

# A GUIDEBOOK FOR EDUCATIONAL SIGN LANGUAGE INTERPRETERS

## “Making Accommodations for Students with Combined Vision and Hearing Losses (Deaf-Blind)”



Developed by: Nebraska Deaf-Blind Project  
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# I. INTRODUCTION

Interpreting in an educational environment is a challenge. The educational sign language interpreter's main goal is to interpret or translate information from one mode or language to another to ensure that the student has equal access, as his hearing peers, to the curriculum. Yet to do this successfully he/she must also be knowledgeable about the content that is being taught and familiar with the curriculum standards, language use of the student, type of hearing loss and learning style of the student.

Most educational sign language interpreters enter the educational environment with a minimum level of sign language interpreting skills and are not exposed to or received training in teaching or on how to make accommodations to meet the needs of students with combined hearing and vision loss (deaf-blind). The students who have a combined hearing and vision loss pose even more challenges. Some students have close or low vision, which does not allow them to access information at a distance. Other students may have reduced peripheral fields of vision, which allows them to access only a small visual space, and other students may not have any useful vision at all and need tactile sign language in order to access their curriculum and environment.

For some of these students an educational sign language interpreter will be needed; however, traditional, visual sign language interpreting will not be sufficient. The interpreter must be aware of ways to accommodate himself/herself, the environment and his/her sign language production in order to meet the needs of the student.

This guidebook provides a basic overview of the various modes of educational sign language interpreting used by students who have combined vision and hearing losses or are deaf-blind. It is designed in a simple "do" and "don't" fashion to clarify positions or sign language production that is most ergonomically and linguistically correct.

## II. Environmental Accommodations

Students with a combined hearing and vision loss (deaf-blind) have difficulty discerning a specific message if it is visually or auditory disrupted with additional, unnecessary information. In order to reduce the amount of incoming stimuli the environment can be manipulated.

Environmental accommodations can come in many variations. Lighting, clothing, background, seating, location, and scent are all part of the environment that we often can control and modify.

It is commonly requested that interpreters wear solid colored clothing that is in contrast to their skin color. In **Picture 1** you can see that the interpreter is wearing clothing of this description. However, since she has darker skin tone her hands are somewhat washed out in the background. In **Picture 2** she has put on a smock that is light blue. Doing so allows for clear contrast between her hands and the background. Students with low vision will be able to visually access the signed information more easily.

**Pictures 3 & 4** show different seating to accommodate for height differences. Oftentimes there is a difference in body composition between the student and the interpreter. In **Picture 3** you clearly see that the interpreter (right) is taller than the learner. The student is forced to raise her receptive arm to an uncomfortable height. **Picture 4** shows the same individuals yet they are at a more equal plane. The interpreter has adjusted her chair so that she is seated lower than the student and so they are at eye level of each other.

Making these simple accommodations will enhance visual reception and reduce the amount of fatigue on the part of the student.

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### III. Close/Low Vision Interpreting

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Students with low vision are not able to see images clearly. They often have difficulty following fast moving objects. In order to maximize use of residual vision, for persons who rely on visual sign language, you want to be aware of the background behind the signer, proper lighting and clothing of the educational sign language interpreter.

The interpreter should wear clothing that provides contrast to her skin color, use a dark backdrop to eliminate additional visual distractions and provide additional lighting when necessary.

In **Picture 1** you can see that the background is very visually distracting as is the clothing of the interpreter. This type of environment will produce additional strain on the student who is relying on visual information. Sign production is easily lost in the backdrop of her clothing.

In **Picture 2** you see that the interpreter has put on a black smock. Wearing the smock provides a dark backdrop to her hands. This will allow for clearer sign and fingerspelling reception. The background, however, is still visually distracting.

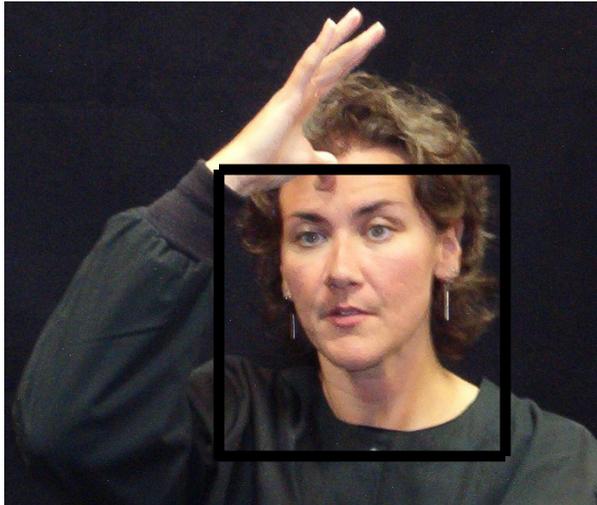
**Picture 3** is the most optimal setting. A black backdrop has been placed behind the interpreter to eliminate unnecessary visual information. The lighting is stationed behind the student and illuminates the interpreter. The interpreter has clothing that allows for a clear contrast between the signer, her hands and the background.

These simple accommodations create an environment that is much less visually distracting and will enhance the student's visual reception.

