

Interpreter and Translator

Snapshot

Career Cluster(s): Business, Management & Administration, Hospitality & Tourism

Interests: Languages, foreign cultures, writing, working with people, communicating with others

Earnings (Yearly Average): \$46,120

Employment & Outlook: Much faster than average growth expected

OVERVIEW

Sphere of Work

Interpreters and translators facilitate communication between people who speak different languages or hearing and deaf people. While the terms are commonly thought to be interchangeable, translators and interpreters work in different media. A translator translates written materials, usually into his or her native language, while an interpreter translates oral communication and may switch between languages. Many professionals in the field work as both translators and interpreters. Among the most



popular languages being translated into English today are Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, and American Sign Language (ASL).

Work Environment

Translators often work by themselves at home, where they receive assignments via the Internet or mail. Interpreters work in a variety of settings, such as hospitals, courtrooms, schools, airports, and government offices. Interpreters and translators may work alone with just their clients or with partners or might work in an office environment surrounded by other professionals. In some cases, a translator or interpreter might work the night shift or odd hours, especially when communicating with people who live and work in other time zones. Globalization has dramatically increased the demand for interpreters willing to live and work overseas assisting in meetings and negotiations for governmental and corporate clients operating in foreign nations.

Profile

Interests: Data, People

Working Conditions: Work Inside

Physical Strength: Light Work

Education Needs: Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree

Licensure/Certification: Recommended

Physical Abilities Not Require: Not Climb, Not Kneel

Opportunities For Experience: Military Service, Volunteer Work

Holland Interest Score*: ESA, ISC, SCE

* See Appendix A

Occupation Interest

Interpreting and translating attract those who are linguistically gifted and enjoy foreign cultures. Individuals who enjoy working alone and are proficient in reading and writing might choose translation, while individuals who enjoy being around people and engaging in social activities might be more drawn to work as interpreters. Translators are often expected to manage deadlines while interpreters comply with variable

schedules and may need to be “on-call” and willing to work irregular hours. In either case, the work demands strong cognitive skills and a sharp memory. Sign language interpreters also need excellent hand dexterity.

A Day in the Life—Duties and Responsibilities

A translator spends most of his or her day translating documents at a computer. A job might be as simple as a few paragraphs in a blog, to a book or transcript hundreds of pages long. The translator takes time to reflect on what he or she reads and then tries to communicate the message with as much of its natural rhythm and nuances intact as possible. Such work requires full knowledge of each language, including slang, subject-specific jargon, and colloquialisms and so translators also need to have specialized knowledge of the native culture of the languages with which they work. Translators spend much of their time using specialized reference materials to ensure that their punctuation and grammar is correct.

Interpreters work closely with their clients, in person or via phone, videophone, or microphone. Simultaneous interpreting involves listening to a speaker and translating orally, or signing, at the same time that the speaker is speaking, while consecutive interpreting involves listening to a speaker complete a few words or a sentence and then translating it orally during a break in conversation or speech. Depending on the speaker's pace, the interpreter might have time to consider various interpretations of a word or phrase while, in other situations, the interpreter will need to work quickly to stay apace with the speaker.

Interpreters at United Nations conventions or other types of conferences often sit in the audience and whisper their translations into a microphone. Sign language interpreters sometimes use videophones and a computer to communicate with the deaf. Self-employed translators and interpreters might also spend part of the day keeping up with marketing, billing, and other administrative tasks to promote their services and might also spend time networking to find new clients.

Duties and Responsibilities

- **Listening through earphones to what is being said**
- **Taking notes on what is being said**
- **Translating orally, possibly using a microphone**
- **Preparing written translations**
- **Editing translations for correctness of grammar and punctuation**
- **Reviewing finished translations for accuracy and completeness**
- **Reading a document in one language and then rewriting it into another following rules of grammar and punctuation**

OCCUPATION SPECIALTIES

Deaf Interpreters

Deaf Interpreters translate spoken material into sign language for the understanding of those individuals who are deaf. They also interpret sign language of the deaf into oral or written language for hearing individuals.

