

How do I get access to an interpreter*?

Some FAQs about interpreting,
brought to you by



(Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators)
the professional association for
translators and interpreters

www.ausit.org

* for when I need to interact with health care workers,
courts and tribunals, social workers, Centrelink,
police or other professionals

So, what do interpreters do, anyway?

- **Interpreters** work with the **spoken** word (unlike translators, who work with the written word).
- In Australia, they mostly work in situations where **two people need to speak with each other**, but one of them **doesn't have English** as a first language (the language they grew up with).
- In such situations, interpreters help by conveying what each person has said to the other person, in the language they understand best.
- The most common type of interpreting is '**consecutive**', where a speaker pauses while the interpreter conveys their message to the other person. (The two speakers usually **take turns** to speak.)
- In a few situations, such as a presentation to an audience, interpreting may be done '**simultaneously**'. This means the interpreter starts interpreting while the speaker continues to speak.
- Sometimes, an interpreter will be asked to give an oral translation of a short written document. This is called '**sight translation**'.

What's the purpose of having an interpreter?

- When a person doesn't have English as a first language, having an interpreter means that they **shouldn't experience any disadvantage** when they need to interact with someone (such as an official or a professional) who is speaking English.
- In other words, with an interpreter present, both speakers should be able to **understand** what is being said, and be able to **express** their own thoughts or questions, as **easily and clearly** as two people using the same language.
- The interpreter is **not a participant** in the conversation – their role is simply to **enable the conversation to take place** between speakers of two different languages.

When are interpreters commonly booked to assist?

- In **legal** settings (courts or tribunals, or with lawyers or the police)
- In **health care** settings (hospitals, clinics, GPs, specialists, etc)
- In **immigration** settings (including asylum seekers)
- In aged care settings
- At Centrelink interviews
- With social workers, psychologists, or trauma counsellors
- In education settings (parent-teacher meetings, etc.)
- And in various other settings ...

continued overleaf ->

Who pays for the services of an interpreter?

- The good news: in almost all the situations listed on the previous page, it **won't** be the person who doesn't have English as a first language.
- Almost all government departments and agencies, at both federal and state/territory level, have policies that require them to make an interpreter available to any person who needs one. (It's often a **legal requirement** because important matters are being discussed, or the consequences of a misunderstanding can be very serious.)
- This means they have **budgets** to pay for interpreting services.
- However, in some situations you might need to pay for an interpreter yourself – for example, if you need to see a lawyer about a **personal** matter (like making a will).

I believe my English is okay for everyday situations like working, shopping, and so on. Do I really need an interpreter?

- **Yes**, probably. The English needed for everyday living is quite different from the **level of language** required in interpreting situations.
- These situations often require a knowledge of specialised **words**, as well as an understanding of specialised **concepts**. NAATI-certified and NAATI-recognised interpreters are trained to handle these difficulties.
- If you interact without the assistance of an interpreter, you **can't be sure** the professional or official has noted your information correctly or has provided the level of service or advice you're entitled to.

What if an official or professional says that I don't need an interpreter?

- If the department or agency you're dealing with has a policy that requires them to make an interpreter available, then it's **your** decision whether to have one – not the decision of the official or professional.
- In many cases, when an appointment is made for you to meet an official or professional, part of the **booking procedure** is to ask you whether you need an interpreter.
- In all these cases, if you believe that you need an interpreter, it's **your right** to request one.

One of my friends / one of my children speaks English much better than I do. Can they be my interpreter?

- Sorry, that's **not** a good idea (especially using children, who may not be mature enough to understand the concepts being discussed).
- An adult friend who isn't a trained interpreter may also not understand the terms and concepts being discussed, nor have the required skills.
- Many departments and agencies have a **policy** that family or friends aren't accepted as interpreters, only NAATI-certified or NAATI-recognised interpreters.

continued overleaf ->

I'm talking to a doctor or a lawyer, and they want me to make a decision about something. Can I ask the interpreter for their advice?

- **No!** Interpreters have to follow a Code of Ethics, and one principle is that they **can't give advice** or **advocate** for you (apart from interpreting what you say). But if you ask the professional or official for advice, the interpreter can convey that question for you, and interpret the answer.

The interpreter is using really complex terms that I can't understand in my language. Can I ask the interpreter to use simpler words?

- **No!** The Code of Ethics also says that the interpreter has to convey what is said at the **same level** as how each speaker says it (not simplify it).
- What you **can** do is **ask the professional or official** (through the interpreter) to explain things in simpler terms. The interpreter can then convey the simpler explanation to you.

What else are interpreters trained to do?

- The Code of Ethics also says that the interpreter's duty is to **interpret everything that is said**. (So a speaker mustn't ask the interpreter not to interpret certain parts of the conversation.)
- Interpreters use **'I'** and **'you'** in the same way as the original speakers: not 'He says that ...' or 'She's asking you to ...'. (And when **you** speak, you should talk **directly to the other speaker**, not to the interpreter.)
- If someone speaks for a **long time** the interpreter will break in and just interpret what's been said so far, before you're invited to continue. (So when you speak, be aware that the interpreter may need to interrupt you.)
- Interpreters may also take **notes** to help them remember what is said, especially detailed information such as numbers, names, and so on.
- The Code of Ethics requires interpreters to maintain strict **confidentiality** in relation to everything they hear during interpreting.

Will the interpreter be present in the room?

- Unfortunately, not always! NAATI-credentialed interpreters aren't always available in every language locally (especially outside major capital cities), or an interpreter might not be available at the time of your appointment.
- And if an interpreter is required urgently, there may not be time to wait for them to arrive.
- Usually, the department or agency will try to arrange an 'onsite' interpreter. However, if this is not possible, they will arrange for an interpreter (who might even be in another city) to interpret over the **telephone** (or by **videolink**). This is much better than not having an interpreter at all!
- However, with telephone interpreting, make sure you **speak clearly**. Often, the sound quality over the telephone is not as good as it is face to face.