

The day has finally come – you have been studying a language for years, reached a high level of proficiency, completed an [interpreting course](#), acquired your interpreting qualification, found interpreting work with an agency, and finally been given your first interpreting job (assignment). Now what?

Before the assignment

Depending on a variety of factors, you may be given your interpreting assignment anything from two months to two hours before the assignment is due to start. The amount of time you have will determine how much preparation you are able to do.

The first step would be to find out as much information about the assignment as possible. I would split this into two categories – logistical and linguistic.

Firstly, logistical. Where is it taking place? Is it over the phone, via video link, or face-to-face? What are the start and end times? Is there a chance the assignment could overrun, and if so, how will you and the service users (the individuals you are interpreting for – one will be an English-speaking professional and the other a Limited English Speaker (LES)) deal with this? How will you get to and from the venue? Will you need any additional materials (face mask, note pad, food and drink, and so forth)? Might you know any of the parties involved and if so, could there be a conflict of interest?

Secondly, linguistic. What is the nature of the assignment? How much are you able/allowed to find out about the two (or more) service users (parties) involved? Where is the second language speaker from and do you have a good knowledge of their language and dialect? Are there any useful term lists/glossaries you could prepare?

In terms of obtaining advance information, it should be straightforward to find out any logistical aspects. As for the linguistic side of matters, this can be more unpredictable. Confidentiality rules often mean you won't know who you are interpreting for until you arrive at the venue. This means you won't know if they, for example, speak clear Brazilian Portuguese or a dialect which you may never have heard before. As for the nature of the assignment, frequently you may only be given very generic information such as 'Venue – Leeds School of Dentistry.' While this means you will

obviously know it is in the field of dental medical interpreting, it could cover any number of ailments or treatments within this field. Sometimes the information could be even more vague – ‘Ward 82, Beckett Wing, LGI.’ You should be prepared for all eventualities and to be aware of any difficulties which may arise along the way.

During the assignment

You have done your preparation, made it to the venue on time and introduced yourself to both parties. Now you are ready to begin the assignment. So far so good!

Here are some things you should bear in mind:

Often, one or more of the service users will have never worked with an interpreter before. Therefore, they might not offer you any natural pauses for interpreting (whether you are using a notepad or not), not fully understand your role (often confusing the role of an interpreter as one of an auxiliary healthcare professional, for example), or assume you know more than you do (a doctor explaining a complex health condition no layman or interpreter would be familiar with). In these cases you just have to be calm and patient and understand the limitations of the scenario, explaining if necessary to the service users what your role is and what they can expect from you.

Service users may become emotional, angry, or frustrated. The main tip here is to not take it personally and take every negative experience as an opportunity to grow and reflect on your work. There is no point in blaming yourself or getting frustrated if a service user is rude to you when you ask them to repeat something to you in their strong, unfamiliar accent – remind yourself that there are plenty of accents and dialects of your native language which you are unfamiliar with.

Don't be afraid to ask for a break if you need one. Depending on the scenario you could arrive at the venue and be thrust straight into the assignment, interpreting non-stop for an hour. Alternatively, you may arrive and then have to wait for half an hour before anything happens. You might even turn up and be told on arrival that the assignment has been cancelled.

During the assignment, feel free to ask for clarification – even using a dictionary or glossary – if you need to. If you try to fumble your way through a scenario it will only cause issues at a later date (e.g., you might

get a complaint which could prevent you getting as many interpreting jobs in the future). Humility is key for an interpreter, as is remembering that you are there because you earned the right to be there through your interpreter qualification, other qualifications and experience.

Often, both service users will know far more about the scenario than you do and may therefore assume knowledge on your part. It could be the seventh of eight physiotherapy appointments, for example. Again, it is a case of making this clear to both parties involved that this is your first time and that a briefing at the start of the assignment would be beneficial to you.

So - expect the unexpected but don't feel daunted, remembering that every assignment is different and that if you go away from one feeling uninspired and negative, your following assignment may well remind you exactly why you decided to embark upon this career in the first place. Patience is key!

After the assignment

At the end of the assignment, make sure you close in the correct manner. Say your goodbyes to the service users and have any relevant forms signed (you may need this to get paid!). Don't forget to submit the form to the agency you work for if required.

Reflect on how your first experience went. How did you find it overall? What did you do well? What could you have done better? Is there anything that you would do differently next time? Were there any safeguarding issues that need to be discussed with any relevant people (if you do not know about safeguarding, you can enrol on our free Safeguarding for Interpreters course here)?

Establish from the agency you work for what will happen next. Do you expect to receive feedback from the service user(s)? Will there be a follow-up assignment? When will you be paid for your work?

Finally, congratulate yourself on doing your first assignment! Strive to keep on improving with every assignment you do and in a few months or years you will, no doubt, have many positive professional experiences to look back on with pride.

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