#### Points to Remember:

- Students with low vision cannot discern fast moving objects.
- Some students with low vision cannot access information at a distance. The interpreter should incorporate movement, facial expression and identify speakers throughout the immediate environment.
- The communication partners should establish a comfortable seating distance (i.e. 3 – 5 feet) before interpreting begins
- The interpreter should provide a contrasting background to ensure clear fingerspelling reception.
- Signs should be produced at a slower pace.

## IV. Reduced Peripheral Fields Interpreting



Students with reduced peripheral fields of vision (i.e. Usher Syndrome) have a limited area that allows them to access visual information. The interpreter must reduce her typical signing space to accommodate for such a need.

In this picture the interpreter signs 'father'. The black box simulates a limited field of vision. As it is now the sign for 'father' will fall outside the visual field of the student. The student may then search for the hand, which will cause a delay in reconnecting visually with the interpreter.



In order to meet the needs of the student the interpreter has altered the location of the sign for 'father.' You can see that the handshape and palm orientation are exactly the same. The location has been changed from the forehead to the cheek in order to be within the visual parameters of the consumer.

In order to avoid confusion as to the meaning of this sign the interpreter could produce the sign and then fingerspell the word after. Employing this technique once will allow for clear and smooth processing for the duration of the interpretation.

## Reduced Peripheral Fields Interpreting

### Points to Remember:

- The interpreter may need to sit at quite a distance from the student (i.e. 8 – 15 feet).
- The interpreter needs to keep her hands/arms in a position that is comfortable to her and visibly accessible to the student.
- The interpreter should remember to take breaks and stretch regularly so that unnecessary strain is not placed on her body.

Here the interpreter has reduced the amount of space she uses during her sign production. However, as you can see, the location of her hands makes it very difficult to clearly access the message. There is no clear delineation between her hands and her face. This location also blocks the student from accessing facial expression and lip movements that may add content to the signer's message.



By lowering her arms, the interpreter has provided a solid backdrop behind her hands. This position makes it much easier for the student to see the sign 'how' more clearly. The consumer can access the entire face of the signer, which will enhance clarity of the message.



## V. Tactile Sign Language: Two-Handed Tactile



Appropriate seating and positioning is crucial for both the student and the interpreter regardless of the type of interpreting (visual, reduced fields or tactile sign language). In this picture they are communicating through a **two-handed tactile method**.

You can see that the interpreter is leaning forward without any lower back support in order to accommodate for the student. Their arms are elevated uncomfortably and they are seated very far apart from each other. If they were to sustain this position for any length of time the interpreter would be easily fatigued and may experience strain on his/her lower back and shoulders. The student may also experience unnecessary strain on her shoulders and upper arms.



As you can see the interpreter and student have made adjustments to their seating that is more comfortable for both parties. They positioned their legs differently so that they could move their chairs closer to each other. The student placed her knees together while the interpreter places his on the outside. By moving closer they have reduced the amount of space between them lessening the need to lean forward or keep their arms elevated. They have also added a pillow behind the back of the interpreter to allow for additional lower back support.



## Tactile Sign Language: One-Handed Tactile



These communication partners are using a method called **one-handed tactile** sign language. Both parties are seated too far away from each other. Additional distance between communication partners causes awkward angling which forces one person to lean in uncomfortably. Also these positions will make it difficult if the interpreter wants to move from a one-handed tactile method to a two-handed mode.

The party on the right attempted to use a table for arm support, yet are not positioned in a way that is ergonomically correct. The student is leaning in and her left arm is over extended.



In these pictures you see that the parties have lessened the distance between themselves. Doing so allows their upper extremities to move more comfortably while they are communicating.

The duo on the left has moved their chairs so that they are seated side-by-side and can access each other easily. The picture on the right shows that the communication partners have switched seats, moved their chairs in closer and are both utilizing the table as a means of support. The parties are on an equal plane with each other, which allows the student access to facial expression and lip movement.



# Sign Language Accommodations



For individuals with low vision or who use tactile sign language specific accommodations to sign production should be made to ease comprehension.

In **Picture 1** the interpreter is signing the word 'blind'. The two fingers on her right hand are often placed over the bridge of the nose just below the eyes to produce this word. She has altered the location slightly so that it is more visually accessible.

**Picture 2** shows a one-handed tactile sign user. The interpreter is producing the sign for 'town'. Even though the student is only coming in contact with one of the interpreter's hands she is able to comprehend the message because the handshape, location and palm orientation are exact on both of the interpreter's hands.

**Picture 3** also shows a one-handed tactile sign user and is signing the word 'garage'. This sign requires different handshapes, locations and palm orientations. In order to produce the sign clearly and to ensure tactile reception the interpreter has simply modified the sign by making sure both of his hands comes in contact with that of the deaf-blind individual. The sign itself has not been changed only the location of the hands while producing the sign.

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## Points to Remember:

- Accommodations can be made to signs without changing the meaning or actual production of the signs.
- Signs that have exact handshapes and palm orientations do not need to be altered for one-handed tactile users.
- Signs that have different handshapes and palm orientations should be modified simply by moving the hands closer to one another so that they come in contact with the hand of the student.

