

Tips for Art Museum Docents/Guides on Working with American Sign Language (ASL) Tour Groups

Tip 1

DO understand that American Sign Language is a real language, although not a universal one.

Good to know: American Sign Language is a complete language with its own unique grammatical structure, and other countries have their own native sign languages. Some deaf and hard of hearing people may prefer to sign in English word order, and there are also those who do not sign at all.

Tip 2

DO refer to people with hearing loss as "deaf" or "hard of hearing" (according to their preferences).

Good to know: Older terms such as "deaf mute" or "deaf and dumb" are no longer acceptable and are considered offensive.

Tip 3

DO address your audience directly when you speak with or present to them.

Good to know: The sign language interpreter is there to serve as a conduit of communication, so it is not necessary to use phrases such as "tell her/them" or "ask him/them" when you are communicating with deaf and hard of hearing people.

Tip 4

DO provide both the sign language interpreter and your audience with some background information about what the tour will cover before starting your presentation.

Good to know: The sign language interpreter cannot read your mind and thus will do a better job of conveying accurate information if you provide some details of your presentation in advance. The audience will also be better prepared to understand and absorb your presentation if you give them a brief review.

Tip 5

DO give your presentation in a normal manner and at a comfortable pace.

Good to know: The sign language interpreter and/or the audience will let you know if and when they need something from you, so you should concentrate on your presentation and not worry about "how you are doing."

Tip 6

DO present your information as normally prepared (don't change your vocabulary, et cetera), and don't make assumptions about who your audience is or what their knowledge of art is.

Good to know: Deaf and hard of hearing people cannot be easily categorized as they are a very diverse minority group. Their lives are similar to everybody's else, and it is likely that they may know about and enjoy art as much as you do. Furthermore, deaf and hard of hearing people do appreciate and participate in all the art forms, including theater, dance and even music.

Tip 7

DO stay in one place when you present information about an art work, and don't present while you are on the move between art works.

Good to know: In a group tour, auditory information can be received regardless of where the audience is looking, but visual information (from sign language, lipreading, and even your pointing) must remain within view of the audience to be successfully received. As you present, be sure not to step in front of or point in front of the sign language interpreter since you will effectively block the flow of information. If you present while on the move, then the interpreter has to attempt to walk backwards, etc., to remain within view of the audience. This is an awkward and potentially dangerous situation, so it is best if the audience can remain in one place and watch your presentation safely.

Tip 8

DO allow for occasional pauses to let the audience absorb your information and enjoy the art.

Good to know: Deaf and hard of hearing people who receive information visually can't look at everything simultaneously (which includes you, the sign language interpreter, and the art), so pauses are very helpful. Furthermore, the audience (even hearing ones!) will appreciate "quiet time" to enjoy the art for its own sake.

Tip 9

DO ask everybody to take turns speaking during group discussions, and watch for deaf and hard of hearing people who may prefer to raise their hands instead of their voices to join in.

Good to know: Nobody can understand multiple speakers simultaneously, so focusing on one speaker at a time makes it easier for everybody (including you, the sign language interpreter, and the audience) to follow what is being said. Some deaf and hard of hearing people do not use their voices, so they will use their hands to indicate interest in speaking.

In summary, relax and help everybody enjoy the art!