



GUIDELINES FOR PEOPLE WHO WORK WITH INTERPRETERS

SIGHT TRANSLATION

CONTENTS	page
1. What is sight translation?	2
2. What preparation do interpreters need?	2
3. How do interpreters carry out sight translation?	3
4. The role of the interpreter is to facilitate communication, not to provide advice or clarify terms or meaning.	3
5. What documents are suitable for sight translation?	3
5.1 In legal settings	4
5.2 In health care settings	5
6. Sight translating in remote interpreting assignments	5
7. Appendices	6
8. References	7
9. Acknowledgements	7

1. What is sight translation?

Sight translation is the verbal or signed translation of a written text into another language.

Sight translation is a challenging task which requires exceptional focus and the ability to multitask, as the interpreter must quickly and accurately process the written content and render it fluently as spoken or signed language. The task is further complicated by the fact that written texts:

- are often linguistically complex
- contain more compound sentence structures than are typically used in spoken language
- use formal language to outline detailed concepts.

When you are employing the professional services of an interpreter to communicate with someone whose preferred language is a 'language other than English' (LOTE) or Australian sign language (Auslan), you may need them to understand a short form or document that is written in English. Alternatively, a LOTE speaker may have a document written in LOTE that needs to be conveyed into English for you. In either case, the interpreter can assist by sight translating the document into the other language. This document focuses on your need to have English texts sight translated into a LOTE, but the principles are the same for the other direction.

NOTE: some types and lengths of document are not suitable for sight translation – see Section 5 below.

2. What preparation do interpreters need?

The interpreter should be given sufficient time to:

- skim the text for meaning
- check for any challenging terms and find the appropriate target language equivalents
- look up any such terms in their phone or tablet dictionary
- ask for clarification from the person providing the document
- mentally plan the best way to render long sentences and/or complex sentence constructions into segments that will be readily comprehensible to the listener / Auslan user.

3. How do interpreters carry out sight translation?

The interpreter will then translate the text into the other language, either verbally or into sign language, sentence by sentence as they read it.

- The interpreter may break up longer sentences into shorter ones, to enable easier comprehension by the LOTE speaker / Auslan user, but the interpreter will not simplify the text. The LOTE speaker / Auslan user absorbs the meaning of the text through the spoken word or the signed message, as they cannot understand the original written text.
- If the LOTE speaker / Auslan user does not understand something relayed to them from the text by the interpreter, they will typically ask the interpreter for clarification. The interpreter will then relay their query to you, and convey your response back to them.

4. The role of the interpreter is to facilitate communication, not to provide advice or clarify terms or meaning.

If you are the provider of the document, you should not leave the room during the sight translation process. This is to ensure that any questions the LOTE speaker / Auslan user has concerning the information contained in the document can be relayed to you by the interpreter, and you can answer them.

5. What documents are suitable for sight translation?

- **Length:** The ideal length of document for sight translation is **200 to 300 words** (or equivalent length in other language).
- **Complexity/technicality:** The document should not be complex or technical. For example, you should not expect an interpreter to sight translate a will.

NOTE: if the document is longer than 300 words (or equivalent length in other language) or if it is complex in nature:

- **for a LOTE speaker** – it should be translated in advance by a certified translator.
- **for an Auslan user** – it should be supplied to the Auslan–English interpreter in advance, so they can advise on how it can best be conveyed.

5.1. In legal settings

- **In court**, interpreters may be requested to sight translate documents such as:
 - indictments
 - statements of evidence
 - other texts relating to court proceedings.

Such documents should be no longer than 300 words (or equivalent length in other language). The interpreter should be given time to read the document thoroughly before they provide the sight translation.

Refer to Standard 26.2 of the [Recommended National Standards for Working with Interpreters in Courts and Tribunals](#) (2nd Edition, JCDI, 2022, p. 22) – see [Appendix 1](#) at the end of this document.

- **In out-of-courtroom interactions and other similar settings** the same requirements apply. These include:
 - pre-trial lawyer–client consultations
 - interactions between lawyers and their clients
 - court-issued decisions or orders that are to be conveyed to a client in the court registry
 - parole board hearings
 - lawyer–prisoner interactions.
- **In police interviews, official notifications** are used, including the police caution that is given at the start of an interview. The police often have ready translations of such notifications available in many community languages. The interpreter should be given access to the translated version in their language if one is available, together with the written English-language official notification used by the police officer.

