 1996.*

Professional Training: *Bachelor's program - Maryville College.*

Courses comfortable interpreting: *Most undergrad courses - humanities and related courses*

Courses not comfortable interpreting: *Math courses and upper level sciences*

Self evaluation using: ASL/Interpreting 1 2 3 4 5
SEE/PSE/Transliterating 1 2 3 4 5

Interpreter: B

Sign Language Acquisition: *ITP, interaction with Deaf people*

Years Experience working with Deaf people: *3 3/4 years*

Years Interpreting Experience: Prior to professional training - *none*
After professional training - *3 1/2*

Years Educational interpreting Experience: *3 1/2*

Degrees: *AA*

QA or National Certification: *registered for Georgia QA*

Professional Training: *ITP and workshops*

Courses comfortable interpreting: *Most undergrad courses/some basic graduate level courses*

Courses not comfortable interpreting: *Upper level math and science*

Self evaluation using: ASL/Interpreting 1 2 3 4 5
SEE/PSE/Transliterating 1 2 3 4 5

Interpreter: C

Sign Language Acquisition: *ITP, Interaction with Deaf community*

Years Experience working with Deaf people: 6

Years Interpreting Experience: Prior to professional training - 1
After professional training - 5

Years Educational interpreting experience: 6

Degrees: *AA in Interpreting*

QA or National Certification: *Georgia QA*

Professional Training: *ITP*

Courses comfortable interpreting: *Anything but upper level Science*

Courses not comfortable interpreting: *Upper level Science*

Self evaluation using: ASL/Interpreting 1 2 3 4 5
SEE/PSE/Transliterating 1 2 3 4 5

Interpreter: D

Sign Language acquisition: *One semester*

Years Experience working with Deaf people: 8

Years Interpreting Experience: Prior to professional training - 3
After professional training - 3

Years Educational interpreting Experience: 6

Degrees: *MA - Clinical Psychology*

QA or National Certification: *QA from Arkansas, Registered for RID written test*

Professional Training: *ITP, workshops*

Courses comfortable interpreting: *Liberal Arts and Humanities, Fine Arts*

Courses not comfortable interpreting: *Computer Science technology*

Self evaluation using: ASL/Interpreting 1 2 3 4 5
SEE/PSE/Transliterating 1 2 3 4 5

Figure 4

Interview Questions

1. Background/interest in UGA position
2. Educational interpreting experience
3. Endurance/stamina - discussion of schedule
 - daily hours - (4 - 5)
 - weekly hours
 - flexible - evening/weekends
4. Interpreting skills
 - certification level
 - strength/weakness in skills areas
 - " / " in course content areas (prefer math-science, English, etc.??)
5. Knowledge of Code of Ethics
 - strong point - (from interviewer's perspective)
 - weaknesses - (from interviewer's perspective)
6. "Passive Interpreting" - down time
7. Familiarity with deaf culture
8. Define "professional distance" as it applies to postsecondary educational interpreting.
9. Secondary responsibilities - if down time is extended
 - administrative experience
 - program development
 - presentations
 - time management and organizational skills
 - self-starter
10. If applicable, how will the change from freelancing to a "nine to five" job affect you?
11. Coming from a freelance background, how comfortable are you with supervision?

What kind of supervision do you prefer?
12. Explain why you are the best person for the job - i.e. personal characteristics, professional accomplishments, etc. which make you an asset to this institution.

Figure 5

University of Georgia
Office of Disability Services

Skills Assessment Form

Applicant Name _____ Date _____

CATEGORY	COMMENTS
INTERPRETING:	
Clarity of Signs	
Clarity of Fingerspelling	
Expression	
Use of Concept	
Use of Space	
Eye Contact	
Correct Mouth Movement(s)	
Correct Sign Choice	
Size of Sign Vocabulary	
Interprets Correctly	
TRANSLITERATING:	
Clarity of Signs	
Clarity of Fingerspelling	
Expression	
Use of Concept	
Use of Space	
Eye Contact	
Correct Mouth Movement(s)	
Correct Sign Choice	
Size of Sign Vocabulary	
Transliterates Correctly	
Additional Comments:	

CATEGORY	COMMENTS
Voice Interpreting:	
Understands and Voices Signed Message into English	
Reads Fingerspelling and Numbers	
Vocal Inflection	
Fluency	
Voice Projection	
Additional Comments:	
Voice Transliterating:	
Understands and Voices Signed Message into English	
Reads Fingerspelling and Numbers	
Vocal Inflection	
Fluency	
Voice Projection	
Additional Comments	
GENERAL COMMENTS:	

Debra Brenner/Bruce Finkbone
July, 1994

Document adapted from the Quality Assurance Assessment of the Georgia Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (GRID).

