

Interim guidelines: How to work with interpreters and translators

A guide to effectively using language services

**Important information about the language services policy and guidelines (November 2023)**

**Please read this note before reading this document.**

The Victorian Government is currently revising the language services policy and accompanying guidelines.

The following remains current in this document:

* its strategic intent
* general advice on how departmental staff and funded organisations should use language services.

Detailed advice on using language services may be unavailable or no longer up to date.

Please contact your department or agency’s procurement team for further:

* information about using language services
* advice on engaging a service provider.

**Terminology**

We have used the terminology ‘Deaf’ noting that many Deaf people, particularly those who use Auslan, consider themselves to be part of the Deaf community. However, we note not all people who are deaf identify as being part of the Deaf community.

To receive this document in another format, email the Department of Health’s Diversity and Access team [diversity@health.vic.gov.au](mailto:diversity@health.vic.gov.au) or the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing’s Language Services and Workforce team [language.services@dffh.vic.gov.au](mailto:language.services@dffh.vic.gov.au).

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Available at:

* the [Department of Health website](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/language-services-policy)   
  https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/language-services-policy
* the [Department of Families, Fairness and Housing website](https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/language-services-policy) https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/language-services-policy.

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# Overview

These guidelines for working with interpreting and translating services are a partner resource to the *Interim language services policy* found on:

* [Department of Health – Language services policy](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/language-services-policy) https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/language-services-policy
* [Department of Families, Fairness and Housing – Language services policy](https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/language-services-policy) https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/language-services-policy.

They will help funded organisations and departmental staff provide quality language services for their clients. This will help meet the needs of Victoria’s diverse community including:

* refugees and people seeking asylum
* migrants
* people using sign language.

Effective communication between clients and service providers is critical to:

* achieving positive health outcomes for clients
* delivering quality health and human services
* meeting the department’s commitment to person-centred care and client safety.

Funded organisations can develop their own language services policies and procedures to complement these guidelines.

All staff should know about these policies and procedures and train staff in how to access and effectively use language services.

Approach your manager for details about your particular program’s process for booking language services.

## Diversity responsiveness

Language services are only one part of delivering diversity-responsive services. Language services are most effective when provided in an organisation where:

* cultural diversity policies and plans are in place including
  + fair and responsive services and programs
  + a culturally responsive workforce
  + partnerships with diverse communities
  + effective and evidence-based approaches
* service planning uses demographic data, including the current and potential client base
* managing budget and procurement arrangements for language services is part of service delivery
* the availability of interpreters – at no cost to clients – is well promoted
* there is an understanding that clients may have several issues that increase their vulnerability and ability to access services. These might include:
  + language
  + visa status
  + disability
  + mental health issues
  + experience of trauma
  + socioeconomic disadvantage
  + social isolation
  + geographic location.

# Resources

## How to embed cultural responsiveness in your service planning, design and delivery

* [*Department of Health multicultural health action plan 2023-27*](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/populations/improving-health-for-victorians-from-culturally-and-linguistically-diverse-backgrounds)  https://www.health.vic.gov.au/populations/improving-health-for-victorians-from-culturally-and-linguistically-diverse-backgrounds
* [Designing for diversity](file:///C:\Users\sale0212\AppData\Local\Microsoft\Windows\INetCache\Content.Outlook\SFAFXNAR\Designing%20for%20diversity) https://www.health.vic.gov.au/populations/designing-for-diversity

## Language services policies and resources

* *Interim language services policy* for the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing and Department of Health available at:
  + [Department of Families, Fairness and Housing – Language services policy](https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/language-services-policy) https://www.dffh.vic.gov.au/publications/language-services-policy
  + [Department of Health – Language services policy](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/language-services-policy) https://www.health.vic.gov.au/publications/language-services-policy
* [Better practice guide for multicultural communications](https://www.vic.gov.au/communicating-multicultural-communities) https://www.vic.gov.au/communicating-multicultural-communities
* [Language services credit line](https://www.health.vic.gov.au/populations/improving-health-for-victorians-from-culturally-and-linguistically-diverse-backgrounds) https://www.health.vic.gov.au/populations/improving-health-for-victorians-from-culturally-and-linguistically-diverse-backgrounds
  + For Health Programs Language Services Credit Line queries, email[dhlanguageservices@health.vic.gov.au](mailto:dhlanguageservices@health.vic.gov.au)
  + For Human Services Credit Line queries, email [languages@dffh.vic.gov.au](mailto:languages@dffh.vic.gov.au)