WORK ENVIRONMENT

Immediate Physical Environment

Interpreters tend to work in diverse interior and exterior environmental conditions, including potentially dangerous or unhealthy job sites. Interpreters often travel and there are many opportunities for interpreters willing to live and work overseas for

extended periods. Translators, on the other hand, work in offices with less variable conditions or may work out of their home. While much of a translator's work can be done via long distances, companies or agencies operating in foreign countries might hire on-site translators or might prefer a professional who can function as both a translator and interpreter.

Transferable Skills and Abilities

Communication Skills

- Expressing thoughts and ideas
- Speaking effectively
- Writing concisely

Interpersonal/Social Skills

- Cooperating with others
- Working as a member of a team

Organization & Management Skills

- Making decisions

Research & Planning Skills

- Creating ideas
- Developing evaluation strategies
- Using logical reasoning

Human Environment

Unless self-employed, translators and interpreters report to supervisors or directors and usually interact with various office staff and professionals. Interpreters interact directly with their clients and are also frequently involved in social, public environments while completing their work.

Technological Environment

Translators may utilize digital tools, including automated

translation software, to complete their work and some use transcription machines to increase the speed of their translations. Interpreters might need to utilize digital software, including translation software, and mobile devices to communicate with clients and to quickly find information to enhance a interpretation. In many cases, interpreters learn to use microphones and listening devices to listen to conversation and deliver interpretations to an audience. Some sign language interpreters use a videophone along with a video relay service (VRS) or video interpreting service.

EDUCATION, TRAINING, AND ADVANCEMENT

High School/Secondary

Achieving proficiency in a foreign language takes many years. A college-preparatory program with four years of at least one foreign language, along with courses in English, speech, and the social sciences (political science, anthropology, and world cultures), will provide the best foundation for a career in interpretation or translation. Those students interested in translating technical material should consider additional courses in favored technical fields, such as science, technology, business, or law. Foreign exchange programs and travel, volunteer work with ethnic organizations, and other independent educational experiences can prove invaluable to those seeking future work as translators or interpreters and there are many study abroad and volunteer programs aimed at individuals seeking to improve fluency in a language or to add cultural knowledge to their linguistic training.

Suggested High School Subjects

- College Preparatory
- Composition
- English
- Foreign Languages
- Literature
- Speech

Related Career Pathways/Majors

Business, Management & Administration Cluster

- Human Resources Pathway

Hospitality & Tourism Cluster

- Travel & Tourism Pathway

Postsecondary

While a bachelor's degree is the minimum requirement for most jobs, the selection of a major is a personal decision based on the type of work desired. Students might consider double majoring in a

foreign language and in another subject, such as computer science, English literature, engineering, nursing, or pre-law, or in two foreign languages, such as Spanish and French. Some translators and interpreters need an advanced degree to translate subject-specific concepts and vocabulary and many companies hiring interpreters/translators, prefer professionals with some level of education in a specific field other than languages. Study abroad programs, foreign travel, and participation in international clubs are some ways to gain important hands-on experience for postsecondary students.

Related College Majors

- Communication Disorders, General
- Foreign Languages Teacher Education
- Linguistics
- Sign Language Interpretation

Adult Job Seekers

Bilingual adults should be able to transition well into an interpreting or translating career, especially with relevant experience. For example, a bilingual nurse would have an advantage translating or interpreting in a medical setting and might therefore be eligible for hospital or medical-center-based interpreter positions. Continuing education courses can refresh or teach new skills and might help a bilingual individual to qualify for translation/interpretation jobs in specific fields. For instance, an individual trained in English and Spanish might attend continuing education classes in pre-law to qualify for work with bilingual law-firms or legal aid organizations. Prospective interpreters and translators should expect to be tested in their language abilities as a prerequisite for employment.

Advancement is highly dependent on experience and those with significant work experience can advance within a company or can use their experience to attract higher-paying clientele. Advancement opportunities might include better work hours, higher pay, or more interesting assignments. Those with experience may also consider moving into editorial positions or starting their own translation companies.

