

“Building a Case for Case Notes”

by Jenee Petri- Swanson

Absences happen. Whether it's planned in advance or last minute, whether we like it or not, we're human and life happens. It's been said that "failing to plan is planning to fail." How can an educational interpreter help prepare their subs working in their absence?

Most of us have probably experienced, both, being subbed out from a class which we regularly interpret, and being the sub for a regular classroom interpreter. Either experience can be stressful.

It is our responsibility to do what is within our power and scope to ensure that quality, meaningful, equitable access happens all the time. Deaf person's right to this kind of access do not take sick days or go on vacation - even when we do. We can be responsibly proactive about this!

One suggestion is for educational interpreters to keep ongoing, updated, clear, easily accessible, yet confidential class/case notes to share on an as-needed basis with relief interpreters. Certainly, do not share anything revealing (ie names). As a rule of thumb, I do not notate anything I wouldn't feel comfortable having others on the team see.

Each interpreter gets to decide how to keep and share notes, and what information to include. Hopefully ed terps and their teams can explore their note taking and sharing options to see what works best for them! It would be ideal if a team who regularly works together knows how/where to access each other's notes, so if the need arises, things can move efficiently.

Personally, I have grown fond of Google Drive. (Those who know me personally may say "fond of" is a euphemism!) In the post-secondary setting, I typically create a Google folder for each class I interpret and grant editing access to my regular team, if I have one. I also set the documents to the "view only" permission for anyone who has the link - with subs in mind. When a sub is needed, the link to the folder is sent to whomever is subbing.

The contents and organization, of course, are up to you! I will share my approach as one example:

In post secondary classes, I start by creating two documents: one called "Terms/Vocabulary" and the other titled "General Info." In the "Terms/Vocabulary" document I often use a spreadsheet or table and list english terms and phrases from the class, their meaning, established signs, and any links I may have to illustrate in various columns. (One could even video themselves modeling the established sign and add a link in the appropriate row!)

I add to the list as the course progresses. In addition to jargon and technical terms, I also enter any colloquialisms the teacher or professor may say. For example, I have interpreted for one educator who was fond of saying, "How do you imagine he makes his living?" while referring to an animal species displayed on the slide. Once I realized the meaning of his question was, "Where you you suppose this animal lives?" I notated that in the vocab document in hopes of helping others avoid the awkward interpretation and confusion I experienced!

In the "General Info" document I typically note logistical items - such as where we position ourselves in the room, how the professor prefers to be addressed, and other relevant information. I often include linguistic information, such as "student stated preference for strong ASL" or "voices for themselves." Either in this document, or uploaded separately in the folder, I would be sure to list the course schedule and topics of discussion (if it were available to me.) I will also insert links to any prep that is available (ie class website, youtube videos).

While working in K-12 settings, my sub folders varied depending on the nature of my work. If I had a varied schedule (ie in a middle or high school, or if I floated between schools), I would typically make a single Google document which listed my class schedule, and each class would be hyperlinked to a separate document or folder which included course topics and info as needed.

When I worked in elementary settings where the people in the class/school were more consistent, I tended to have a class list of names. I'd be sure to including any name signs used for folks or places in the school. Sometimes I would provide lyrics for the school song, and frequently notated any commonly used phrases and sign choices for the classroom (ie 1-2-3 eyes on me, crisscross applesauce.)

Come to think of it, the term 'sub notes' may be too narrow of a description considering how many other functions these notes can perform! In fact, Nick Beese, in his article "[Working with Sign Language/English Interpreters](#)" describes how that he uses a similar approach as a Deaf professional working with interpreters, except he is the main author and contributor to his google documents and they are referred to as an interpreter prep sheet. Be sure to check out [the template he provides!](#)

Other Uses of Sub Folders:

- Collaboration! Share them with the itinerant DHH teacher who is providing support on classroom content - so they can use the same signs established in the course.
- Sign Negotiation! In the college setting, use them to discuss sign choices with the Deaf consumer when doing so before/during/after class doesn't work or is cumbersome (of course, only when this is agreeable to the student!) As an example, I have created a document and shared it with the student. During my prep, I would notate terms/concepts for which there is no standardized sign (with which I am familiar.) Either we would collaboratively dialogue in the

document how we wanted to address the sign/concept, or we would simply refer to the list so we come to class ready to tackle them.

- Labor division! If there are multiple assigned readings and materials leading up to a class and the interpreting team doesn't have time to prep together or to prep it all, team members could prep separately taking notes along the way. This way, the other team interpreter can save time by reading the other terp's summary/notes, and may choose to spend their time prepping for something else.
- Helping out! Imagine some day another interpreter is assigned to the same class you've already covered. You can also hand off the materials to the other interpreter to help them along their way!
- Self Reflection! Taking the time to write in these 'sub folders' is not for naught, even if you don't miss a day off work. Taking the time to reflect on the work is a wonderful opportunity for personal and professional growth. By taking the time to write down WHAT we did, it may trigger us to consider WHY and HOW - great prompts for growth.
- Consistency! If a student is taking multiple courses on a similar topic (I.e. courses for their highly technical major), a document or folder can be shared with various teams of interpreters who will work with the student over the years - culminating in a master grid of terms, their meaning, and established sign choices.
 - If you use the 'sub folder' in this way, there will be a lot of content added over time, so it will be important to date materials or somehow organize them so that the most relevant information is highlighted for a one-time sub who won't have time or need to sift through all of the material.

You may be thinking, "When do I have TIME for this?" It's sad but true that interpreters are often not provided adequate prep time. Hopefully, our access to time and resources will grow as our profession evolves. Along the way, let's strive for notating the basics (unique spellings of names, terms that come up, agreed upon sign choices) which, hopefully, can be done in as little as 5 minutes a day.

To me, this 'added work' on our end is important: it allows the Deaf student to have consistency across their courses, empowers interpreters to come prepared, and decreases the amount of time and energy the Deaf student has to expend feeding/correcting sign choices - freeing them up to attend more fully to the content (rather than its form.)

What are some other added benefits of using sub folders? What other strategies have you employed for communicating within your teams? We would love to learn from you in the comments section below!



Jenee Petri-Swanson, NIC TSC, is an educational interpreter at heart and views the role of the educational interpreter as a great privilege and profound responsibility. Jenee co-chairs MRID's Educational Interpreters' Committee and co-authored "K-12: A Call to Arms for Sign Language Interpreter Training Programs" available on streetleverage.com. She is a St. Paul College ITP alumni and has been interpreting since 2003. Much of her career has been interpreting in the K-12 setting, but she has also enjoyed working VRS and freelancing on the side. More recently, Jenee has focused on interpreting in a post-secondary setting as she is a full time staff interpreter at the University of Minnesota. (jeneepetri-Swanson.weebly.com)