## Find language service providers

* [National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) online directory](https://www.naati.com.au/online-directory/) https://www.naati.com.au/online-directory/

## Code of ethics for interpreters and translators

* [Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT) Code of Ethics](https://ausit.org/code-of-ethics/) https://ausit.org/code-of-ethics/
* [Australian Sign Language Interpreters’ Association (ASLIA) Code of Ethics](https://aslia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/ASLIA-Code-of-Ethics.pdf) https://aslia.com.au/wp-content/uploads/ASLIA-Code-of-Ethics.pdf

## Health Translations

* [Health Translations online portal](https://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au/) funded by the Department of Health http://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au/

# Interpreting services

## Before booking an interpreter

### Working out if you need an interpreter

If possible, work out if you need an interpreter before the appointment.

Assessing how well a person can understand English is the first step in seeing if you need an interpreter.

Even when a client seems to understand English, a stressful or unfamiliar situation may affect their ability to communicate well.

It is best to book an interpreter if:

* requested by the client
* the client cannot understand or respond to basic questions in English
* you are having difficulty understanding your client or your client can only respond in a limited way
* the client relies on family or friends to communicate
* the client prefers to speak in their own language
* the client speaks English as a second language and is in a stressful, complex or unfamiliar situation.

To figure out a client’s level of English language ability, the following questions may help:

* Why are you here today?
* Is English your first language?
* In which country were you born?
* How long have you lived in Australia?
* How long have you been learning or speaking English?

If the client is having trouble responding to these questions, or if the responses are difficult to understand, it is best to arrange an interpreter.

### Figuring out the preferred language

You can’t always work out a client’s preferred language and dialect based on their country of birth.

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| The following steps may help to figure out a client’s preferred language:  1. If a client speaks enough English, you could ask for their preferred language and dialect, especially if they have used interpreters before.  2. Use visual aids that list languages and dialects (refer to ‘Resources’). The client may be able to point to the language they speak.  3. Contact a language service provider. They may be able to help you identify the language through a telephone interpreter. |

### What to do if the person doesn’t want an interpreter

Using an interpreter is not only for the benefit of the client. It also helps the service provider to deliver quality health and human services.

If a client refuses the offer of an interpreter, it is important to clarify and address the reasons. These may include that the client:

* has misunderstood why you need an interpreter
* may feel confident communicating in English
* may know the interpreter assigned to the interview and feel uncomfortable
* may worry that an interpreter could pose a risk to their right to confidentiality, privacy or safety
* may be uncomfortable with the gender, religious or ethnic background of the interpreter
* may not know that the interpreting service will be free of charge.

Address these concerns. Let the client know the interpreter is also for the benefit of the service provider. This is because limited communication may result in an incomplete diagnosis or advice.

### Choosing the type of interpreting

There are three ways of offering interpreting services:

* onsite (face-to-face)
* telephone
* video remote.

Respect the client’s preference for an onsite, telephone or video remote interpreter if you can.

Credentialed interpreters follow a code of conduct that includes strict confidentiality requirements. Confidentiality requirements are the same for all three interpreting options.

#### Onsite interpreting (face-to-face)

Onsite interpreters attend in person. Book an onsite interpreter for matters that are:

* complex
* legally binding
* lengthy.

Onsite interpreting is often better for understanding information because it considers non-verbal communication such as body language. Onsite interpreting is best for complex situations.

You will usually have to book onsite interpreting in advance. Most language service providers have a minimum fee for onsite interpreting, based on a 90-minute session.

In rural and regional areas the availability of onsite interpreters in some languages may be limited.

#### Telephone interpreting

Telephone interpreting is useful for:

* short, non-complex communication
* establishing the language spoken and nature of an enquiry before booking an onsite interpreter
* accessing an interpreter in less common languages for which there are fewer credentialed interpreters, in rural and regional areas, and when videoconferencing is not available
* situations when the client needs immediate help (before you can arrange an onsite interpreter).

