

# Test Accessibility:

## What Professionals Need to Know

**TS**  
Tip Sheet

### Overview

Many different test-taking issues affect deaf students, but linked to all of these issues are the differing experiences with English, professionals who do not have a full understanding of the learning experiences or backgrounds of deaf individuals, and the lack of testing standards.

Schools rely on testing to measure the knowledge and abilities of their students. However, disproportionate numbers of deaf students at all grade levels fail critically important standardized tests—even though their classroom work may show that they know the test material. This long-recognized discrepancy sometimes prompts questions regarding academic tests' accuracy and reliability in measuring the knowledge and aptitude of deaf students. Accurately evaluating student knowledge and ability has become increasingly important for schools as funding and curriculum development are tied to standardized testing and reporting mandated by the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015.

A large array of complex factors might determine how a deaf student performs on a test or psychoeducational evaluation. These factors can occur in any combination, and each factor or mix of factors might affect individuals differently. Ultimately, the factors that can affect test performance yield unpredictable and inaccurate test results for deaf students.

Low or failing test scores can have long-term effects and dictate or limit life choices for deaf students. Results of tests for academic courses, vocational aptitude, professional licensing, certifications, driving, college entrance, and others can open or close the door to a deaf individual's access to professions, employment, education, and other life choices.

### The Design and Wording of Tests

For most students, test taking is a challenge. For deaf students, classroom quizzes, tests, and exams are even more challenging. Standardized tests—the SAT, ACT, state proficiency tests, and psychoeducational evaluations—present additional challenges for deaf students for many reasons, including the following.

- Deaf children often enter school with widely varying English (and possible first-language) proficiency levels. Limited access to English language for deaf students, over time, may mean tests contain English vocabulary that is unfamiliar to them.
- The language style and structure of tests can present obstacles to individuals who do not have a strong language base. Tests use phrasing, grammar, and sentence structure that is different from everyday English. Multiple-choice questions, idioms, words with multiple meanings, homophones, and those with complex grammar or unnecessary information may be difficult to understand for some deaf students. Thus, test results may underestimate these students' skills and abilities, making it difficult to determine the significance of the results and how they should be used.
- Tests may contain English vocabulary that is unfamiliar to deaf individuals due to their limited access to spoken and written language.



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- Although there is no word-for-word parallel between English and American Sign Language (ASL), any concept expressed in English can be expressed in ASL. However, students who access classroom course content via ASL are at a disadvantage if they are tested on that content in English.
- Few test developers have expertise in deafness or the accommodations that a deaf student may need. In addition, test developers rarely use deaf people as evaluators or include them in norm groups.
- Standardized tests are structured to elicit specific information from students in a very particular way. This structure is quite different from classroom tests written by K–12 teachers or college instructors, who may not be skilled at developing tests or making tests accessible to deaf students.



### Common Accommodations Allowed on State Standardized Assessments

- Extended time
- Separate room for administration of the test
- Signed test instructions
- Signed test items (except for tests of reading ability)

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Cawthon, S., & Leppo, R. (2013). Assessment accommodations on tests of academic achievement for students who are deaf or hard of hearing: A qualitative meta-analysis of the research literature. *American Annals of the Deaf*, 158(3), 363–376.

## Lack of Standards for Giving Tests and Using Their Results

The educational system has no clear guidelines or best practices on administering tests, making tests accessible, or using test results to determine placement, achievement, or advancement for deaf students. For example, there are no accepted guidelines on what should be presented in sign language to students who sign, who should translate that material, or how the accommodation is granted—if it is permitted at all. Individual schools and states often create their own guidelines on testing access and use of testing results.

Some schools allow only verbatim interpretation of test instructions and questions; others allow paraphrasing of the information to make it more understandable for the student.

Providing a video of signed translation of a standardized test’s instructions or questions to all deaf test takers may not be an equitable solution because of disparities in sign language proficiency among students and the need for region-specific signs.

