

# Ask for an interpreter

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Read this if it is hard for you to speak, hear, read, or understand English. You might be able to get an interpreter or translations.

## **1. Definitions**

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### **What is an interpreter?**

An **interpreter** transfers one language, presented verbally through spoken language or signed through a sign language, to another person.

A **translator** translates the written words of one language into the written words of another language.

Interpreters help to communicate between people who don't speak the same language.

Interpreters are **required** to be provided to you in legal proceedings if you can't easily communicate in English because you:

- Are Deaf,
- Are hard of hearing,
- Struggle to communicate because of another speech or hearing impairment, or
- Are Limited English Proficient because you come from a non-English speaking cultural background.

In some other situations, you also should be given an interpreter at no cost.

## How do I know if I am Limited English Proficient or LEP?

If English isn't your primary language and you have limited English skills, you might be Limited English Proficient. This means you don't speak, hear, read or understand English easily. If it's hard for you to have a simple conversation in English or to read a simple document in English, you might be Limited English Proficient.

## 2. How interpreters help

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### Can I get an interpreter?

Yes, if:

- English isn't your primary language.
- It's hard for you to hear, speak, or understanding English easily.

You might be able to get an interpreter. Interpreters can help you communicate during important interactions.

In some situations, like when you go to court, an interpreter can be provided for you. In other situations, you must provide your own interpreter.

### What can interpreters help with?

When you go to see a doctor, a lawyer, or a government agency, a skilled interpreter can help ensure effective communication. The interpreter speaks and listens for you and speaks to you. Their job is to tell you what was said to you in a language you can understand and to tell the other person what you said.

Interpreters can help you communicate during the interactions you must have with courts, businesses, medical providers, organizations, and government agencies. You may also have a right to ask for written translations of certain materials into your language from some providers.

An interpreter can't offer you advice or an opinion about your legal or medical situation.

A skilled interpreter communicates all the important details about your situation. The interpreter will understand the words that a doctor, lawyer, or judge says and will interpret them to you. The interpreter should tell you exactly what was said to you by the English-speaking person. The interpreter should easily be able to describe to you what was said to you using **your language** instead of using English.

### **I received a document written in English. What if I can't understand it?**

Many agencies and courts have versions of documents in languages other than English. If you can't read a document in English, ask if there's a copy written in your language.

#### **If not, ask the agency or court to:**

- Provide an interpreter to "sight" translate the document for you into your language. This means the interpreter will read the document verbally to you in your language or sign it for you if you use ASL or another signed language.
- Or ask to have the document translated for you into your language as soon as possible.

### **Can I use my child or a friend instead of a professional interpreter?**

Yes, but only in some situations. In court proceedings, you should be provided a certified professional interpreter by the court. Other situations might **require** that you use a professional interpreter.

Using someone you know as an interpreter may have benefits. **But it may create problems.**

If you use a professional interpreter instead of using your child or a friend, it can protect your privacy. You won't have to share private or personal information (like medical symptoms or the amount of your debts) with your child or friend.

Professional interpreters keep your information confidential and private.

## **()When do agencies have to provide an interpreter for me?**

- Anytime you must go to a Superior or District Court in Washington or other court hearings, including administrative hearings. This includes when you're a court case participant, a witness or a juror.
- During interactions with the Department of Social and Health Services (<https://www.dshs.wa.gov/office-of-the-secretary/eligibility-language-services>) (DSHS).
- During public school related hearings (<https://ospi.k12.wa.us/policy-funding/equity-and-civil-rights/information-families-civil-rights-washington-schools/interpretation-and-translation-services>), issues and meetings about your child's education.
- Hospitals and certain other healthcare related interactions, especially if you have Apple Health (<https://www.hca.wa.gov/about-hca/programs-and-initiatives/apple-health-medicaid>).
- Other places might provide an interpreter if you ask for one and they're able to provide free interpreters.

## **How can I get an interpreter?**

In Washington, you can usually get a professional interpreter when you're dealing with these kinds of service providers:

- Hospitals
- Public and private colleges
- Public school districts
- State government agencies (and some federal agencies)
- Local housing authorities
- Many city and county agencies
- Community organizations
- Federal, state, and local courts, for criminal and civil court hearings and some settlement conferences – including juvenile court, diversion and youth court, and domestic violence or sexual assault protection order hearings
- Administrative hearings () (hearings against government agencies like the Division of Child Support)
- Prosecuting attorneys
- Law enforcement officers (police, sheriffs)
- Departments of correction (jail, prison)
- Some drug rehabilitation and domestic violence programs

- 911 and other fire, emergency and crisis intervention services

If you need an interpreter, you must ask the people you're dealing with for an interpreter **as soon as possible**. This will give the provider time to find you a qualified interpreter.

