
Interpreters and Translators

Significant Points

- About 26 percent of interpreters and translators are self-employed; many freelance and work in this occupation only sporadically.
- In addition to needing fluency in at least two languages, many interpreters and translators need a bachelor's degree.
- Employment is expected to grow much faster than average.
- Job prospects vary by specialty and language.

Nature of the Work

Interpreters and translators facilitate the cross-cultural communication necessary in today's society by converting one language into another. However, these language specialists do more than simply translate words—they relay concepts and ideas between languages. They must thoroughly understand the subject matter in which they work in order to accurately convey information from one language into another. In addition, they must be sensitive to the cultures associated with their languages of expertise.

Although some people do both, interpreting and translation are different professions. Interpreters deal with spoken words, translators with written words. Each task requires a distinct set of skills and aptitudes, and most people are better suited for one or the other. While interpreters often interpret into and from both languages, translators generally translate only into their native language.

Interpreters convert one spoken language into another—or, in the case of sign-language interpreters, between spoken communication and sign language. Interpreting requires that one pay attention carefully, understand what is communicated in both languages, and express thoughts and ideas clearly. Strong research and analytical skills, mental dexterity, and an exceptional memory also are important.

There are two modes of interpreting: simultaneous, and consecutive. Simultaneous interpreting requires interpreters to listen and speak (or sign) at the same time someone is speaking or signing. Ideally, simultaneous interpreters should be so familiar with a subject that they are able to anticipate the end of the speaker's sentence. Because they need a high degree of concentration, simultaneous interpreters work in pairs, with each interpreting for 20-minute to 30-minute periods. This type of interpreting is required at international conferences and is sometimes used in the courts.

In contrast to the immediacy of simultaneous interpreting, consecutive interpreting begins only after the speaker has verbalized a group of words or sentences. Consecutive interpreters often take notes while listening to the speakers, so they must develop some type of note-taking or shorthand system. This form of interpreting is used most often for person-to-person communication, during which the interpreter is positioned near both parties.

Translators convert written materials from one language into another. They must have excellent writing and analytical ability, and because the translations that they produce must be accurate, they also need good editing skills.

Translating involves more than replacing a word with its equivalent in another language; sentences and ideas must be manipulated to flow with the same coherence as those in the source document so that the translation reads as though it originated in the target language. Translators also must bear in mind any cultural references that may need to be explained to the intended audience, such as colloquialisms, slang, and other expressions that do not translate literally. Some subjects may be more difficult than others to translate because words or passages may have multiple meanings that make several translations possible. Not surprisingly, translated work often goes through multiple revisions before final text is submitted.

Nearly all translation work is done on a computer, and most assignments are received and submitted electronically. This enables translators to work from almost anywhere, and a large percentage of them work from home. The Internet provides advanced research capabilities and valuable language resources, such as specialized dictionaries and glossaries. In some cases, use of computer-assisted translation—including memory tools that provide comparisons of previous translations with current work—helps save time and reduce repetition.

The services of interpreters and translators are needed in a number of subject areas. While these workers may not completely specialize in a particular field or industry, many do focus on one area of expertise. Some of the most common areas are described below; however, interpreters and translators may work in a variety of other areas also, including business, education, social services, and entertainment.

Judiciary interpreters and translators facilitate communication for people with limited English proficiency who find it challenging to communicate in a legal setting. Legal translators must be thoroughly familiar with the language and functions of the U.S. judicial system, as well as other countries' legal systems. Court interpreters work in a variety of legal settings, such as attorney-client meetings, preliminary hearings, arraignments, depositions, and trials. Success as a court interpreter requires an understanding of both legal terminology and collo-



Interpreters and translators must have a thorough understanding of various languages.

Projections data from the National Employment Matrix

Occupational Title	SOC Code	Employment, 2008	Projected Employment, 2018	Change, 2008-2018	
				Number	Percent
Interpreters and translators.....	27-3091	50,900	62,200	11,300	22

(NOTE) Data in this table are rounded. See the discussion of the employment projections table in the *Handbook* introductory chapter on *Occupational Information Included in the Handbook*.

quial language. In addition to interpreting what is said, court interpreters also may be required to read written documents aloud in a language other than that in which they were written, a task known as sight translation.

Medical interpreters and translator, sometimes referred to as *healthcare interpreters and translators*, provide language services to healthcare patients with limited English proficiency. Medical interpreters help patients to communicate with doctors, nurses, and other medical staff. Translators working in this specialty primarily convert patient materials and informational brochures issued by hospitals and medical facilities into the desired language. Interpreters in this field need a strong grasp of medical and colloquial terminology in both languages, along with cultural sensitivity to help the patient receive the information.