Telephone interpreters do not get the benefit of non-verbal communication, so they are not used for Auslan clients. But you can arrange a call to someone who is Deaf using an ordinary handset through the **National Relay Service** on **133 677**.

You won’t usually need to pre-book a telephone interpreter. Although you should confirm this with the service provider.

#### Video remote interpreting

Video remote interpreting uses audiovisual technology to provide face-to-face communication between a client and an off-site interpreter. It can be used for Auslan and spoken languages. Modes of video remote interpreting include videoconferencing systems, laptops and tablets.

Video remote interpreting is a cost-effective alternative to onsite services. It is often better than telephone interpreting. This is particularly the case:

* in rural and regional areas
* where local Auslan interpreters may not be available
* where you need an interpreter at short notice.

Videoconferencing facilities are becoming less available. But this option is not always possible.

A good internet connection and suitable equipment is essential for the speed and data capacity required.

### Understanding the role of family and friends

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| Family and friends should never act in the role of an interpreter because they:   * may not have the required language competence * may lack impartiality * are not bound by the same standards of conduct as credentialed interpreters.   Family and friends can have an important and helpful role supporting and advocating for the client. Acknowledge, value and understand this as separate from and complementary to the role of an interpreter.  Using a qualified interpreter allows family and friends to focus on their advocacy and support role.  Most importantly, friends or family members, especially children, should not interpret in critical situations. It will be difficult for them to:   * remain impartial * maintain confidentiality * accurately convey information.   This can compromise the duty of care to the client.  Never ask children under 18 years old to act in the place of a credentialed interpreter or to relay information between staff and a client.  In some instances – for example, in cases of family violence – using a family member to interpret may risk the safety of the client. |

## Working with interpreters

### Booking an interpreter

You will need the following information to book an interpreter:

* client’s name (but consider not disclosing the name of the client to protect confidentiality in small communities and around sensitive topics)
* language/dialect required
* preferred gender of the interpreter (if relevant)
* date and time you need the interpreter – ensure you allow time to brief the interpreter beforehand
* type of appointment – for example, a medical appointment
* address of the agency booking the interpreter (for onsite interpreting services)
* name and telephone contact details of the staff member who will be doing the interview
* nature of the matter for discussion – for example, an aged care health assessment
* expected length of the interview
* the interpreter’s name, if you need a specific interpreter for continuity of care.

For some clients, the gender of the interpreter will be important. Before booking an interpreter, ask the client if they have a preference.

In smaller communities the client may know the interpreter. This may be difficult for the client and/or the interpreter, especially in sensitive situations.

Knowing the name of the interpreter before the interview helps to identify any concerns the client or interpreter may have.

When booking a telephone interpreter, tell the language service provider about the telephone system you will use. For example: Is it a speakerphone? Or will the interviewer and client be using a dual handset telephone?

### Requests for a preferred interpreter

Using a client’s preferred interpreter helps the communication process by ensuring the client is comfortable with the interpreter. This is particularly important for ongoing or sensitive interviews such as family violence counselling. Make any request for a particular interpreter at the time of booking. (Note that they will need to have the professional level qualification needed for the situation.)

### Preparing for the session

Brief the interpreter by giving general background information. This might include:

* the reason for the session
* specific terms to use
* what you need to achieve.

Consider scheduling a break for long sessions.

As with all interpreting, it is important to be patient and allow time for communication. This is due to the delay between a message being spoken or signed and the interpretation.

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| **Onsite**   * Ensure the room is set up well. Consider appropriate lighting, avoiding glare from windows and seating arrangements. * Ideally, arrange seats in a triangle, with the service provider facing the client and the interpreter next to the client. * Avoid leaving the interpreter alone with the client, either in the room where the interview will take place or a waiting room.   **Telephone and video remote**   * Make sure you have suitable technology and understand how to work the telephone/IT system. * Telephone interpreting is more effective over a landline rather than a mobile phone. * Use a telephone with a speakerphone (or two handsets) where possible. |

### Working with Auslan interpreters

Auslan interpreters work in a similar way to other language interpreters. The interpreter will typically need to sit or stand next to the service provider and opposite the client. This allows the Deaf person to:

* maintain eye contact with the speaker
* read body language
* engage with the person speaking while receiving the message from the interpreter.