### 3. Certified and qualified interpreters

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#### What is a “certified” interpreter?

An interpreter can receive certification from the State of Washington or the federal government to interpret a specific language. This means the interpreter has a high level of skill. Some interpreters get certification to work in medical settings, legal settings, or social service settings.

Certified interpreters must follow a special Code of Conduct. Certified interpreters should have the highest fluency in the language and the subject area that they are certified in.

#### What if there are no certified interpreters for my language?

Certification exams aren't available in all languages. So, some languages won't have any “certified” interpreters available at all. Use a certified interpreter if you can find one for your language. If your language doesn't have certified interpreters, try to find an interpreter who is at least “qualified” in your language.

**Interpreters can be “qualified interpreters”** by answering a series of questions. This special set of questions will help you understand the interpreter's language skills, experience, training, and ethics.

To help determine if the interpreter is qualified, you can ask the interpreter:

1. What training do you have as an interpreter?
2. What work have you done as an interpreter? How long? How many clients have you had?
3. What interpreting certifications do you have?
4. What dialects of my language are you able to interpret?
5. Do you have special interpretation training for medical or legal settings?

## Do all interpreters have to follow certain rules?

Yes. Any interpreter, whether certified or not, must also follow certain ethical standards. All interpreters must:

- Interpret everything you say exactly as you said it. They must not change what you said, explain, summarize, or add details.
- Tell everyone if there are problems with interpreting. For example, because of differences in dialect, there might be a misunderstanding happening that only the interpreter is aware of. If that happens, the interpreter must stop and explain to both sides what's happening.
- Tell everyone if the interpreter **knows** you or another person personally who is there in the interpreted setting. It doesn't mean the interpreter can't still interpret, but they should let everyone know about the relationship.

## When should I use a certified or qualified interpreter?

Use a certified or qualified interpreter when it's important for you to understand what's going on, in words that make sense to you. Use an interpreter when it's important that the person you're talking to understands what you're trying to communicate.

Here are some examples of when you might want to use a certified or qualified professional interpreter:

- You're seeing a doctor or medical professional.
- You've been served with (given) legal papers () and need to figure out what to do.
- You're meeting with a social worker to discuss your application for Social Security Disability benefits (<https://www.ssa.gov/disability>).
- You're meeting with your child's school about a disciplinary action, an IEP or special education meeting, or other important school events.
- You have to go to a court hearing as a participant, witness or juror.

## 4. Tips: spotting good interpretation

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### What are common practices of good interpreters?

Even if you don't speak English well, you usually can tell if your interpreter's doing a good job. You should understand what your interpreter says to you in your language. Your interpreter should also follow these common practices:

1. The interpreter should speak in first person, not third person, when interpreting someone else's comments to you. If your doctor says, "I see Juan's temperature is high," that's what the interpreter should say. The interpreter shouldn't say "He sees Juan's temperature is high."
2. The interpreter should refer to themselves as "the interpreter," not "I."
3. The interpreter may take notes during the conversation. The interpretation is more likely to be accurate. Not all interpreters will take notes depending on what's happening.
4. The interpreter should ask you to pause in the middle of a very long sentence so they can interpret each shorter portion accurately.
5. The interpreter should tell you when they don't understand something you're saying. They should tell you if they don't understand something being said by the other person.

## **How do I know if an interpreter is skilled?**

Your interpreter may not be skilled if you see or hear these things:

- The interpreter's version of what you say, or is said to you, is much shorter than the original version.
- The interpreter has a conversation with someone else involved in your discussion without explaining to you what the conversation is about.
- The interpreter's facial expressions or body language don't show you respect.
- The interpreter's tone or attitude doesn't match or reflect the tone you're expressing.

If your interpreter has these behaviors, ask the interpreter to correct the problems. If they don't change the behavior, ask for another interpreter.

## **5. Tips: working with interpreter**

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**Are there things I can do to better communicate with the interpreter?**

Yes. These behaviors can help the interpretation process:

- Pause at the end of your sentences. Make sure the interpreter has a chance to interpret before you move on.
- Don't interrupt while the interpreter is speaking.
- If you don't understand a question or a comment, ask for an explanation.
- If you don't know the meaning of a word or phrase, ask for a definition.
- If you don't understand why you're being asked a particular question, ask why.
- If you don't understand why you're being asked to do something, ask why. Explain what you think is a better alternative.

## 6. Ask for an interpreter

**Need an interpreter?** You have the right to interpreter services in court at no cost to you. Each court should have a contact person for interpreter requests. As soon as you find out about a court date, contact the court to ask for an interpreter.

