

# Court Interpretation

## What kinds of skills does it take to be a good court interpreter?

In addition to total fluency in both English and the foreign language, a court interpreter should have excellent public speaking and interpersonal skills. Sometimes the testimony to be interpreted is shocking or traumatic, and the interpreter must be able to deal with such matters without becoming emotionally involved. The interpreter must also be able to refrain from expressing personal opinions or acting as an advocate for one side or the other in a court case and must be able to work unobtrusively. The interpreter must be able to work well under pressure and react quickly to solve complex linguistic and ethical problems as they arise. On the other hand, when a problem cannot be solved by the interpreter alone, the interpreter must demonstrate the good judgment required to inform the court of that fact and take whatever steps are necessary to resolve the situation. And finally, good court interpreters constantly strive to improve their skills by reading from a wide variety of sources, attending conferences, researching new terms and concepts, and honing their interpreting techniques.

## Qualifications For Court Interpreting

### What qualifications should you have before attempting to become a certified court interpreter in federal or state courts?

Professional court interpreters are individuals who:

- possess educated, native-like mastery of *both* English and a second language;
- display wide general knowledge characteristic of what a minimum of two years of general education at a college or university would provide; and
- perform the three major types of court interpreting:
  1. Sight interpreting
  2. Consecutive interpreting, and
  3. Simultaneous interpreting.

Thus, proficiency in applied interpreting skills involves the two-fold elements of 1) a high level of mastery of two languages and 2) specific performance skills in the modes of interpreting. Court interpreters must perform each type of interpreting skillfully enough to include everything that is said, preserve the tone and level of language of the speaker, and neither change nor add anything to what is said. Interpreters must deliver services in a manner faithful to all canons of a Code of Professional Responsibility and court policies regarding court interpreting promulgated by the judiciary.

Mastery of a language at the levels required for court interpreting requires reading and speaking the languages regularly in a wide variety of language contexts and, usually, years of formal education. Acquiring the specific performance skills presupposes some element of innate ability and **practice, practice, practice!**

Following are some questions to ask yourself to help you decide if you are ready to take a court interpreting certification exam.

### A FEW Self-Assessment Questions Related to Court Interpreting

1. Do you have experience interpreting simultaneously in court or conference settings?  
 Yes  
 No
  
2. Have you ever recorded yourself while simultaneously interpreting and compared your performance to a transcription of what was originally said?  
 Yes  
 No
  
3. If your answer to 2 was “yes,” how successful were you?
  - a)  I could not keep up.
  - b)  I could keep up most of the time.
  - c)  I omitted very little of the original information.
  - d)  I rendered the complete meaning of what was said with very few exceptions.
  
4. When watching the nightly news on television, I can simultaneously render the newscaster’s speech into my specialty non-English language without falling behind.
  - a)  always
  - b)  most of the time
  - c)  often
  - d)  rarely
  - e)  never
  
5. If someone reads a passage to me that is descriptive (what something looks like or something that happened), I can remember and repeat back what I hear word-for word:
  - a)  I have never tried this, and have no idea
  - b)  Only if the passage is less than 20 words in length
  - c)  Usually, even if the passage is as many as 30 to 40 words long
  - d)  Usually, even when the passage is more than 40 words long.

### KEY:

**Question 1:** If your answer was “no,” then you are very likely **not** ready for this exam.

**Question 2:** If your answer was “no,” you probably are **not** ready for this exam.

**Question 3:** If your answer was **c** or **d**, then you are a **good** candidate for the exam. If you answered **b**, ask yourself whether you might have accurately rendered as much as 80 percent of the source language. If you think “yes,” then you might pass the exam.

**Question 4:** You should be able to answer **a** or **b**. You are **not** ready if you answered **d** or **e**.

**Question 5:** You should be able to answer **c** or **d**. If you answer **d** with confidence, you have the required short-term memory ability necessary for consecutive interpretation. If your bilingual language skills are very good, as described above, then you are a good candidate to pass this part of the exam.

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