

Interpreters and Translators

Summary



Interpreters work in spoken or sign language, while translators work in written language.

Quick Facts: Interpreters and Translators

| | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| 2010 Median Pay | \$43,300 per year \$20.82 per hour |
| Entry-Level Education | Bachelor's degree |
| Work Experience in a Related Occupation | None |
| On-the-job Training | Long-term on-the-job training |
| Number of Jobs, 2010 | 58,400 |
| Job Outlook, 2010-20 | 42% (Much faster than average) |
| Employment Change, 2010-20 | 24,600 |

What Interpreters and Translators Do

Interpreters and translators convert information from one language to another. Interpreters work in spoken or sign language, translators in written language.

Work Environment

Interpreters work in settings such as schools, hospitals, courtrooms, and conference centers. Many translators work from home. Both interpreters and translators who are self-employed frequently have variable schedules.

How to Become an Interpreter or Translator

Although interpreters and translators typically need a bachelor's degree, the most important requirement is that they be fluent in English and at least one other language. Many complete job-specific training programs.

Pay

The median annual wage of interpreters and translators was \$43,300 in May 2010.

Job Outlook

Employment of interpreters and translators is expected to grow 42 percent from 2010 to 2020, much faster than the average for all occupations. Employment growth will be driven by broadening international ties and by large increases in the number of non-English-speaking people in the United States. Job opportunities should be best for those who have professional certification.

Similar Occupations

Compare the job duties, education, job growth, and pay of interpreters and translators with similar occupations.

O*NET

O*NET provides comprehensive information on key characteristics of workers and occupations.

Contacts for More Information

Learn more about interpreters and translators by contacting these additional resources.

What Interpreters and Translators Do



Interpreters and translators speak, read, and write in at least two languages fluently.

Interpreters and translators convert information from one language to another. Interpreters work in spoken or sign language, translators in written language.

Duties

Interpreters and translators typically do the following:

- Convert concepts in the source language to equivalent concepts in the target language
- Speak, read, and write fluently in at least two languages, including English and one or more others
- Relay style and tone
- Manage work schedules to meet deadlines
- Render spoken ideas accurately, quickly, and clearly

Interpreters and translators aid communication by converting information from one language into another. Although some people do both, interpreting and translating are different professions: interpreters deal with spoken words, translators with written words.

Interpreters convert information from one spoken language into another. In the case of sign language interpreters, between spoken language and sign language. Interpreters must usually be fluent speakers or signers of both languages because they communicate back and forth among the people who do not share each other's language.

There are two modes of interpreting: simultaneous and consecutive.

Simultaneous interpreting requires interpreters to listen or watch and speak or sign at the same time someone is speaking or signing. Simultaneous interpreting requires a high level of concentration. For that reason, simultaneous interpreters usually work in pairs, each interpreting for about 20 to 30 minutes and then resting while the other interprets. Simultaneous interpreters are often familiar with the subject matter so they can anticipate the end of a speaker's sentences.

In contrast, consecutive interpreting begins only after the speaker has said or signed a group of words or sentences. Consecutive interpreters often take notes while listening to or watching the speakers, so they must develop some type of notetaking or shorthand system.

Translators convert written materials from one language into another. The goal of a translator is to have people read the translation as if it were the original. To do that, the translator must be able to write sentences that flow as well as the original did while keeping the ideas and facts of the original accurate. Translators must consider any cultural references, including slang, and other expressions that do not translate literally.

Translators must read the original language fluently but may not need to speak it fluently. They usually translate only into their native language.

Nearly all translation work is done on a computer, and translators receive and submit most assignments electronically. Translations often go through several revisions before becoming final.

Interpreters' and translators' services are needed in a number of subject areas. Although these workers often do not specialize in any particular field or industry, many focus on one area of expertise.

The following are examples of occupational specialties:

Health or medical interpreters and translators typically work in healthcare settings and help patients communicate with doctors, nurses, and other medical staff. Both interpreters and translators must have a strong grasp of medical terminology and the common words for those medical terms in both languages.

Health or medical interpreters must also have sensitivity to participate in patients' personal situations with healthcare providers.