Each court will have a staff person who manages interpreter requests. If not, the Court Administrator will help handle interpreter requests. You'll need to give the court time to find an interpreter. This can take many days or weeks. Some courts won't accept requests for an interpreter if the hearing is within 3 days.

Always contact the court as soon as possible to request an interpreter. You'll need the hearing notice or court case number and information. You might have to request ask for interpreter every time you go to court, even if it's for the same case or matter.

### How do I ask for an interpreter from DSHS?

If you're applying for DSHS benefits (<https://www.dshs.wa.gov/esa/community-services-offices/how-apply-services>), you should tell DSHS when you make your application that you need an interpreter. You should also do this if you're applying for medical benefits through the Health Care Authority (HCA)

(<https://www.hca.wa.gov/>).

You should write it on the application form if you have a hard time reading, speaking, or understanding English. You can put the language you prefer to use. DSHS must provide you with a free interpreter without delay.

DSHS and HCA **must** provide a free interpreter so you can talk with them about your application and benefits. They should also send you translated notices about your benefits. DSHS should send you translated notices about your benefits so you can read about your rights and responsibilities in your own language. Keep copies of what they send you.

## How do I ask for an interpreter for my medical care if I use Apple Health?

When you schedule your appointment, tell your healthcare provider that you'll need an interpreter (<https://www.hca.wa.gov/free-or-low-cost-health-care/i-need-medical-dental-or-vision-care/interpreter-services-clients>) for your appointment. They should provide you one during your appointment. You might have to do this every time you schedule an appointment.

## How do I ask for an interpreter from my child's school?

Your child's school should give you information (<https://ospi.k12.wa.us/policy-funding/equity-and-civil-rights/information-families-civil-rights-washington-schools/interpretation-and-translation-services>) **in your language** about your child's education. They should give you an interpreter for meetings, hearings and conversations about your child's education.

They should give you documents translated into your language **if you ask for them to be translated** into your language. You might have to ask for the translations. Schools may only provide automatic translations into certain languages that might not include your language.

The school shouldn't use your children or other students as interpreters. You shouldn't use your child as the interpreter with their school.

- You can ask for these services if your child **can** read or speak English but you **can't**.

- You can ask for these services even if you can speak some English, but not well enough to understand what's being communicated by the school.

You should directly ask the child's school for these services. Contact the school's main office to get help. You can also try to contact the school's principal.

The school is supposed to give you information in your language if it's about any of these issues:

- Registration and enrollment in school
- Grades, academic standards, and graduation
- School rules and student discipline
- Attendance, absences, and withdrawal
- Parent permission for activities or programs
- Health, safety, and emergencies
- School closures
- Opportunities to access programs or services-including highly capable, advanced placement, and English language learner programs
- Special education and services for students with disabilities

**If the school fails to give you an interpreter or translations, you can make a complaint.** You can get help with [making a complaint](https://ospi.k12.wa.us/about-ospi/contact-us/how-file-complaint) (<https://ospi.k12.wa.us/about-ospi/contact-us/how-file-complaint>) to the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). For help with your child's school try contacting:

- The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction at 360-725-6162.
- The Office of the Education Ombuds 206-729-3251.

## How much will the interpreter cost?

Some agencies will provide free interpreter services. It will depend on the situation and provider.

It's best to ask for a **free** interpreter and work with the provider to figure out how to access a free professional interpreter. The interpreter **will** be a professional interpreter, but you won't have to pay for their services. The agency or organization will be paying for the services.

## 7. If you're denied an interpreter

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## What if an agency or court refuses to provide or pay for an interpreter?

If you're refused an interpreter, you might be able to get legal help.

If you think you were treated unfairly and you think the situation would qualify to make a complaint

([https://wahum.my.site.com/FileaComplaintOnline/s/?language=en\\_US&tabset-4c28e=4ac66](https://wahum.my.site.com/FileaComplaintOnline/s/?language=en_US&tabset-4c28e=4ac66)), you can also try to file a complaint

([https://wahum.my.site.com/FileaComplaintOnline/s/?language=en\\_US&tabset-4c28e=a5ea4](https://wahum.my.site.com/FileaComplaintOnline/s/?language=en_US&tabset-4c28e=a5ea4)) with the Washington Human Rights Commission

([https://wahum.my.site.com/FileaComplaintOnline/s/?language=en\\_US](https://wahum.my.site.com/FileaComplaintOnline/s/?language=en_US)).

## 8. Federal changes

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### Did the federal changes affect rights to an interpreter in Washington?