Sign-language interpreters facilitate communication between people who are deaf or hard of hearing and people who can hear. Sign-language interpreters must be fluent in English and in American Sign Language (ASL), which combines signing, finger spelling, and specific body language. Most sign-language interpreters either interpret, aiding communication between English and ASL, or transliterate, facilitating communication between English and contact signing—a form of signing that uses a more English language-based word order. Some interpreters specialize in oral interpreting for people who are deaf or hard of hearing and lip-read instead of sign. Other specialties include tactile signing, which is interpreting for people who are blind as well as deaf by making manual signs into their hands, using cued speech, and signing exact English.

Conference interpreters work at conferences that have non-English-speaking attendees. The work is often in the field of international business or diplomacy, although conference interpreters can interpret for any organization that works with speakers of foreign languages. Employers prefer high-level interpreters who have the ability to translate from at least two languages into one native language—for example, the ability to interpret from Spanish and French into English. For some positions, such as those with the United Nations, this qualification is mandatory.

Guide or escort interpreters accompany either U.S. visitors abroad or foreign visitors in the United States to ensure that they are able to communicate during their stay. These specialists interpret on a variety of subjects, both on an informal basis and on a professional level. Most of their interpreting is consecutive, and work is generally shared by two interpreters when the assignment requires more than an 8-hour day. Frequent travel, often for days or weeks at a time, is common, and it is an aspect of the job that some find particularly appealing.

Literary translators adapt written literature from one language into another. They may translate any number of documents, including journal articles, books, poetry, and short stories. Liter-

ary translation is related to creative writing; literary translators must create a new text in the target language that reproduces the content and style of the original. Whenever possible, literary translators work closely with authors to best capture their intended meanings and literary characteristics.

Localization translators completely adapt a product or service for use in a different language and culture. The goal of these specialists is to make it appear as though a product originated in the country where it will be sold and supported. At its earlier stages, this work dealt primarily with software localization, but the specialty has expanded to include the adaptation of Internet sites, marketing, publications, and products and services in manufacturing and other business sectors.

Work environment. Interpreters work in a wide variety of settings, such as schools, hospitals, courtrooms, and conference centers. Translators usually work alone, and they must frequently perform under pressure of deadlines and tight schedules. Technology allows translators to work from almost anywhere, and many choose to work from home.

Because many interpreters and translators freelance, their schedules often vary, with periods of limited work interspersed with periods requiring long, irregular hours. For those who freelance, a significant amount of time must be dedicated to looking for jobs. Interpreters who work over the telephone or through videoconferencing generally work in call centers in urban areas and keep to a standard 5-day, 40-hour workweek.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

Interpreters and translators must be fluent in at least two languages. Their educational backgrounds may vary widely, but many need a bachelor's degree. Many also complete job-specific training programs.

Education and training. The educational backgrounds of interpreters and translators vary. Knowing at least two languages is essential. Although it is not necessary to have been raised bilingual to succeed, many interpreters and translators grew up speaking two languages.

In high school, students can prepare for these careers by taking a broad range of courses that include English writing and comprehension, foreign languages, and basic computer proficiency. Other helpful pursuits include spending time abroad, engaging in direct contact with foreign cultures, and reading extensively on a variety of subjects in English and at least one other language.

Beyond high school, there are many educational options. Although a bachelor's degree is often required for jobs, majoring in a language is not always necessary. An educational background in a particular field of study can provide a natural area of subject-matter expertise. However, specialized training in how to do the work is generally required. Formal programs in interpreting and translation are available at colleges nationwide

and through nonuniversity training programs, conferences, and courses. Many people who work as conference interpreters or in more technical areas—such as localization, engineering, or finance—have master’s degrees, while those working in the community as court or medical interpreters or translators are more likely to complete job-specific training programs.

Other qualifications. Experience is an essential part of a successful career in either interpreting or translation. In fact, many agencies or companies use only the services of people who have worked in the field for 3 to 5 years or who have a degree in translation studies, or both.

A good way for translators to learn firsthand about the profession is to start out working in-house for a translation company; however, such jobs are not very numerous. People seeking to enter interpreter or translator jobs should begin by getting experience whatever way possible—even if it means doing informal or volunteer work.

Volunteer opportunities are available through community organizations, hospitals, and sporting events, such as marathons, that involve international competitors. The American Translators Association works with the Red Cross to provide volunteer interpreters in crisis situations. Any translation can be used as an example for potential clients, even translation done as practice.