Health or medical translators don't usually have the same level of personal interaction with patients and providers that interpreters do. They primarily convert information brochures, materials that patients must read and sign, and website information from one language to another.

Legal or judiciary interpreters and translators typically work in courts and other legal settings. At hearings, arraignments, depositions, and trials, they help people who have limited English proficiency. They must understand legal terminology. Many court interpreters must sometimes read documents aloud in a language other than that in which they were written, a task known as sight translation.

Literary translators rewrite journal articles, books, poetry, and short stories from one language into another language. They strive to keep the author's tone and style as well as meaning. Whenever possible, literary translators work closely with authors to capture their intended meaning and literary characteristics.

Localization translators adapt text for a product or service from one language into another. Localization specialists strive to make it appear as though the product originated in the country where it will be sold. They must know not only both languages, but they must also understand the technical information they are working with and must understand the culture of the people who will be using the product or service.

Localization may include adapting Internet sites, marketing materials, instruction manuals, and other publications. Usually, these are related to products and services in manufacturing and other business sectors.

Localization may be helped by computer-assisted translation, where a computer program develops an early draft of a translation for the localization translator to work with. Also, translators may use computers to compare previous translations with current assignments.

Sign language interpreters help people who are deaf or hard of hearing and people who can hear communicate with each other. Sign language interpreters must be fluent in English and in American Sign Language (ASL), which combines signing, finger spelling, and specific body language. ASL is a separate language from English with its own grammar.

Some interpreters specialize in other forms of interpreting for people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Some people who are deaf or hard of hearing lip-read English instead of signing in ASL. Interpreters who work with these people do "oral interpretation," mouthing speech silently and very carefully so their lips can be read easily. They may also use facial expressions and gestures to help the lip-reader understand.

Other specialties include using cued speech, which uses hand shapes placed near the mouth to give lip-readers more information; signing exact English; and tactile signing, which is interpreting for people who are blind as well as deaf by making hand signs into the deaf-blind person's hand.

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 informally and on a professional level. Frequent travel for these workers is common.

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 required.

Conference interpreters often do simultaneous interpreting. People at the conference who do not understand the language of the speaker wear earphones tuned to the interpreter who speaks the language they want to hear. The interpreter listens to a bit of the speaker's talk and then translates that bit. Simultaneous interpreters must be able to listen to the next bit the speaker is saying while translating the previous bit of what the speaker said.

Work Environment



Interpreters and translators generally work indoors in comfortable spaces.

U.S. v. Romo-Chavez, No. 10-10424 archived on May 30, 2012

Interpreters and translators held about 58,400 jobs in 2010. About 23 percent were self-employed.

The industries that employed the most interpreters and translators in 2010 were:

| | |
|--|-----|
| Professional, scientific, and technical services | 26% |
| Educational services; state, local, and private | 25 |
| Health care and social assistance | 13 |
| Government | 7 |

Interpreters work in settings such as schools, hospitals, courtrooms, and conference centers. They must sometimes travel to conferences. Simultaneous interpreting can be stressful, as the interpreter must keep up with the speaker, who may not know to slow down when an interpreter is present.

Translators typically work from home. They receive and submit their work electronically. They must sometimes deal with the pressure of deadlines and tight schedules.

Work Schedules

Because many interpreters and translators are self-employed, their schedules often vary, with alternating periods of limited work and periods of long, irregular hours. Still, most work full time during regular business hours.

How to Become an Interpreter or Translator



Some interpreters and translators attain a degree in a specialty area, such as finance.

Although interpreters and translators typically need a bachelor's degree, the most important requirement is that they be fluent in English and at least one other language. Many complete job-specific training programs. It is not necessary for interpreters and translators to have been raised in two languages to succeed in these jobs, but many grew up communicating in both languages in which they work.

Education

The educational backgrounds of interpreters and translators vary, but it is essential that they be fluent in English and at least one other language.

