

## **Making Media Accessible Using Sign Language American Sign Language**

In North America, American Sign Language (ASL) is the primary language of many D/deaf and hard of hearing communities and is an important communication method to consider when making your media as accessible as possible. D/deaf and hard of hearing individuals may choose to use English, ASL, or both to communicate, and each language has some key distinctions.

While ASL shares qualities with the spoken English language, it is its own language with its own set of rules, such as syntax/word order, visual cueing, and cultural norms, that are independent of English. Below we'll walk through what ASL is, how it differs from Signed Exact English (SEE) and other sign languages, how to provide effective ASL interpretations to your audience, and more.

### **What Is ASL?**

ASL is a complete language expressed non-verbally using movements of the hands, face, and body. ASL exists independently of the English language with its own linguistic properties and grammatical structures. According to the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, ASL itself is most closely related to French Sign Language (LSF), having arisen more than 200 years ago from the mixing of local community signs and LSF. Modern ASL and LSF are distinct languages, but still share some similarities in signs.

### **What Is SEE?**

SEE is a signing system modeled after the English language and incorporates some ASL signs. SEE maintains the same grammatical structure as English, providing a visual counterpart to the language, and was originally invented in the 1970s with the goal of providing a way for D/deaf and hard of hearing children to gain the same proficiency in English as their hearing peers.

As opposed to the complex language-to-language interpretation processes required to translate English words into ASL concepts, SEE is a method of transliterating English from an auditory mode into a visual one. SEE is much more comparable to text captioning for English speakers and should not be regarded as a suitable alternative to ASL. Some who are bilingual in ASL/English may prefer an interpreter to use transliteration/SEE in settings where it is important to them that word choice, lingo, phrasing, etc. not be lost in translation, as English-to-ASL interpreting prioritizes meaning over verbatim words.

### **Multilanguage Signing**

As previously mentioned, ASL is the primary sign language of North America, similar to how English is the primary spoken language of the region. And just like English is not spoken by all communities worldwide, ASL is not the only sign language used worldwide. Across the globe, there are varying estimates of how many different sign languages are in use, but most researchers believe it to be between 150 to 300. Many countries have their own language, but new offshoots emerge frequently between communities and deaf schools. As with the spoken English language and ASL, sign languages across the world can be incredibly different even if the regions' spoken languages are related.

No universal sign language officially exists, so if your media is being broadcasted in other regions of the world, Captionmax will work with you to determine if sign language can be provided for any additional languages you may request.

### **Effective ASL and Interpretation**

When it comes to getting a sign language interpreter, you may wonder if hiring one is as straightforward as getting a hearing interpreter to take English and sign into ASL (or any other sign language) for your event. It can be, but there's a couple of things to keep in mind as you prepare.

Captionmax's best practice is to seek interpreters certified by Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID). RID Certifications involve unique requirements depending on the type of certification: [National Association of the Deaf certifications \(NAD III, NAD IV, and NAD V\)](#) and [National Interpreter Certification \(NIC\)](#).

For higher profile events and media, sign language experts suggest utilizing [Certified Deaf Interpreters \(CDIs\)](#). CDIs are highly skilled D/deaf interpreters that usually partner with hearing interpreters to sign from English into ASL. Positioning themselves across from the CDI, the hearing interpreter signs to them what is being said. In turn, the CDI interprets this message into a more fluent and authentic form of ASL. Thus, CDIs are assets able to provide a quality and depth of interpretation that is unmatched by any interpreter whose first language was not ASL. The main difference in interpreting with a CDI is slightly longer lag time, since the message is being conveyed through two people instead of one. It's important to note that Certified Deaf Interpreters are increasingly requested by people who utilize sign language interpreting services, and hiring CDIs whenever possible as a best practice can positively impact your brand's recognition and esteem.

### **I Already Have Closed Captions. Why Should I Get ASL Too?**

Because ASL is its own language separate from English, that means closed captions are only reaching the D/deaf and hard of hearing community in the English written language. English can function as a second language to D/deaf individuals who grew up using ASL as their first language. ASL adds an additional layer of comprehension and affirms your message via signs for the D/deaf community by ensuring the true meaning of the content is inclusively delivered to an important segment of your audience.

### **I'm Ready To Add ASL To My Next Project. How Do I Get Started?**

Captionmax can provide ASL or potentially other sign language services for your next project. To best prepare for your media to be interpreted, we suggest providing the following information when you make your request:

- What type of media is being interpreted? Meeting, webinar, event, companywide information, training, etc?
- Is your event live or prerecorded? ASL can be utilized in either workflow.
- Is any prep available for the interpreter's use? Script, PowerPoint slides, agenda, list of speaker names, etc?
- Is ASL being added to your event to address specific, identifiable end users at your event? If yes:
  - Are the names of your users in the audience available to share? These names are used in a large preferred interpreter system which is based on consumer preference.
  - Do your users have certain interpretation needs: ASL fluent, SEE, a mixture?
    - This can determine both how an interpreter should prepare and whether a CDI may be more ideal.
- Will you require a test run with your interpreter?

Other important items to consider:

- How does your media platform interface with interpreters? Interpreters should be clearly visible on screen at all times. For example, if your event is a meeting and the platform shrinks webcams during screenshares, that may cause the interpreter to be less visible to your audience.
- Is your media dense, complex, and/or over 2 hours? These events require at least two interpreters by default.
- Does your media event contain breakout rooms or multiple sessions? These events also require booking multiple interpreters.
- Is your media event high profile, important for your brand, or reaching a wider audience across North America? You may want to choose a CDI to get the most authentic interpretation of your message across.

## References

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