Two interpreters may take it in turns to sign, depending on the length of the session.

As with all interpreting, the service provider should ensure they speak directly to the client and not the interpreter.

Because Deaf people generally use language services their entire lives, many are familiar and work regularly with Auslan interpreters. It is common for Deaf people to ask for a specific interpreter or agency. Accommodate this request where possible.

### During the session

#### At the start of the interview

* Introduce yourself and the interpreter to the client.
* Explain the interpreter’s role, noting that their role is not to add to the communication but only to interpret what is being said.
* Explain the purpose of the session and what you hope to achieve.
* Do not assume the client knows what the interview is about. Explain to the client that they can raise questions or concerns at any time during the interview.

#### During the interview

* Talk directly to the client, not the interpreter. Maintain eye contact with the client.
* Use the first person when speaking to your client. For example, say ‘What time did you arrive today?’ instead of ‘What time did she arrive today?’
* Use clear language and avoid using slang, jargon, acronyms, colloquialisms and metaphors.
* Make one point at a time. Pause until the end of a full sentence. Keep questions, statements and comments short. This allows the interpreter to understand and remember what is being said and to interpret in stages.
* Allow the interpreter to clarify information with you. If there is a need to clarify, ask the interpreter to explain this to the client first.
* Allow the client to ask questions or raise issues at any time in the interview.
* If you have any questions about the client’s cultural background, ask the client directly and not the interpreter.
* Summarise the discussion from time to time to ensure the client understands the information.
* Do not ask the interpreter to edit your information to suit the client’s background.

#### At the end of the interview

* Summarise key points for the client.
* Check that the client understands any information you have conveyed and if there are any final questions.
* Allow the interpreter to leave separately to the client.

#### After the interview

* Debrief the interpreter. Discuss any issues to do with the role of the interviewer or the interpreter.
* Do not ask for or allow the interpreter to give an opinion about the client or what they have said.
* Raise any unprofessional or unsatisfactory practices directly with the interpreter.

### Complaints and feedback

Credentialed interpreters must follow the code of ethics developed by:

* Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators (AUSIT), or
* Australian Sign Language Interpreters Association (ASLIA).

If an interpreter does not follow the relevant code of ethics, you can lodge a complaint with the language service provider.

If there are issues with the performance of an interpreter, discuss them with the interpreter first. If not resolved, contact the relevant language service provider to make a formal complaint.

Discuss any other issues with the language service provider. These might include:

* the interpreter not attending
* the interpreter charging incorrect fees
* interpreters without the right level of certification.

# Translation services

Translated information is another tool for communicating with clients, their families and carers. It gives them information they can refer to later. Translated material does not replace the need for interpreting services.

You may need to translate client-specific information, such as medical documents. You may need to distribute health and service information to a wider audience for information and educational purposes.

## Before translating

Planning and consultation is central to effective translations, ensuring the resource:

* responds to the needs of the service area
* meets timelines
* remains within budget
* avoids duplication
* is delivered to a high standard.

You may need to use multiple data sources to get an accurate picture of the diversity in the community and to identify your target audience. Sources include:

* Australian Bureau of Statistics Census data
* the most recent settlement data
* service usage data.

### Preferred language

It is essential to consult with your target audience to figure out their preferred language and level of literacy.

In some countries, several languages may be spoken. It is important to figure out which one the local migrant community prefers. Consider dialect and regional variations when choosing language(s) for translation.

Be aware that different writing systems may be used within certain languages. For example, some Chinese languages use simplified character sets, while others use traditional characters. Ask your target audience about the right writing system for the target language(s).

### Other communication options

Different communities may have preferences for receiving information. For example, communities with a strong oral language tradition may not use written communication. Some people – for example, refugees and people seeking asylum – may not be able to read or write because of limited or disrupted education. Avoid written translation for communities where most members have low literacy levels.

Other ways of offering multilingual information include:

* information sessions, seminars or presentations using credentialed interpreters
* audio information such as podcasts or recorded messages
* storyboards, including images, photos, diagrams or charts
* easy English, which uses clear, simple language and sometimes diagrams to make information as simple as possible without changing the meaning.