Appendix

Resources For Finding Qualified Interpreters

Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. (RID)

The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. (RID) is a national organization of professionals who provide sign language interpreting/transliterating services for Deaf and hearing persons. Contact RID to receive information about your local/state affiliate chapter of RID and/or interpreter referral services/agencies.

Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, Inc. (RID)
8719 Colesville Road, Suite 310
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910-3919
(301) 608-0050

EDITOR Council and Regional Delegates

EDITOR is a special interest group of RID, composed of RID members who are educational interpreters and transliterators.

Jeanne M. Wells - Chair
57 Raleigh St.
Rochester, NY 14620
(716) 475-6890 (W)

Paul Klucsarits - Vice Chair
603 Scandia Hemman
Lindenwold, NJ 08021
(609) 227-7200 ext. 506 (W)

Joan Cohen - Secretary/Treasurer
625 Delaware Avenue
Delanco, NJ 08075
(609) 764-7675 (H)

Karen Lefebvre - Region I Delegate
33 Frantone Lane
Loudonville, NY 12211
(518) 869-9427 (W)

Region I - CT, DE, MA, ME, NH, NJ, NY,
PA, RI, VT, WV, Quebec, New Brunswick,
Nova Scotia, Denmark, Sweden

Bruce Finkbone - Region II Delegate
325 Georgetown Drive
Athens, GA 30605
(706) 542-8719 (W)

Region II - AL, DC, FL, GA, MD, MS,
NC, SC, TN, VA, Virgin Islands

Karen Hale - Region III Delegate
101 Edgewood
Crystal Lake, IL 60014
(708) 397-3000 ext. 2266 (W)

Region III - IL, IN, KY, MI, MN, OH, WI,
Ontario

Gail Altman - Region IV Delegate
15671 Hester Street
Chesterfield, MO 63017
(314) 569-8100 (W)

Region IV - AR, CO, IA, KS, LA, MO,
MT, NE, NM, ND, OK, SD, TX, WY
Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba

Malina Lindell - Region V Delegate
P.O. Box 1283

Region V - AK, AZ, CA, HI, ID, NV, OR,
UT, WA, British Columbia, Hong Kong

Pendleton, OR 97801
(503) 276-6616 (W)

Guam, New Zealand

Postsecondary Education Consortium

PEC Central Office
The University of Tennessee
112 Claxton Addition
Knoxville, TN 37996-3400
(423) 974-8427

Central Piedmont Community College
Services for Hearing Impaired Students
P. O. Box 35009
Charlotte, NC 28235-6421
(704) 342-6421

Chattanooga State Technical Community College
Deaf and Hearing Impaired Program
4501 Amnicola Highway
Chattanooga, TN 37406-1097
(423) 697-4452

DeKalb College
Center for Students with Disabilities
555 North Indian Creek Drive
Clarkston, GA 30021
(404) 299-4038

Hinds Community College
Services for the Deaf and Hearing Impaired
Box 1282
Raymond, MS 39154-0999
(601) 857-3310

Jacksonville State University
Office of Disabled Student Services
147 Doughton Hall
Jacksonville, AL 36265
(205) 782-5093

Kentucky Tech - Jefferson Campus
Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program
727 West Chestnut Street
Louisville, KY 400203
(502) 595-4221

New River Community College
Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing
Drawer 1127
Dublin, VA 24084
(540) 674-3619

St. Petersburg Junior College
Program for the Deaf/Hard of Hearing
Impaired
2465 Drew Street
Clearwater, FL 34625
(813) 791-2628

Spartanburg Technical College
Cooperative Program for the Sensory
P.O. Drawer 4386
Spartanburg, SC 29305-4386
(864) 591-3811

University of Arkansas at Little Rock
Disability Support Services
2801 S. University
Little Rock, AR 72204-1099
501-569-3143