

Guidelines for Readers & Scribes



GUIDELINES FOR READERS & SCRIBES¹

Individuals with visual or cognitive impairments may need assistance with written materials, including court documents. They may request that someone read documents to them. They may also request that someone write information that they dictate. They may need this type of help in informal settings, for example, at the clerk's counter, or in a Maryland Court Help Center. They may also request this type of assistance for court proceedings. The guidelines can aid courts in responding to certain requests for accommodations.

These guidelines apply when the court assigns a reader or scribe to serve an individual either in response to an informal or formal request as described in the Reader and Visual Interpreter Policy.

These guidelines should be followed in both:

- informal settings, for example, in a clerk's office or court help center; or
- for courtroom proceedings including when assisting a juror.

A reader or scribe may be appropriate when other assistive technology is not available or practicable.

The goal of providing a reader or scribe is to ensure that the court visitor has equal access to court services, processes, and proceedings.

WHO SHOULD BE APPOINTED OR SERVE AS A READER OR SCRIBE

The court may appoint either a court employee or an agency professional secured specifically to serve as a reader / scribe. Under the ADA, a reader should be able to read effectively, accurately, and impartially using any necessary specialized vocabulary. 28 CFR § 35.104.

Commissioners, help center providers, and court staff may be called upon to read or scribe for individuals in the course of their duties. If so, this document can provide guidance on how those services can be provided.

¹ These *Guidelines* were adopted by the Maryland Judicial Council on 09.28.2022 as part of the *Report & Recommendations of the Readers & Visual Interpreters Work Group*.

DEFINITIONS

READER

A reader is a person who provides an oral presentation of the printed text to an individual in need of assistance. The reader reads out court documents, court forms, brochures, instructions, or other material relevant to the individual's interaction with the court. In some cases a reader may also serve as a scribe.

SCRIBE

A scribe is a person who writes down what a court visitor dictates via speech, American Sign Language, or an assistive communication device. The scribe may be asked to write information on court forms or other documents. In some cases a scribe may also serve as a reader.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

A reader/scribe must be careful not to make decisions for or give advice to the person requesting assistance. The reader must read documents in a neutral way, without interpretation or elaboration. Similarly, a scribe must record information in a neutral way, without rephrasing, enhancing, or modifying the information being dictated.

The reader/scribe may not discuss any portion of documents read or scribed with anyone unless specifically authorized to do so by the individual in need of assistance. The reader/scribe should maintain confidentiality both about the person they are assisting and any information they access in providing assistance.

QUALIFICATIONS

QUALIFICATIONS OF A READER

1. Ability to read aloud clearly, at a normal to fast pace, and with good pronunciation.
2. The reader should have the ability to communicate in a neutral tone and maintain a neutral facial expression and posture throughout the proceeding or service. A reader must be impartial and not enhance or interpret what is being read.
3. Familiarity with the words, terms, symbols or signs that are specific to a court setting or proceeding when possible.
4. Ability to follow instructions (e.g., please re-read the last sentence) and to read, verbatim, only the words on the page, without changing or adding words or assisting the individual in responding to the information.
5. Willingness to be patient and to understand that the individual may need information repeated several times.

QUALIFICATIONS OF A SCRIBE

1. Ability to transcribe responses verbatim from the individual.
2. Ability to produce legible text either through clear handwriting or through typing.
3. Generally, a scribe is responsible for spelling. Good spelling skills are essential.
4. The scribe should have the ability to communicate in a neutral tone and maintain a neutral facial expression and posture. A scribe must be impartial and not enhance or interpret what is being dictated.
5. Familiarity with the words, terms, symbols or signs that are specific to a court setting or proceeding, when possible.

GUIDELINES FOR READER AND SCRIBES

1. Explain your role to the person receiving assistance. Confirm that you will keep information you access in performing your duty confidential. Note that you are to read and scribe neutrally, without interpretation or modification. Let the individual know that they may ask you to modify the way you read, if necessary (faster, slower, louder), and state that you may repeat information if they need you to do so. If the person will also be using assistive technologies, discuss how those will be used.

