



Patrons Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing: What You Need to Know
Library Accessibility Tip Sheet 10

Overview

Library staff are often not aware that a child or adult approaching them for assistance is deaf or hard of hearing until the person begins to communicate. Deaf persons communicate in a variety of ways: speaking, writing, signing, gesturing, or a combination of these. People often assume that the deaf will use American Sign Language (ASL) or read lips. In reality, only a small number of those who are deaf know ASL, and few people are skilled lip-readers.

Assistive technologies, such as one-to-one or wide-area assistive listening devices, public TTYs/text telephones, and videophones help facilitate communication. Videophones allow a translator to sign conversations to viewers. These items are economical, and the manufacturer subsidizes some, like the videophone.

Some patrons who are deaf may use a service dog. Hearing dogs alert people to sounds unique to their environment, for example, smoke alarms, stove timers, alarm clocks, sad or happy sounds of family and friends, ringing telephones, doorbells, and unusual sounds that may indicate danger or emergencies; furthermore, they watch for dropped items.

Common requests that library staff members may expect are questions relating to local education options for children who are deaf or hard of hearing and information about a variety of hearing differences and how to cope with hearing loss. Patrons may also ask how to request accommodations people may need in order to enjoy participating in library programs.

Tips

- To get the attention of a deaf person gently touch a shoulder or get in the line of sight and wave or tap on the table or countertop. Staff should use the method with which they feel most comfortable.
- Position yourself for visibility, in a well-lit area.
- Look at and speak directly to the patron, not to an interpreter.
- Maintain eye contact at all times during the conversation. Don't look away at a computer screen or down at the desktop. Don't speak as you turn to retrieve materials. Although patrons may not read lips, they can get cues from facial expressions. These cues let patrons know when staff have stopped speaking, signaling that it is their turn to talk.
- Speak naturally—don't exaggerate, shout, or speak slowly.

- Use short sentences.
- Repeat, rephrase, or spell words if not understood. For example, patrons may not hear the word *quarter*, but they may hear *twenty-five cents*.
- Use gestures, write, or type back and forth on a computer, using a program like Word, to add clarity to communication.
- Instant Messaging (IM), texting, or other virtual reference services are accessible to people who are deaf or hard of hearing. If the library uses IM or virtual reference services, make an extra effort to market it to the deaf community.
- Train staff members who provide telephone services to receive and make calls using TTY or video relay services.
- Provide assistive listening devices, interpreter services, or real-time captioning services for public programs upon request.
- Provide print materials advertising the technologies and services that the library provides for patrons who are deaf and hearing. Place these items where they can be easily seen.

Resources

Gallaudet University Library, *Communicating in the Library with People Who Are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing*

http://library.gallaudet.edu/Library/Deaf_Research_Help/Communication_Tips_for_Librarians.html

All library staff will benefit from using the tips provided by Gallaudet University (the premier university attended by persons who are Deaf and/or seeking an education in providing services to people who are Deaf) library staff when working with patrons who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.

Friends of Libraries for Deaf Action (FOLDA)

<http://www.folda.net/home/index.html>

FOLDA is a leader in the area of providing information to libraries and library staff in regards to Deaf culture, programming for people who are Deaf, sign-language, assistive technology, and access to electronic information. Its earliest product, The Red Notebook remains a trustworthy tool to many.

This tip sheet, revised in 2010, is one in a series developed by the Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies, a division of the American Library Association. See www.ala.org/ascla.