High school students interested in becoming an interpreter or translator should take a broad range of courses that includes English writing and comprehension, foreign languages, and computer proficiency. Other helpful pursuits for prospective foreign-language interpreters and translators 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. Through community organizations, students interested in sign language interpreting may take introductory classes in ASL and seek out volunteer opportunities to work with people who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Beyond high school, people interested in becoming an interpreter or translator have 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, interpreters and translators generally need specialized training on how to do the work. Formal programs in interpreting and translating are available at colleges and universities 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 a master's degree. Those working in the community as court or medical interpreters or translators are more likely to complete job-specific training programs.

Certification

There is currently no universal certification required of interpreters and translators. However, workers can take a variety of tests that show proficiency. For example, the [American Translators Association](#) provides certification for its members in 24 language combinations involving English.

Federal courts provide 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 [National Association of the Deaf](#) and the [Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf](#) (RID) jointly offer certification for general sign language 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.

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 seminary 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 their completion indicates that a person has significant skill in the occupation.

The [International Association of Conference Interpreters](#) offers certification for conference interpreters.

The [Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters](#) offers two types of certifications for healthcare interpreters: the Associate Healthcare Interpreter (AHI) for interpreters of languages other than Spanish, Arabic, and Mandarin, and the Certified Healthcare Interpreter (CHI) for interpreters of Spanish, Arabic, and Mandarin.

Advancement

After interpreters and translators have enough experience, they may move up to more difficult or prestigious assignments, seek certification, get editorial responsibility, or manage or start their own business.

Many self-employed interpreters and translators start a business by establishing themselves in their field. They may submit resumes and samples to many different translation and interpreting agencies and work for agencies that match their skills with a job. Many then get work based on their reputation or through referrals from existing clients.

Work Experience

Work experience is essential. In fact, some agencies hire only interpreters or translators who have related work experience.

A good way for translators to learn firsthand about the occupation is to start working in-house for a translation company. Doing informal or volunteer work is an excellent way for people seeking to get interpreter or translator jobs to get experience.

Volunteer opportunities for interpreters 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 during crises.

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

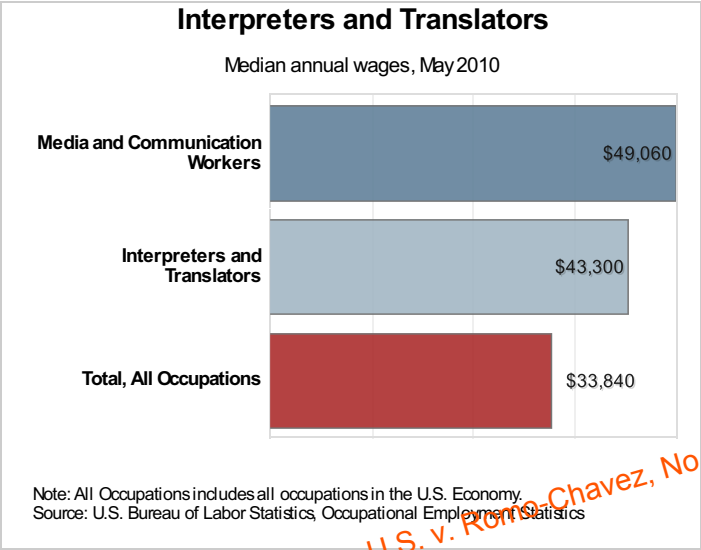
To show experience in translation, any translation—even translation done as practice—can be used as a sample for potential clients.

Whatever path of entry they pursue, new interpreters and translators should develop relationships with mentors to build their skills, confidence, and professional network. Mentoring may be formal, such as that through a professional association, or informal, such as 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.

Important Qualities

- Business skills.** Self-employed and freelance interpreters and translators need general business skills to manage their finances and careers successfully. They must set prices for their work, bill customers, keep records, and market their services to attract new business and build their client base.
- Concentration.** The ability to concentrate while others are speaking or moving around them is critical for interpreters and translators.
- Cultural sensitivity.** Interpreters and translators must be sensitive to cultural differences and expectations among the people whom they are helping to communicate. Successful interpreting and translating is not only a matter of knowing the words in different languages but also of understanding people's cultures.
- Dexterity.** Sign language interpreters must have quick and coordinated hands, fingers, and arm movements when interpreting sign language for a targeted audience.
- Listening skills.** Interpreters and translators must listen carefully when interpreting for audiences to ensure that they interpret or translate correctly.
- Speaking skills.** Interpreters and translators must speak clearly in the languages they are translating.
- Writing skills.** Interpreters and translators must be able to write clearly and effectively in the languages they are talking in or translating.

