

DeafBlind Interpreting Module

Modifications to the Environment

While interpreting for individuals with combined hearing and vision loss, sign language interpreters must be even more aware of the environment than usual. Standard environmental considerations such as “Will I stand or sit?” and “Never interpret in front of a light source.” apply but, in a situation in which you are interpreting with persons who are DeafBlind, you need to be sure the environment is also ergonomic. As defined in the Collins English Dictionary, the adjective “ergonomic” is used to describe something that is “designed to minimize physical effort and discomfort, and maximize efficiency.” When interpreting for persons who are DeafBlind, we might add “and facilitate communication.” In addition to distorting the message, poor posture can cause fatigue and pain in both the interpreter and the consumer especially in prolonged interpreting situations. Taking preventative measures is key! Below are some suggestions for “ergonomically correct” environmental modifications you can use when interpreting for DeafBlind consumers.

SEATING – You will most likely sit when you work with DeafBlind consumers. You and your consumer will work together to determine the optimal seating arrangement for both of you, keeping in mind the following important principles:

1. **Be sure you and your consumer are on equal planes.** This can be achieved by utilizing chairs with adjustable heights.
2. **Be sure you are within easy reach of each other.** Avoid over-reaching.
3. **Support your arms.** In addition to the arms of your adjustable chair, tables can be used as a natural support for both you and your consumer. While using close vision interpreting, however, a chair without arms is preferable.
4. **Support your back.** Consider placing a pillow behind your back for additional support.

LIGHTING - Sufficient and appropriate lighting is crucial for almost every assignment in which you are working with persons who are DeafBlind. Again, you will work with the DeafBlind consumer to adjust the lighting as needed being mindful of the following:

1. **Be sure that the environment is sufficiently illuminated.** – Consumers who rely on their residual vision generally require a bright environment free of glare. Natural lighting is best but additional, artificial lighting may be needed to accomplish clear communication.

2. **Be aware of the direction of the lighting.** - The light source should come from behind the consumer so you are sufficiently illuminated and there are no shadows across your face.

BACKGROUND – You’ve been taught to be aware of what’s behind you any time you interpret but, when working with persons who are DeafBlind, this concern takes on additional urgency. For consumers relying on their impaired vision, a distracting background can have a significant negative impact on their ability to receive the message. When setting up for an interpreting assignment that includes persons who are DeafBlind, you and the consumer need to make sure of the following:

1. **The background is dark.** – Your first choice is to utilize something already present in the environment such as a dark chalkboard, drapes or a wall. At times you may need to suggest that a portable chalkboard be placed behind you or a dark cloth be tacked over a light colored or distracting surface.
2. **The background is solid.** – Just as you’ve been taught not to wear striped or flowered tops, the surface behind you must also be plain with no designs.

CLOTHING – Again, you know how an interpreter should dress – in a solid color contrasting to their skin color. When you take an assignment with persons who are DeafBlind, however, you should also consider

1. **A closed or higher neckline** - The article “The Case of the Missing Neckline” by Rhonda Jacobs that appeared in the Winter 2010 RID VIEWS illustrates why a higher neckline is an important consideration when working with DeafBlind consumers. *(When you finish reading this page, please read the article.)*
2. **If you’re female, wearing pants.** This is particularly true if you will be working with a consumer who uses two-handed tactile communication.

PERSONAL HYGIENE – Common sense, and the videotapes you’ve seen in this module, tell you that you are going to be in closer proximity to persons who are DeafBlind. You would most likely not appreciate their wearing strong perfumes or lotions or carrying the lingering scent of a cigarette. So you will want to take care that you do not exude any strong scents either. Likewise, common sense dictates that you wash or sanitize your hands frequently during an assignment with persons who are DeafBlind and with whom you use tactile sign language.

Adapted by J. Hecker-Cain. Morgan, S. (n.d.). *Interpreting strategies for deaf-blind students: An interactive training tool for educational interpreters*. Dayton, OH: Ohio Center for Deaf-Blind Education. (T200.0001.01) Retrieved from the [NCRTM website](#).