
General Strategies for Taking the Court Interpreter Oral Exam Judicial Council of California Administrative Office of the Courts

Long-term test preparation

Preparing can help you pass your exam and possibly save time and money needed to take it again.

- Interpreters often take public speaking courses and/or engage in dramatic or theatrical endeavors to gain confidence in speaking before an audience.
- Coursework in languages and interpreting techniques is highly recommended. A person with college-level language skills in both languages is advised to attend interpreting courses offered by qualified providers. Some educational institutions provide training on the different techniques (e.g., shadowing, décalage) that will develop and strengthen a student's ability to perform all modes of interpreting. Such institutions are best suited to monitor your interpretations and thereby ensure that you are meeting established criteria for the interpreting venue you have chosen. The schools also help you to acquire the specialized terminology successful interpreters need.
- Immerse yourself in the culture of both languages until you are thoroughly comfortable with the idioms and colloquialisms of each. Your goal should be to transition easily between languages.
- Watch television programs and listen to radio broadcasts taped in both languages.
- Practice consecutive and simultaneous interpretation with tapes designed exclusively for this purpose and during television programs featuring trials and news broadcasts or news commentary radio programs. Tapes from court reporting schools may also be used to practice simultaneous interpretation.
- Practice falling behind a certain number of words in order to avoid false starts and changes of meaning. Most people need to practice for hundreds of hours before they are able to perform this skill competently. Interpreting schools are best suited to help you develop the necessary skills.
- Meet and talk with state certified court interpreters to learn more about their work and the skills required to be a court interpreter. Ask them to recommend study material.
- Contact the interpreter coordinator at your local court. Ask to observe interpreters on the job and learn about courtroom protocol.
- Visit and observe interpreters on the job where possible. Find out which courts are open to the public and practice interpreting the proceedings.
- Tape record or videotape your renditions to evaluate your performance for accuracy, clarity and coherence and to build confidence.

- Learn to judge how much time has elapsed as you translate to pace yourself so that you do not rush through your rendition.
- The simultaneous portion of the exam requires practice, practice and more practice. Listen to taped recordings using headphones and practice interpreting. This will enable you to determine the best volume level for the recorded script and for your own voice.
- In a court setting, interpreters are expected to handle a large number of dates, numerical figures and dollar amounts. Interpreters must be able to record numbers and read them back accurately.
- Strengthen your retention skills by developing a note-taking system. The court interpreter exam requires the interpreter to retain up to 40 words at a time. Note-taking should enhance your recall abilities, but not interfere with your ability to interpret without lengthy pauses. Note taking is an aid to the interpreter when it is second nature. It is very hard to improvise abbreviations and symbols on the spur of the moment.

Exam day preparation

There are three components to the oral exam:

- **Consecutive Interpretation** A role-play exercise with a judge, an attorney and a foreign-language-speaking witness.
- **Site Translation.** You will be asked to translate a document from English to a foreign language.
- **Simultaneous Interpretation.** This part of the examination is designed to test your ability to interpret accurately in the simultaneous mode. The text is recorded in English at approximately 140 words per minute.

Your attitude about the test process can make a difference. Approach the test confidently. Be sure to get plenty of rest the night before the exam.

Other important items to note:

- Remember to bring a valid, government-issued photo identification card, such as a driver's license, state issued identification card, passport, or military identification card with you to the testing center.
- Under no circumstances will you be permitted to bring items with you into the test room. This includes cell phones, briefcases, backpacks, etc. Pocket items (keys and wallet) must remain in your pocket during testing. Do not bring dictionaries, books, notes, reference materials or any other aids to the exam site, as you will not be allowed to use them.
- Note-taking is allowed during the exam, so you may want to bring a tablet and pencil with you.
- Warm up prior to taking the test by practicing interpreting aloud for a brief period of time.



Important Failure to provide appropriate photo identification is considered a missed appointment. If you miss an appointment, you forfeit your fees.

Taking the exam

Please arrive at the test site early to allow for parking, walking to the room and signing in. Be sure to listen very carefully to all instructions that are read to you by the proctor. Ask questions if you do not understand the instructions.

When interpreting, remember that accuracy is your key to success. You should not add or delete material nor should you paraphrase or summarize. The following general strategies may be helpful to keep in mind while taking the oral exam.

Consecutive interpretation

- You will be required to retain up to 40 words at a time.
- Always be ready with pencil and paper in hand.
- Take notes on noncontextual information such as names, dates, numbers and times.
- Try to see in your mind the events that are unfolding through the script. Imagine that you are a participant in the dialog. (Interpreters generally perform better on the consecutive translation if they become immersed in the situation at hand.)
- Stay focused – concentrate; it is imperative that you not let your mind wander.
- Speak clearly and audibly; people requiring the services of an interpreter need and deserve clarity.
- Ask for a repetition if you are concerned you may make an error. It is better to ask for a repetition than to be inaccurate. You are permitted six repetitions before performance will be affected.

Site translation

- Take advantage of the time you are allowed to read the passage. First, scan the entire passage for meaning. Concentrate on what the passage says, and then concentrate on finding the closest equivalent in the target language.
- In the initial reading, write down any terminology that you are unable to translate easily at first sight. If you cannot think of the exact equivalent in the target language, explain the term; if you cannot explain the term, read it in the target language and continue. Do not take up a great portion of your allotted time trying to think of a word that, for the moment, escapes you.
- During the initial reading, identify and anticipate areas where syntax may be a problem such as passive voice, use of the subjunctive, and number and sequence of qualifiers/adjectives (e.g., the two red, Italian, convertible sports cars).
- Read carefully; it is unacceptable for an interpreter to make mistakes on items such as dates, numbers and names.
- Documents used in the exam are taken directly from authentic sources and include specialized terminology. It is incumbent upon you to convey the meaning accurately.
- Pace yourself so that you do not rush through your rendition or run out of time.

Simultaneous interpretation

- Determine the best volume level for the recorded script and for your own voice.
- Remember to fall behind a certain number of words in order to avoid false starts and changes of meaning.
- Keep focused; you may find it helps to sit up straight and keep objects that distract you out of reach to avoid having your mind wander.
- Be aware of intonation in your target language delivery (e.g., ensure that questions are rendered as questions and statements are rendered as statements).
- Keep up with the source material and be sure to render the information accurately.
- If you miss a word either because you have fallen behind or do not know the word, choose a strategy that enables you to recover as quickly as possible.
- If you make a mistake, correct it as soon as possible and move on quickly to avoid the risk of future errors or omissions.