Pay



The median annual wage of interpreters and translators was \$43,300 in May 2010. The median wage is the wage at which half the workers in an occupation earned more than the amount and half earned less. The lowest 10 percent earned less than \$22,950, and the top 10 percent earned more than \$86,410.

Median annual wages in industries that employed the most interpreters and translators in 2010 were as follows:

| | |
|--|----------|
| Other professional, scientific, and technical services | \$51,650 |
| Junior colleges | 43,980 |
| General medical and surgical hospitals | 41,720 |
| Local government | 41,040 |
| Elementary and secondary schools | 37,300 |

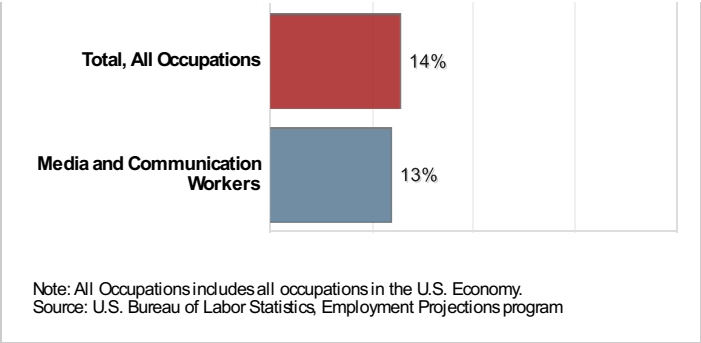
Wages depend on the language, subject matter, skill, experience, education, certification, and type of employer. Wages of interpreters and translators vary widely. Interpreters and translators who know languages for which there is a greater demand or that relatively few people can translate often earn higher wages, 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. Self-employed interpreters usually charge an hourly rate. Self-employed translators typically charge a rate per word or per hour.

Because many interpreters and translators are self-employed, their schedules may vary, with alternating periods of limited work and periods of long, irregular hours. Still, most work full time during regular business hours.

Job Outlook





Employment of interpreters and translators is expected to grow 42 percent from 2010 to 2020, much faster than the average for all occupations. Employment growth reflects an increasingly diverse U.S. population, which is expected to require more interpreters and translators.

Demand will likely remain strong for translators of frequently translated languages, such as French, German, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish. Demand also should 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 is expected to grow rapidly, driven by the increasing use of video relay services, which allow people to conduct online video calls and use a sign language interpreter.

In addition, growing international trade and broadening global ties should require more interpreters and translators. The need to interpret and translate languages in the military should result in more jobs as well.

Computers have made the work of translators and localization specialists easier. However, these jobs cannot be entirely automated. Computers cannot yet produce work comparable to the work that human translators do.

Job Prospects

Job opportunities should be best for those who have professional certification. In addition, urban areas—especially Washington, DC, New York, and Los Angeles—should continue to provide the largest numbers of employment possibilities, especially for interpreters

Job prospects for interpreters and translators should also vary by specialty and language. For example, interpreters and translators of Spanish should have good job opportunities because of expected increases in the population of Hispanics in the United States. In particular, job opportunities should be plentiful for interpreters and translators specializing in healthcare and law, because of the critical need for all parties to fully understand that information.

In addition, there should be many job opportunities for specialists in localization, driven by the globalization of business and the expansion of the Internet.

Interpreters for the deaf will continue to have favorable employment prospects because there is a shortage of people with the needed skill levels.

Conference interpreters and literary translators will likely face competition because of the small number of job opportunities in these specialties.