In the Courtroom. If you are providing service as a reader or scribe in open court, request the court's permission to review the document with the individual needing assistance before proceeding. When you and the individual needing assistance agree that the review of the document is complete, then you or the individual should so inform the court.

2. Briefly review the form and subject matter and make yourself familiar with unknown words or phrases.
3. Read or scribe without interpretation. Do not provide additional information by paraphrasing, summarizing, defining, translating, or interpreting any words, unless your regular duties also involve explaining documents or proceedings to individuals doing court business.
4. Read all information as clearly as possible. Give special emphasis to words in italics or bold text. Clarify when information is from a title or header, if necessary.
5. ***Pacing.*** Adjust your reading speed and volume if requested by the individual you are assisting. When scribing, you may ask the individual to slow the pace of dictation if you are unable to keep up. You may also ask the person dictating to spell names, etc. as needed. Allow the person dictating to pause as needed.

6. If, when reading, you encounter an unfamiliar word that you are not sure how to pronounce, (or spell, when scribing), advise the individual of your uncertainty about the word. If reading, spell the word out loud.
7. ***Homonyms.*** When reading a word that is pronounced like another word with a different spelling, if there can be any doubt about which word is intended, spell the word after you have pronounced it. Similarly, if you are not sure which version of a homonym the person dictating intends, ask them to spell or clarify which they mean.
8. ***Misspelled Words.*** If a word you are reading is misspelled, pronounce it as you believe it is intended. Note the misspelling and spell the word as written in the document.
9. ***If the Person Has Questions.*** Avoid engaging in conversation with the individual you are assisting about the content of what you are reading or scribing, unless your regular employment with the court includes providing such assistance. Respond to the individual's questions by repeating what you have read, or any instructions for example, on a form.
10. ***Punctuation.*** Read documents as punctuated (pause at periods; use the proper tone to indicate a question) so that the individual can grasp the content of the document. Do not verbalize punctuation marks other than ellipses and quotation marks.
 - a. *For Ellipses:* When used to signify missing text, pause briefly, and read as “dot, dot, dot.”
 - b. *For Quotations:* Verbalize them as “quote” and “end quote.”

When scribing, request clarification from the individual about the use of capitalization, punctuations, and spelling, when in doubt.

11. ***Images.*** If there are images that are necessary to the document's understanding when reading, the reader may provide a neutral description:
 - a. Do not describe logos or imprints unless they are necessary to the meaning of the document.
 - b. Read the title or caption of the image, if available.
 - c. Read any text that appears in the body of the image.
 - d. Describe the image or graphic as concisely as possible following a logical progression.
12. ***Forms.*** If scribing a court form, provide an overall description of the document, noting the form title and number, and reviewing any instructions included on the document.
 - a. Read each “sentence” of the form, or each section, completely, noting any fields to be completed. Then go back and ask the individual what they would like you to write in each of the fields in that sentence or section.

- b. Once you have completed the sentence or the section, read the sentence or section in its entirety to confirm that it conveys what the person intends.
 - c. Repeat for each sentence or section.
13. ***Scribing Review.*** When you have scribed information for an individual, be prepared to read back the information scribed to confirm it reflects their intention.
14. ***Signing of Documents or Forms.*** Never sign a document on an individual's behalf unless he or she directs you to do so. If directed to sign on an individual's behalf, write the individual's name as directed and then write "by" and your own name. If the individual's signature is not legible, ask if you can also print their name beside it if needed. If the signature constitutes an affirmation, attestation, or grant of consent, be sure to read the text accompanying the signature field carefully, repeating as often as asked, so that the individual is fully aware of the consequences or ramifications of signing before they sign the document or you sign it on their behalf.

For more information about these Guidelines, contact:

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