Test development companies carefully craft the language of psychometric tests to produce valid results. It would be virtually impossible to provide a psychometrically valid sign language translation, and further inaccuracies could be introduced translating ASL responses back into English.

The meaning and the use of terms such as “intermediate reading level” for hearing students vary widely. But these terms vary even more for deaf students. No test currently gives a clear picture of whether a deaf student is at grade level or meets other standards, particularly in English language proficiency.

Other methods of assessing a student's abilities that may be used in place of or as an adjunct to testing include portfolios and other demonstrations of skills and knowledge. However, there are no standards for portfolio content or evaluation, and postsecondary schools typically demand test results, not portfolios, for admission.

## Suggestions for Test Developers

Deafness is a low-incidence disability, so developing standardized tests exclusively for deaf individuals likely isn't feasible. However, accessible test design principles can be applied to test development.

Write tests so that they are clear and understandable for all test takers. Avoid test questions with complex syntax, double negatives, passive verbs, and idioms unless their inclusion is necessary to the test. Avoid cultural bias and phrasing or lingo that may not have reached the deaf community.

Ensure that tests actually measure the knowledge they are intended to measure for deaf students.

Consider making computer-based tests more accessible by using a team of content and ASL linguistics experts to develop ASL items for ASL speakers.

Actively recruit and employ deaf individuals as test designers, to serve on item writing and test development committees, and to serve in advisory roles.

"Some of the great [assessment accessibility improvements] I have seen have been for students who are deaf ... you see now that, for example, ASL signing is provided as part of an online test platform, where in the past that never would have happened and there may not have even been an interpreter for the student."

— Dr. Martha Thurlow, director of the National Center on Educational Outcomes

## Suggestions for Schools

**Formal guidelines:** Develop formal guidelines and methods for fairly and accurately measuring the abilities and progress of all students, including deaf students.

- Define the circumstances when tests are an appropriate method of measuring student knowledge, ability, or progress.
- Use portfolio assessments, interviews, and other alternatives and/or adjuncts to traditional and standardized tests to gauge a student's skills and knowledge.
- Recognize that test results may not correspond to the actual abilities and knowledge of deaf students.
- Ensure that test scores are used properly and in the context of the student's classroom performance.

**Team approach:** Use a team to assess a student's abilities and potential. Include deaf community members who understand deaf culture and deafness. A diverse team can more effectively evaluate the potential of a deaf student.

**Curriculum-test alignment:** Ensure that curriculum, instruction, and test content align.

**Clearly written tests:** Avoid language in tests that is unnecessarily complex. Consult a teacher of the deaf or other specialists in deafness for advice on accessible, effective test design.

**Accommodation guidelines:** Develop test-taking accommodation guidelines that can adapt to the needs of individual students. Accommodations may include additional time to complete a test and test instructions and questions communicated in sign language. In some instances, it may be appropriate to allow the student to sign answers to an interpreter, who then records the answers.

**Qualified interpreters:** Provide a qualified sign language interpreter if that is an appropriate test accommodation for a student who uses sign language. The interpreter and the instructor should meet at least a day before the test to ensure that the interpreter understands the test's content and objectives.

**Test-taking skills:** Teach test-taking strategies and techniques. A teacher of deaf students or a successful deaf student can provide valuable information and insight.

**Language:** From the outset of their education, deaf students need a rich, fully accessible language foundation and instruction by teachers who are linguistically competent.

**Psychoeducational testing:** Assign evaluations of deaf students to psychologists who have appropriate training and experience in evaluating these students.

**Deaf culture:** Offer professional development to teachers and staff members on deaf culture and testing issues experienced by deaf test takers.

More information on this topic is available at [www.nationaldeafcenter.org](http://www.nationaldeafcenter.org). Questions can be sent to [help@nationaldeafcenter.org](mailto:help@nationaldeafcenter.org).



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