Consider a range of consultation methods to find the communication preferences of the target audience and the best way to distribute your information. These could include asking:

* focus groups
* other service providers who work with the community
* local committees
* community groups.

Always deliver complex information such as medical advice in person through a credentialed interpreter.

### Avoiding double-up

To ensure the translation does not already exist, first check [Health Translations](http://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au/) http://www.healthtranslations.vic.gov.au/.

**Health Translations** is an online portal for health professionals and the community that offers access to high-quality translated health information.

As a guiding principle and to avoid duplication, share translated resources across organisations and services.

Before deciding to translate, check a similar resource does not already exist by scanning:

* available translation directories
* other organisations’ websites.

If it does not, contact other organisations and explore developing the resource together. By sharing the cost, organisations can often develop a more extensive resource.

### Writing for translation

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| Once you have the message to convey to your target audience and confirmed that translated material is the best way to communicate, it is important to prepare the text before booking a translation service.  Generally, the English source text will not be suitable for direct translation.  The following tips will help prepare a text for translation. Clarity  * Use plain language and write in the active voice. * Explain unfamiliar concepts and complex terms. * Do not use idioms, metaphors, acronyms, professional jargon, slang, colloquialisms, euphemisms and figures of speech.  Brevity  * Keep it short. Consider a summary version for translation rather than the full publication. This ensures the source text is easier to translate and understand.  Appropriateness  * Adapt the source text to each community group. * Consider the level of pre-existing knowledge in the target group. For example, recently arrived communities may be less familiar with the service system than more established communities and so need more contextual information. * Be alert to cultural sensitivities about certain topics. * Consult the relevant community about the best way to deal with the topic. * Ensure any images or graphics are culturally appropriate.  Accuracy  * Proof read the text before submitting it for translation. Ensure it is final. * Assume the translator will translate everything as provided. It is not their responsibility to correct errors. * Consider using an editor to ensure the clarity and accuracy of the source text. |

## Arranging a translation

Before the language service provider can give you a quote for the translation, they will need:

* the name of the organisation contracting the translation
* the purpose of the translation
* the audience for the translation, including ethnic community, age and gender
* how the translated material will be published or broadcast (such as a brochure, website, media release, podcast)
* any technical needs such as the computer operating system and software. Check with IT staff to ensure uncommon language scripts and fonts are enabled on the system. If not, ask the language service provider to figure out the best format (such as MS Word, PDF, Adobe InDesign) for receiving the translation
* other information including any deadlines and copyright arrangements if applicable.

Once you have booked a suitable translating service, the translator will need:

* the text to translate, including a glossary of key terms
* the languages (including dialects) for translation
* the required certification level specialisation (such as health) of the translator
* the need for the translation to be typeset
* translation of the glossary of key terms for future reference
* certification of the translation if needed (such as for legal purposes)
* confidentiality requirements
* any parts of the text that do not need translating (such as logos and names).

## Finalising the translation

It is highly recommended that translations are independently checked by a different translator with at least the same level of certification as the original translator. The language service provider can arrange this for an extra fee. Independent checking ensures quality and accuracy. It involves comparing the translation with the original text.

Depending on the document, community members should also review the translated resource. This will show up any particular words or expressions that are unclear or culturally inappropriate. Consider compensating communities for their time.

Always publish the translated version with the English version online – or print both together. This allows an English-speaking user to refer to the translated version with a non-English-speaking client.

Consider a regular maintenance schedule for translated material to ensure relevancy and currency. Be sure to update the translated information if the original English version changes.

Also, consider ways to assess the effectiveness of the translated publication. This might include speaking with target communities and asking for feedback on the publication. You could also survey the target audience and relevant service providers.

# Appendix: Overview of the translation process

The typical translation process, whether for print, web or other media, involves:

Overview of the translation process

Before translation: use multiple data sources and community consultation; identify target audience; select language(s); consider options other than written translations

Writing for translation: text for translation; bilingual publications

Arranging translations: engage language services provider (check your program's policy and procedures); brief the translator

Finalising the translation: independent checking and community review; make translations and an English version available; evaluate and maintain translations in consultation with communities