5.2. In health care settings

- Sight translation may be required for documents such as
 - **medical histories**
 - **discharge sheets**
 - **directions of use for medications**
 - **information brochures on medical conditions.**

Such documents should be between 200 and 300 words long (or equivalent length in other language) and should not be complex in nature. The interpreter should be given time to prepare for the delivery of the sight translation.

Refer to Section 4 of the [Guide for Clinicians Working with Interpreters in Healthcare Settings](#) (MRWHP, 2019) – see [Appendix 2](#) at the end of this document.

- **A complex patient consent form** may need to be conveyed to a LOTE speaker / Auslan user prior to a medical procedure, to enable them to understand what procedure is to be carried out and confirm their agreement to this.

In such cases, the medical professional often explains to the patient the procedure that they will have and the risks involved. In other words, the medical professional verbally summarises the consent form, and the interpreter interprets the professional's summary. In this manner the interpreter can accurately convey the essential information contained in the form, as identified by the medical professional, to the patient.

Ideally, a written translation of the form should be provided for the LOTE speaker, to accompany their copy of the original English document. However, it should be noted that even when a LOTE translation is provided, it is the signed English-language consent form which is the legal document.

6. Sight translating in remote interpreting assignments

- If a document is to be read aloud by either party during a remote (telephone or video-link interpreting) assignment, this document should ideally be shared with the interpreter in advance, so they can read it and prepare before they start interpreting.
- If this is impossible, then the provider of the document should read it sentence by sentence, and should be ready to pause if the interpreter needs to seek clarification. If the document is long and complex, the provider should verbally summarise the document, and the interpreter will interpret the summary.
- When working with an Auslan–English interpreter via video-link interpreting, it is advisable for the service provider to send a copy of the document to the Auslan–English interpreter, to allow them to read it and prepare before they sight translate it into Auslan.

Appendices

Appendix 1

Standard 26.2 of the *Recommended National Standards for Working with Interpreters in Courts and Tribunals* (the RNS) states the following:

‘Legal practitioners should not require interpreters to sight translate during the course of a hearing without prior notice (“sight unseen”) long, complex or technical documents. Sight unseen translation by interpreters of even simple or short documents should be avoided as far as possible.’ (JCCD, 2022, p. 22)

Further, Standard 18 of the RNS states:

‘Under Model Rule 5.3, an interpreter may decline to translate at sight, “if the interpreter considers they are not competent to do so or if the task is too onerous or difficult by reason of the length or complexity of the document”.’ (JCCD, 2022, p. 66)

Appendix 2

Section 4 (‘Interpreter’s Role and Scope of Practice’) of the *Guide for Clinicians Working with Interpreters in Healthcare Settings* recommends that:

‘Sight translations must take place in the presence of the clinician, or their clinical and non-clinical colleagues.’ (MRWHP, 2019, p. 13)

and that:

‘Sight translation should be used sparingly and for brief documents only (200–300 words). Interpreters should not be required to sight translate [complex] consent forms, complex medical reports or documents with extensive information on conditions, procedures, options of treatment and risks. Long, complex or technical documents—including documents associated with a person’s participation in a clinical trial—are not suitable for sight translation and warrant translation [or liaison with an Auslan–English interpreter re. complex documents intended for deaf or hard-of-hearing people].’ (MRWHP, as above. Square brackets added.)

References

AUSIT [Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators Inc.] (2006). [*AUSIT Guidelines for Health Professionals Working with Interpreters \(with reference to special interpreting contexts such as mental health and speech pathology\)*](#).

JCDI [Judicial Council on Diversity and Inclusion, formerly the Judicial Council on Cultural Diversity or JCCD] (2022). [*Recommended National Standards for Working with Interpreters in Courts and Tribunals*](#). [2nd Edition].

MRWHP [Migrant & Refugee Women's Health Partnership] (2019). [*Guide for Clinicians Working with Interpreters in Healthcare Settings*](#).

Acknowledgements

We thank Suzan Piper for initiating these guidelines, contributing the first draft, and revising the subsequent and final draft. We also thank the following interpreters for reviewing drafts of these guidelines and for their input: Meredith Bartlett (Auslan interpreter and educator, Monash University & RMIT University); Yue Hu (Transcultural and Language Services, Northern Health, Melbourne). Further thanks go to members of the AUSIT Ethics and Professional Practice Committee for their suggestions and advice.