



## **The Universal Translator**

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Are you familiar with the Universal Translator? This high-tech invention automatically translates a large number of languages into English and vice-versa. It does so in a seamless way, making it possible for English speaking people to travel the world and communicate with ease. Amazingly, it also translates language from alien cultures, thereby allowing travel throughout the universe, where no one has gone before.

As you may have guessed, the Universal Translator was invented in the 1960s for the original *Star Trek* series. It has been used ever since – in science fiction. We know that reality often mimics fiction, especially science fiction, so some day there will be a Universal Translator. We already have computer voice recognition and language translation software, so someday we will break the language barrier.

But there is another important barrier that we interpreters must strive to break. It is the barrier that keeps us from communicating effectively with people with disabilities. These people have a civil right to equally effective communication under the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. For this purpose, interpreters are Universal Translators.

Are you prepared to locate and work with a sign language interpreter to give a program that includes a visitor who is deaf? Would you know how to present an audio-visual program to a visitor with a visual impairment? Do you feel comfortable providing a tour of an historic building to a group of adults who are developmentally disabled?

You may be relieved to know that most of the techniques that make programs accessible are also considered good interpretive techniques. The more you involve all of the senses, encourage participation and relate with your visitors, the better your programs will be for all visitors, including those with disabilities. Your techniques will also benefit visitors who don't speak English.

### **Hearing Impairments**

People with hearing impairments often develop acute abilities to communicate visually. Most people with hearing impairment read lips, trail signage, brochures and publications. They have a heightened awareness of gestures and body language and may understand sign language. A visitor with a hearing aid or impairment may benefit from an assistive listening device for amplification. For people with hearing impairment, pantomime messages, use handouts, transcripts, or song sheets, allow extra time for viewing, and keep your face and lips visible at all times.

To develop your skills at visual communication, imagine telling your favorite story, interpretive theme, or joke using only pantomime or charades. You can practice in front of a mirror. Or find an opportunity to play charades and exercise your non-verbal communication abilities. You may be able to use charades as an activity in a campfire program you are presenting.

## Visual Impairments

People with visual impairments often have an increased focus on their senses of hearing and touch. Visual impairment covers a broad spectrum from the type that can be corrected with glasses to complete blindness. Only about 5% of people who are blind read Braille. Interpretive techniques for people with visual impairment include descriptive language, touchable models, hand-held objects, magnifiers, large print and audio recordings.

To develop your descriptive language skills, practice painting a picture with words – describing your park resources in detail. Describe the colors, textures, sizes and contrasts. Explore relationships, movement, directions, metaphors and analogies. Avoid labels like “beautiful.” For example, “Toward the West, a jagged mountain range stretches across the horizon. As the sun sets, the thin clouds above reflect layers of color – purple, red, orange and yellow – across the sky above the range.” There is no need to say it is beautiful.

## Learning Disabilities

People with learning disabilities often have a variety of concerns. They may have dyslexia or attention deficit disorder. Begin your program with some information about the length of time, what to expect and allow visitors an opportunity for an early exit. Pose questions and repeat them, use all the senses, and reinforce concepts through repetition.

For practice, brainstorm as many ways as possible to communicate your theme. Create illustrations, a game or group activity, or a physical demonstration. Practice using familiar words to replace jargon or academic terms. Experiment with new forms of expression. Think about the visitors as a part of the program, not just observers.

## Mobility Impairments

A “person with mobility impairment” could refer to someone with chronic pain, chronic fatigue or severe heart disease. Most commonly we refer to people in wheelchairs, but mobility impairment may be temporary – like a broken bone. It also includes arthritis.

To prepare to serve people with mobility impairment, review the route a visitor takes to participate in your program. If your park has not been officially surveyed for compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act, you may choose to invite someone who is in a wheelchair to check the route with you and identify barriers and alternatives. You may find a volunteer at a local organization that serves people in wheelchairs. In addition, think about people who will need to rest. Where can you stop near a bench or have a few chairs available? What alternate route(s) could you use to present the same theme?

## Etiquette

Here are a few tips to build understanding and communicate with confidence:

- “People first” terminology – Avoid labeling and emphasize individuals – not the category of their disability. For example, use “The visitor in the blue shirt requested a magnifier” instead of “That blind visitor requested a magnifier.”
- “Accessible” is better than “handicapped” – Parking spaces and restrooms are not handicapped, they are accessible.
- Never distract a service animal – The animal is on the job and the visitor needs your attention.
- Maintain good eye contact with a person in a wheelchair – For longer programs, don’t make a person in a wheelchair strain their neck to see you. Find a way to be at their eye level periodically.
- Never assume a person wants or needs help – Independence is one of the most important aspects of equality. Don’t take it away without asking first if the person needs assistance.
- Avoid negative terms such as “confined” to a wheelchair or “stricken” with cerebral palsy – Speak with respect for differences.
- Never touch a person’s wheelchair or cane – These items are an extension of their personal space.

## Summary

If you incorporate a variety of techniques into every program, you will not only meet the needs of people with disabilities, but also create better programs for all visitors. Take some time to practice descriptive language and charades. Find someone who uses a wheelchair to check your tour routes. Explore new ways to involve your visitors and demonstrate your themes. Until technology catches up with science fiction, you are a Universal Translator (and technology will never replace you!).

## Reference

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### Did you know?

- Disabilities may originate with birth defects, diseases, accidents, aging or toxic exposure.
- Approximately one in seven visitors has a disability. This includes children who have learning disabilities.
- Many people have hidden disabilities.
- Older adults often have a combination of concerns that may or may not be considered disabilities. (mobility, visual and/or hearing impairment)
- Advances in medicine and technology are constantly changing the lives of people with disabilities.