Employment projections data for interpreters and translators, 2010-2020








| Occupational Title | SOC Code | Employment, 2010 | Projected Employment, 2020 | Change, 2010-20 | | Employment by Industry |
|------------------------------|----------|------------------|----------------------------|-----------------|---------|------------------------|
| | | | | Percent | Numeric | |
| Interpreters and Translators | 27-3091 | 58,400 | 83,100 | 42 | 24,600 | [XLS] |

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment Projections program

Similar Occupations

This table shows a list of occupations with job duties that are similar to those of interpreters and translators.

| | OCCUPATION | JOB DUTIES | ENTRY-LEVEL EDUCATION | MEDIAN ANNUAL PAY, MAY 2010 |
|--|---|---|--------------------------------|-----------------------------|
| | Adult Literacy and GED Teachers | Adult literacy and General Education Development (GED) teachers instruct adults and youths who are out of school in basic skills, such as reading, writing, and speaking English. They also help students earn their GED or high school diploma. | Bachelor's degree | \$46,530 |
| | Career and Technical Education Teachers | Career and technical education teachers help students in middle school and high school develop career-related and technical skills. They help students explore or prepare to enter a particular occupation, such as one in auto repair, healthcare, business, or the culinary arts. | Bachelor's degree | \$53,920 |
| | Court Reporters | Court reporters attend legal proceedings and public speaking events to create word-for-word transcriptions. Some court reporters provide captioning for television and at public events. | Postsecondary non-degree award | \$47,700 |
| | High School Teachers | High school teachers help prepare students for life after graduation. They teach academic lessons and various skills that students will need to attend college and to enter the job market. | Bachelor's degree | \$53,230 |
| | Kindergarten and Elementary School Teachers | Kindergarten and elementary school teachers prepare younger students for future schooling by teaching them the basics of subjects such as math and reading. | Bachelor's degree | \$51,380 |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|-----------------------------------|----------|
|  | <u>Medical Transcriptionists</u> | Medical transcriptionists listen to voice recordings that physicians and other health professionals make and convert them into written reports. They interpret medical terminology and abbreviations in preparing patients' medical histories, discharge summaries, and other documents. | Postsecondary non-degree award | \$32,900 |
|  | <u>Middle School Teachers</u> | Middle school teachers educate students, most of whom are in sixth through eighth grades. They help students build on the fundamentals they learned in elementary school and prepare them for the more difficult lessons they will learn in high school. | Bachelor's degree | \$51,960 |
|  | <u>Postsecondary Teachers</u> | Postsecondary teachers instruct students in a wide variety of academic and vocational subjects beyond the high school level. They also conduct research and publish scholarly papers and books. | Doctoral or professional degree | \$62,050 |
|  | <u>Self-enrichment Teachers</u> | Self-enrichment teachers instruct in a variety of subjects that students take for fun or self-improvement, such as music and foreign languages. These classes generally do not lead to a degree or certification, and students take them voluntarily to learn new skills or gain understanding of a subject. | High school diploma or equivalent | \$36,340 |
|  | <u>Special Education Teachers</u> | Special education teachers work with students who have a wide range of learning, mental, emotional and physical disabilities. With students who have mild or moderate disabilities, they ensure that lessons and teaching strategies are modified to meet the students' needs. With students who have severe disabilities, they teach the students independent living skills and basic literacy, communication, and math. | Bachelor's degree | \$53,220 |
|  | <u>Technical Writers</u> | Technical writers, also called technical communicators, produce instruction manuals and other supporting documents to communicate complex and technical information more easily. They also develop, gather, and disseminate technical information among customers, designers, and manufacturers. | Bachelor's degree | \$63,280 |
|  | <u>Writers and Authors</u> | Writers and authors develop original written content for advertisements, books, magazines, movie and television scripts, songs, and online publications. | Bachelor's degree | \$55,420 |

Contacts for More Information

For more information about interpreters, visit

[Discover Interpreting](#)

For more information about translators, including professional certification, visit

[American Translators Association](#)

For more information about interpreter and translator specialties, including professional certification, visit

[American Literary Translators Association](#)

[Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters](#)

[National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators](#)

[Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf](#)

For more information about testing to become a federal contract interpreter or translator, visit

[U.S. State Department](#)

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