Paid or unpaid internships and apprenticeships are other ways for interpreters and translators to get started. Escort interpreting may offer an opportunity for inexperienced candidates to work alongside a more seasoned interpreter. Interpreters might also find it easier to break into areas with particularly high demand for language services, such as court or medical interpreting.

Whatever path of entry they pursue, new interpreters and translators should establish mentoring relationships to build their skills, confidence, and professional network. Mentoring may be formal, such as through a professional association, or informal with a coworker or an acquaintance who has experience as an interpreter or translator. Both the American Translators Association and the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf offer formal mentoring programs.

Translators working in localization need a solid grasp of the languages to be translated, a thorough understanding of technical concepts and vocabulary, and a high degree of knowledge about the intended target audience or users of the product. Because software often is involved, it is not uncommon for people who work in this area of translation to have a strong background in computer science or to have computer-related work experience.

Self-employed and freelance interpreters and translators need general business skills to successfully manage their finances and careers. They must set prices for their work, bill customers, keep financial records, and market their services to attract new business and build their client base.

Certification and advancement. There is currently no universal form of certification required of interpreters and translators in the United States. However there are a variety of different tests that workers can take to demonstrate proficiency, which may be helpful in gaining employment. For example, the American Translators Association provides certification in 24 language combinations involving English for its members.

Federal courts have certification for Spanish, Navajo, and Haitian Creole interpreters, and many State and municipal courts offer their own forms of certification. The National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators also offers certification for court interpreting.

The U.S. Department of State has a three-test series for prospective interpreters—one test in simple consecutive interpreting (for escort work), another in simultaneous interpreting (for court or seminar work), and a third in conference-level interpreting (for international conferences)—as well as a test for prospective translators. These tests are not considered a credential, but successful completion indicates that a person has a significant level of skill in the field. Additionally, the International Association of Conference Interpreters offers certification for conference interpreters

The National Association of the Deaf and the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) jointly offer certification for general sign interpreters. In addition, the registry offers specialty tests in legal interpreting, speech reading, and deaf-to-deaf interpreting—which includes interpreting among deaf speakers with different native languages and from ASL to tactile signing.

Once interpreters and translators have gained sufficient experience, they may then move up to more difficult or prestigious assignments, may seek certification, may be given editorial responsibility, or may eventually manage or start a translation agency.

Many self-employed interpreters and translators start businesses by submitting resumes and samples to many different translation and interpreting agencies and then wait to be contacted when an agency matches their skills with a job. Work is often acquired by word of mouth or through referrals from existing clients.

Employment

Interpreters and translators held about 50,900 jobs in 2008. However, the actual number of interpreters and translators is probably significantly higher because many work in the occupation only sporadically. Interpreters and translators are employed in a variety of industries, reflecting the diversity of employment options in the field. About 28 percent worked in public and private educational institutions, such as schools, colleges, and universities. About 13 percent worked in health care and social assistance, many of whom worked for hospitals. Another 9 percent worked in other areas of government, such as Federal, State, and local courts. Other employers of interpreters and translators include interpreting and translation agencies, publishing companies, telephone companies, and airlines.

About 26 percent of interpreters and translators are self-employed. Many who freelance in the occupation work only part time, relying on other sources of income to supplement earnings from interpreting or translation.

Job Outlook

Interpreters and translators can expect much faster than average employment growth. Job prospects vary by specialty and language.

Employment change. Employment of interpreters and translators is projected to increase 22 percent over the 2008–18 decade, which is much faster than the average for all occupa-

tions. Higher demand for interpreters and translators results directly from the broadening of international ties and the large increases in the number of non-English speaking people in the United States. Both of these trends are expected to continue throughout the projections period, contributing to relatively rapid growth in the number of jobs for interpreters and translators across all industries in the economy.

Demand will remain strong for translators of frequently translated languages, such as Portuguese, French, Italian, German, and Spanish. Demand should also be strong for translators of Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages and for the principal East Asian languages—Chinese, Japanese, and Korean. Demand for American Sign Language interpreters will grow rapidly, driven by the increasing use of video relay services, which allow individuals to conduct video calls using a sign language interpreter over an Internet connection.

Technology has made the work of interpreters and translators easier. However, technology is not likely to have a negative impact on employment of interpreters and translators because such innovations are incapable of producing work comparable with work produced by these professionals.