## VI. TACTILE FINGERSPELLING – ONE-HANDED

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Tactile fingerspelling is a method used by individuals who cannot access fingerspelling visually. This method of communication may be used in conjunction with visual or tactile sign language or used as a main mode of communication by itself. When it is used solely it is referred to as the Rochester Method. In this method every word is spelled out. Contractions or abbreviations can be used in order to expedite communication. The interpreter and student prior to commencing interpreting should agree upon these short cuts.

Hand position and hold will be different from student to student. Some students will prefer accessing tactile fingerspelling with one hand (as shown here) while others use two hands. The interpreter should allow the student to grasp her hand lightly in a position that allows for the highest level of reception. *\*Note: the interpreter's hand(s) should always be under those of the student's.*

The interpreter should consider the length and cleanliness of her nails. While fingerspelling the interpreter should produce each letter in a typical fashion. She may need to reduce the speed of each letter being produced in order to ensure clear reception.

In **Picture 1** the student is using a “back hand” hold. She places her hand on the back of the interpreter's, which allows her to feel the back and side portions of the letters being produced.

**Picture 2** shows a “front hold” position. This approach allows the student full access to the letter handshape and position.

In **Picture 3** the student is using a “side angle” position. This method is very common for fluent tactile users. The student places her hand over that of the interpreter's which allows her to feel the top and side portions of the letters being produced.

All of these handholds are acceptable. The interpreter should allow the student to make the decision in terms of handhold and position.

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### Points to Remember:

- Handhold and positioning will vary from student to student.
- Fingerspelling should be produced at a slightly slower pace than normal to ensure clear tactile reception.
- Interpreters should allow the student to determine the most optimal hold for tactile fingerspelling.
- Tactile fingerspelling can be both an one-handed or two-handed method.

## VII. TACTILE FINGERSPELLING – TWO-HANDED

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Tactile fingerspelling is a method used by individuals who cannot access fingerspelling visually. This method of communication may be used in conjunction with visual or tactile sign language or used as a main mode of communication by itself (Rochester Method). Contractions or abbreviations can be used in order to expedite communication. The interpreter and student prior to commencing interpreting should agree upon these short cuts.

Hand position and hold will be different from student to student. Some students will prefer accessing tactile fingerspelling with one hand while others use two hands (as shown here). The interpreter should allow the student to grasp her hand lightly in a position that allows for the highest level of reception.

*\*Note: the interpreter's hand(s) should always be under those of the student's.*

The interpreter should consider the length and cleanliness of her nails. While fingerspelling the interpreter should produce each letter in a typical fashion.

She may need to reduce the speed of each letter being produced in order to ensure clear reception.

In both pictures you can see the student is using both hands to explore the letter that is being produced (in this instance the letter 'C'). This method will be used mainly when a student is looking for clarification of a letter or number being produced or if the student is a new user of tactile sign language. For those persons just transitioning from a visual mode or from using tracking it may be difficult for them to easily understand and receive tactile fingerspelling with one hand. As a student gains confidence and skill most students move to a one-handed tactile fingerspelling approach.

As always the student should determine the hand position and grasp.

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### Points to Remember:

- Tactile fingerspelling can be either one or two-handed.
- The student should decide the handhold and angle.
- The interpreter should produce her fingerspelling at a slightly slower pace.
- The interpreter and student should be seated comfortably so that they can access each other without undue strain on their arms or upper bodies.

## VIII. Various Modes of Communication



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Individuals with combined vision and hearing losses use various modes of communication. Some modes are used separately while others are used in conjunction with each other. For example, tactile sign language can be used as a main mode of communication while Print-on-Palm (**Picture 1**) may be administered as a supplemental mode. Print-on-Palm (POP) is generally used as a means to communicate with the general public or to clarify fingerspelled numbers or letters. The interpreter uses her index finger and writes the letters in capital letters or numbers in the palm of the deaf-blind individual.

**Picture 2** shows a method of communication called Tadoma. This is the only tactile method that allows a deaf-blind consumer to access spoken language. The consumer places her hand on the lips, jaw and vocal cords of the speaker. This method is not commonly used but may be seen occasionally by elderly persons.

Various types of devices and equipment are also effective communication tools. **Picture 3** shows a Deaf-Blind Communicator (DBC). This device includes two separate portable components. The main unit is the DB BrailleNote, and the companion unit is the DB-Phone which is a cell phone with a visual display and a QWERTY keyboard. The system provides three types of communication for students who are deaf-blind: face-to-face, TTY, and SMS Texting.

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### Points to Remember:

- Various modes of communication can be used simultaneously.
- Technological devices can be used as interpreting tools.
- The same student may switch between different modes of communication.

## IX. SUMMARY & RESOURCES

Making accommodations for students who are deaf-blind can be challenging. It takes time and training to become proficient in making such accommodations. This guidebook provides a simple overview on deaf-blind interpreting and is meant to be a resource for the classroom. It is recommended that educational sign language interpreters working with students with combined hearing and vision losses seek additional training on how to make specific accommodations that the student they are working with receive equal access to the general education curriculum.

For more information or technical assistance please contact the following agencies or organizations:

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