

# Guidelines for Working with Interpreters in Mediations

## Definitions

There are two types of interpreters.

A *consecutive interpreter* listens while the speaker talks and interprets when the speaker pauses. This form of interpretation gives the speaker time to organize his or her thoughts and the interpreter time to interpret accurately. But, the use of a consecutive interpreter requires speakers to learn to talk with strategic pauses, doubles the meeting time, and poses the risk of becoming tedious, resulting in the listeners losing attention.

A *simultaneous interpreter* interprets as the speaker speaks. The simultaneous interpreter must be specially trained for this more demanding form of interpretation. Listeners must adjust to hearing both the speaker and interpreter talking simultaneously, unless listeners can hear the interpretation through headphones connected to a microphone of the interpreter who is in a soundproof booth. Simultaneous interpretation permits speakers to talk without disruptive pauses and shortens the time allocated for interpreting, but increases the chance of errors because the interpreter has less time to hear whole thoughts and select the most accurate translation. Simultaneous interpreters are usually more expensive than consecutive interpreters.

## Guidelines

You are likely to communicate more effectively through an interpreter by following these tips:

- 1. Select a Qualified Interpreter.** You should carefully select a trained and experienced interpreter, one who is qualified for the type of technical mediation in which you will be participating. If the mediation involves complex business or engineering matters, for instance, an interpreter should be hired who has some training in the language of business or engineering.
- 2. Meet With the Interpreter Before the Mediation Session.** Before the first session, the mediator and possibly the participants should discuss with the interpreter what they expect from the interpreter during the mediation. This meeting also provides an important opportunity to acknowledge the vital and demanding work of the interpreter and to begin developing working relationships.

The interpreter should be briefed about the context of the mediation and the distinctive vocabulary that might be used during the session. If possible, give the interpreter an opportunity to skim samples of documents in order to become familiar with the technical vocabulary and to select words that seem to fit less familiar concepts.

The interpreter should be advised to not summarize what is said in order to avoid the risk of the interpreter omitting critical details when conveying information. The interpreter should interpret every word that is spoken.

The interpreter might be asked to serve as a cultural consultant. A qualified interpreter will understand the culture in which the language is spoken and therefore should be able to recognize communication misunderstandings that may be related to cultural differences. The interpreter also can help participants recognize culturally-based barriers and suggest ways to overcome them. But, interpreters do not usually see themselves as cultural consultants. Therefore, if you would like this assistance, you will usually need to request it.

The interpreter should be asked where would be the best place to sit at the table during the mediation session if there is no simultaneous interpretation with headsets. The interpreter should sit where the interpreter is able to hear what needs to be interpreted.

The interpreter should be instructed to interrupt the speaker when he or she is talking too fast or is unclear and to request clarification.

**3. When Speaking, Look Directly at the Other Party, Not the Interpreter. When Listening, Look Directly at the Other Party, Not the Interpreter.** When speaking, it is too easy to fall into the trap of speaking directly to the interpreter with whom you have a common language. When listening, it is tempting to look at the interpreter who is *listening and talking* in your language.

If you look at the interpreter, the other party might feel left out of the conversation, which will reduce your connection with the other party at precisely the time you are trying to develop a working relationship with the other party. By looking at the other party, you are giving the party your personal attention. You also are making it easier for you to observe the other party's body language and for the other party to read your body language.

**4. Pay Attention When the Interpreter or the Other Party is Speaking in the Other Language.** If your attention begins to wander when the consecutive interpreter is interpreting what you said or when the other party is speaking, you can lose your focus on what is happening in the mediation, making it difficult for you to respond to what is being said. You also may inadvertently convey to the other party that you are not interested in what is being said.

**5. Speak in Simple Sentences Without Jargon, Slang, Idioms, and Culturally-Laden References.** Many speaking techniques for enlivening conversation do not translate well.

Even jokes can be risky because they can be difficult to translate or may not be appreciated due to cultural differences. Using examples, however, can be effective when trying to convey complicated ideas.

**6. Speak Slowly. Pause Often But Not Before Completing A Thought When Using Consecutive Interpretation.** The reasons for speaking slowly and pausing are obvious. You want the interpreter to understand you and remember what you are saying so that the interpreter can interpret every word instead of summarizing your points. However, you need to complete a thought before pausing. Strategic pausing is essential so that the interpreter can interpret in accordance with the sentence structure of your language as well as the other language. If you pause at the wrong point, the interpreter may not be able to convey your thought accurately.

**7. Try to Gauge The Listener's Reaction.** You want to be understood so you should be sensitive to the listener's reactions, especially if the listener seems to be confused or bored. Either reaction warrants your attention. You may want to clarify your point by using other words or enliven your words by asking the interpreter to add intonation.

**8. Respect the Interpreter.** The interpreter should be treated as a full-fledged participant in the mediation session. The interpreter serves as the vital communication link among all the participants. Because interpreting is a difficult, stressful, and exhausting job, the interpreter may require more breaks than the other participants in the mediation session. In a long session, two interpreters may be needed so that the interpreters can alternate throughout the day.