Job prospects. Urban areas, especially Washington, DC, New York, and cities in California, provide the largest numbers of employment possibilities, especially for interpreters; however, as the immigrant population spreads into more rural areas, jobs in smaller communities will become more widely available.

Job prospects for interpreters and translators vary by specialty and language. For example, interpreters and translators of Spanish should have good job opportunities because of expected increases in the Hispanic population in the United States. Demand is expected to be strong for interpreters and translators specializing in healthcare and law because it is critical that information be fully understood among all parties in these areas. Additionally, there should be demand for specialists in localization, driven by the globalization of business and the expansion of the Internet; however, demand may be dampened somewhat by outsourcing of localization work to other countries. Given the shortage of interpreters and translators meeting the desired skill level of employers, interpreters for the deaf will continue to have favorable employment prospects. On the other hand, competition can be expected for both conference interpreter and literary translator positions because of the small number of job opportunities in these specialties.

Earnings

Wage and salary interpreters and translators had median hourly wages of \$38,850 in May 2008. The middle 50 percent earned between \$28,940 and \$52,240. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$22,170, and the highest 10 percent earned more than \$69,190. Individuals classified as language specialists in the Federal Government earned an average of \$79,865 annually in March 2009.

Earnings depend on language, subject matter, skill, experience, education, certification, and type of employer, and salaries of interpreters and translators can vary widely. Interpreters and translators who know languages for which there is a greater demand, or which relatively few people can translate, often

have higher earnings, as do those who perform services requiring a high level of skill, such as conference interpreters.

For those who are not salaried, earnings typically fluctuate, depending on the availability of work. Freelance interpreters usually earn an hourly rate, whereas translators who freelance typically earn a rate per word or per hour.

Related Occupations

Interpreters and translators use their multilingual skills, as do teachers of languages. These include:

Teachers—adult literacy and remedial education

Teachers—kindergarten, elementary, middle, and secondary

Teachers—postsecondary

Teachers—self-enrichment education

Teachers—special education

Translators prepare texts for publication or dissemination; other workers involved in this process include:

Authors, writers, and editors

Interpreters or translators working in a legal or healthcare environment are required to have a knowledge of terms and concepts that is similar to that of other workers in these fields, such as:

Court reporters

Medical transcriptionists

Sources of Additional Information

Organizations dedicated to these professions can provide valuable advice and guidance to people interested in learning more about interpreting and translation. The language services division of local hospitals or courthouses also may have information about available opportunities.

For general career information, contact:

► American Translators Association, 225 Reinekers Ln., Suite 590, Alexandria, VA 22314. Internet: <http://www.atanet.org>

For more detailed information by specialty, contact the association affiliated with the subject area in question. See, for example, the following:

► American Literary Translators Association, University of Texas at Dallas, 800 W. Campbell Rd., Mail Station JO51, Richardson, TX 75080-3021. Internet: <http://www.utdallas.edu/alta>

► International Medical Interpreters Association, 800

Washington Street, Box 271, Boston, MA 02111-1845. Internet: <http://www.imiaweb.org>

► Localization Industry Standards Association, Domaine en Prael, CH-1323 Romainmôtier, Switzerland. Internet: <http://www.lisa.org>

► National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators, 1707 L St. NW., Suite 570, Washington, DC 20036. Internet: <http://www.najit.org>

► National Council on Interpreting in Health Care, 5505 Connecticut Ave. NW., Suite 119, Washington, DC 20015. Internet: <http://www.ncihc.org>

► Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 333 Commerce St., Alexandria, VA 22314. Internet: <http://www.rid.org>

For information about testing to become a contract interpreter or translator with the U.S. State Department, contact:

► U.S. Department of State, Office of Language Services, 2401 E St. NW., SA-1, Room H1400, Washington, DC 20522. Internet: <http://languageservices.state.gov>

Information on obtaining a position as an interpreter and translator with the Federal Government is available from the Office of Personnel Management through USAJOBS, the Federal Government's official employment information system. This resource for locating and applying for job opportunities can be accessed through the Internet at <http://www.usajobs.opm.gov> or through an interactive voice response telephone system at (703) 724-1850 or TDD (978) 461-8404. These numbers are not toll free, and charges may result. For advice on how to find and apply for Federal jobs, see the *Occupational Outlook Quarterly* article "How to get a job in the Federal Government," online at <http://www.bls.gov/opub/ooq/2004/summer/art01.pdf>.

The Occupational Information Network (O*NET) provides information on a wide range of occupational characteristics. Links to O*NET appear at the end of the Internet version of this occupational statement, accessible at <http://www.bls.gov/ooh/ocos175.htm>