Professional Certification and Licensure

In the United States, interpreters and translators are not required to obtain professional licenses or certifications, though available certification programs may provide an advantage when seeking employment. Professional associations, such as the American Translators Association and the International Association of Conference Interpreters, offer certification programs in a variety of sub-specializations and such certification programs can provide useful experience and qualifications for professionals in the field. To obtain certification, translators and interpreters typically must pass a written test and to perform work under the guidance of specialist educators.



Additional Requirements

Interpreters and translators who wish to work for government agencies must pass a civil service exam while freelancers need good business skills as well as experience in the field. Interpreters and translators should consider membership in professional associations, which often provide opportunities for networking and professional development. Work experience or certification is required for membership in some organizations. For those looking to work as translators or interpreters overseas, interest in travel and exploring foreign cultures is important and translators/interpreters who succeed in the field often spend time developing detailed knowledge of foreign customs and culture.

EARNINGS AND ADVANCEMENT

Earnings of interpreters and translators depend on the type of work done and the language spoken, as well as the education, experience, and skill of the individual. Median annual earnings of interpreters and translators were \$46,120 in 2016, with those at the lowest ten percent earning less than \$25,000, while those at the upper end of the spectrum might earn more than \$83,000.

Full-time interpreters and translators employed by multinational companies may receive paid vacations, holidays, and sick days; life and health insurance; and retirement benefits. These are usually paid by the employer. Interpreters working for the United Nations earn tax-free salaries. In addition, international organizations often pay supplementary living and family allowances to interpreters/translators working and living abroad.

EMPLOYMENT AND OUTLOOK

Globalization has had a dramatic effect on the interpreter/translator industry, with the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimating as much as 29 percent growth in the industry between 2014 and 2024, which is far faster than average in comparison to the 6-7 percent growth expected for all U.S. industries during this same period. In 2016, about 20 percent of 61,000 translators and/or interpreters in the United States were self-employed. Professional and scientific companies and organizations employed roughly 29 percent of the remaining professionals in the field, while educational institutions employed 26 percent, healthcare organizations employed 16 percent, and 7 percent were employed by governmental organizations.

The rapid growth in the industry is the result of two continuing trends; an increase in the number of non-English and/or bilingual individuals living and working in the United States and the increasing interconnectedness of global educational, business, and governmental environments. As more and more U.S. companies do business overseas there is an increasing demand for bilingual individuals to work in the corporate and hospitality industries. International businesses, tourism companies, and a variety of other organizations and corporations frequently use the services of interpreters to facilitate their activities overseas. Demand is expected to remain especially strong for translators of the languages referred to as PFIGS - Portuguese, French, Italian, German, and Spanish (and the principal Asian languages - Chinese, Japanese, and Korean). In addition, current events and changing political environments, often difficult to foresee, will increase the need for persons who can work with other languages. For example, homeland security needs are expected to drive increasing demand for interpreters and translators of Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages, primarily in Federal Government agencies. In addition, demand for American Sign Language interpreters will grow due to the increasing use of video relay services that provide video calls using a sign language interpreter over an Internet connection.

Related Occupations

- Intelligence Officer
- Interpreter & Translator
- Radio Intelligence Officer

MORE INFORMATION

American Association of Language Specialists

P.O. Box 27306
Washington, DC 20038
www.taals.net

American Translators Association

225 Reinekers Lane, Suite 590
Alexandria, VA 22314
703.683.6100
ata@atanet.org
www.atanet.org

Certifies translators

[www.atanet.org/certification/
aboutcert_overview.php](http://www.atanet.org/certification/aboutcert_overview.php)

Offers honors and awards:
[www.atanet.org/membership/
honorsandawards.php](http://www.atanet.org/membership/honorsandawards.php)

National Security Education Program

P.O. Box 20010
Arlington, VA 22219
703.696.1991
nsep@nsep.gov
www.nsep.gov

Sponsors scholarships and fellowships
www.nsep.gov/initiatives

Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf

333 Commerce Street
Alexandria, VA 22314
703.838.0030
www.rid.org

Sponsors sign language interpreter
scholarships and awards:
[www.rid.org/aboutRID/schol_awards/
index.cfm](http://www.rid.org/aboutRID/schol_awards/index.cfm)

Offers sign language certification and
professional development:
www.rid.org/education/overview/index.cfm

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