The federal changes could affect your rights in these ways:

- Certain federal agencies may no longer provide interpreters or translators for certain languages or at all.
- You may not be able to file complaints about federal agencies.
- You may only have the right to an interpreter in relation to Washington state or local services, agencies and benefits.

## 9. Contact info

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### Where can I get more information about interpreter services in my court?

Ask the court clerk's office about the process for requesting interpreter services for that court.

- Clark County's interpreter program is handled by the District Court Interpreter Coordinator (<https://clark.wa.gov/courts/interpreter-service>) for all the courts in Clark County. You can email questions to [DistrictCourtIntCoor@clark.wa.gov](mailto:DistrictCourtIntCoor@clark.wa.gov) (<mailto:DistrictCourtInterpreterCoordinator@clark.wa.gov>).
- King County **Superior** Court Interpreter services page (<http://www.kingcounty.gov/courts/SuperiorCourt/InterpSrv.aspx>) or call 206-477-1415.
- For King County **District** Court, contact the specific King County District court (<https://kingcounty.gov/en/court/district-court/courts-jails-legal-system/court-calendars-locations-operations/locations>) where the hearing will be.
- Interpreter services in Pierce County Superior Court, District Court and Juvenile Court (<https://www.piercecountywa.gov/1031/Interpreter-Services>). Or call 253-798-6091 or email [Supcrtinterpret@co.pierce.wa.us](mailto:Supcrtinterpret@co.pierce.wa.us) (<mailto:Supcrtinterpret@co.pierce.wa.us>).
- Interpreter services in Snohomish County: For Superior Court, go to the 5th Floor Courthouse or call 425-388-3459. Juvenile Court, go to the 1st Floor Reception or call 425-388-7960. For District Court and general interpreter questions, call 425-388-3421 or email [SSCInterpreterSupport@snoco.org](mailto:SSCInterpreterSupport@snoco.org) (<mailto:SSCInterpreterSupport@snoco.org>).
- Spokane County Superior Court interpreter services (<https://www.spokanecounty.org/1634/Interpreter-Services>) or call 509-477-5790 or 509-477-4402.
- Spokane County District Court interpreter services (<https://www.spokanecounty.org/3119/Interpreter-Services>). You can use the online interpreter request form (<https://www.spokanecounty.org/FormCenter/District-Court-10/Interpreter-Request-182>).
- Thurston County Superior Court interpreter services (<https://www.thurstoncountywa.gov/departments/superior-court/interpreter-requests>). You can use the online interpreter request form (<https://s3.us-west-2.amazonaws.com/thurstoncountywa.gov.if-us-west-2/s3fs-public/2023-04/Interpreter%20Request%20Form%20for%20Superior%20Court%20-%20Updated%202-2023.pdf>) as you know you have a hearing. Or call 360-596-5154 or email [Court\\_Interpreter@co.thurston.wa.us](mailto:Court_Interpreter@co.thurston.wa.us) ([mailto:Court\\_Interpreter@co.thurston.wa.us](mailto:Court_Interpreter@co.thurston.wa.us)).
- For Thurston County District Court interpreter services, contact the Court Interpreter Coordinator. Call 360-596-5154 or email [Court\\_Interpreter@co.thurston.wa.us](mailto:Court_Interpreter@co.thurston.wa.us)

(mailto:Court\_Interpreters@co.thurston.wa.us).

- Yakima County Superior Interpreter Services  
(<https://www.yakimacounty.us/2570/Certified-Court-Interpreters>). You'll need the form (<https://www.yakimacounty.us/2570/Certified-Court-Interpreters>). You can also contact the Court Interpreter Coordinator at 509.574.2715 or by email at Chela.Fisk@co.yakima.wa.us.
- Yakima County District Court Interpreter Services  
(<https://www.yakimacounty.us/2552/Interpreter-Services>). Email [dcinterpreters@co.yakima.wa.us](mailto:dcinterpreters@co.yakima.wa.us) (mailto:dcinterpreters@co.yakima.wa.us). You can also use the online request form  
(<https://www.yakimacounty.us/FormCenter/District-Court-28/Interpreter-Request-Form-Formulario-Para-139>).
- For interpreter services in other counties, contact the Court Administrator or Clerk of that court and tell them you need an interpreter for your hearing. Do this as soon as you know you'll have to go to court.

Make sure you contact the **correct** court. Each county has a Superior Court and a District Court. Check your hearing notice or court papers to see whether it's the Superior Court or the District Court.

**WashingtonLawHelp.org** gives general information. It is not legal advice. Find organizations that provide free legal help on our [Get legal help](#) page.