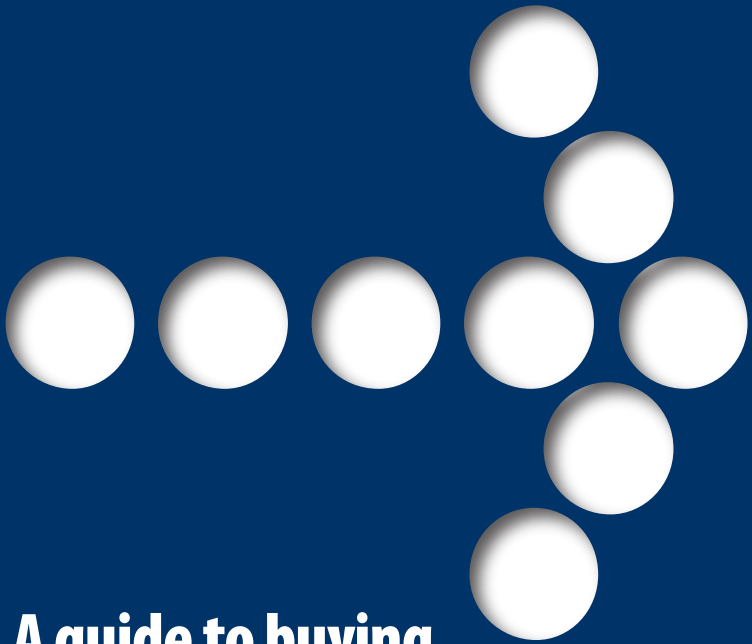
Interpreting
Getting it Right



A guide to buying interpreting services

For non-linguists, buying interpreting services is often frustrating.

The suggestions in this guide are aimed at reducing stress and helping you get the most out of your interpreting budget.

Q: Translation, interpreting —what's the difference? A: Translators write, interpreters speak.

If you are working with written documents—a user manual for your German customers, billboards for a sales campaign in Argentina, reports filed in Chinese by your new subsidiary in Shanghai that you must read and understand—you need a *translator*.

If you want to interact with people in a foreign language on the spot—a lab tour with Mexican visitors, a board meeting in Japan, a parent-teacher conference with a family recently arrived from Somalia—you need an *interpreter*.

Interpreters are human bridges.

They step in whenever people speaking different languages need to communicate with each other. They are trained to carry ideas from one language to another—accurately and efficiently.

A professional interpreter is an invaluable resource in any face-to-face negotiation, communicating your meaning and intent to your customer, and vice versa.

At the UN you see interpreters working in glass booths. At your plant, they accompany you and the trade delegation from Poland on the factory floor, relaying your message to your visitors and their questions back to you. In a hospital they help ensure that patients get access to the care they need, whatever their language. And in courts they play an essential role in ensuring that justice is done.

Interpreters have nerves of steel.

Interpreters listen to a message in one language and relay the same information back in another language, almost instantaneously.

Want to experience the stress yourself?
Take a microphone, turn on your TV and try to rephrase whatever the newscaster or soap star is saying *in real time*. No lagging behind—you'll never catch up. And no dangling sentences, please.

Now imagine you are doing the same thing, but restating the message *in a different language*. Don't even think of using a dictionary for words you don't know: there's no time!

A child's life may depend on you. A million-dollar deal may be in the balance, or the success of a company's participation in an international trade fair. These are just a handful of situations where a professional interpreter makes all the difference.

Interpreters are bilingual, but that's not all. They know both the words and the culture behind the words—in two or more languages.

Bilingual? That's like my brother-in-law. He speaks Spanish.

Red alert! Untrained "bilinguals" are a major risk in an interpreting situation. The reason is simple: bilinguals may speak two languages fluently, but lots of people described as bilingual are not really that fluent or even accurate. Most importantly, they are not necessarily good at moving information between two languages, especially when the pressure is on. And if they identify with one of the speakers, they might take sides, which can skew a critical exchange.

Professional interpreters bring a different approach and skill-set to the job. Familiar with different interpreting techniques, they are trained to get your message across—accurately, smoothly, efficiently—and let you know exactly what the other guys are saying, too.

Amateurs & volunteers? No thanks.

Nine times out of ten, relying on well-meaning but untrained volunteers is a huge waste of human and financial resources.

In a medical setting, using untrained relatives or staff can have catastrophic consequences. In police work, improper communication of an individual's rights can result in reversal of sentences. In courts, innocent people have been convicted and guilty parties set free due to incompetent interpreting.

Using non-professionals may also be against the law: several states, among them California and New York, have forbidden the use of children as interpreters in healthcare situations and in courtrooms.

"In our hospital, we have seen many examples of 'filtering of information' by well-meaning friends and family members acting as interpreters, with very bad outcomes for the patient."

Department head at a large hospital group

How do interpreters work? (1) Consecutively

In *consecutive interpreting*, the interpreter takes turns with the other speakers, as in a Q&A session. The client speaks, then stops. The interpreter steps in to interpret, then stops. If long statements are made, the interpreter may take notes to ensure accuracy.

This is the format for interpreting by telephone, for many meetings, for some medical consultations and for certain court proceedings. Electronic equipment (microphones and headsets) may be necessary, depending on the size of the room.

Because of the stops and starts, such events will always take longer than usual—up to twice as long. Be sure to factor this into your schedule.

How do interpreters work? (2) Simultaneously

Simultaneous interpreting is different. In this case, the speaker and the interpreter talk at the same time, with the interpreter lagging a few words or seconds behind the speaker. It's what you see at the UN, at international conferences and in many courts. Normally the interpreters are some distance from the speaker (usually in soundproof booths) and you listen to them with wired-in headphones or pocket-sized receivers that use a radio or infra-red frequency.

Simultaneous interpreters may also use a portable electronic system with microphones and headphones. This is particularly handy when interpreting for a large group on a tour of, say, a noisy factory. When there is only one listener, interpreters may dispense with equipment and simply whisper to the person.

Because simultaneous interpreting requires immense concentration, linguists usually work in pairs, relieving each other at 15- to 30-minute intervals.

How do interpreters work? (3) Sight translation

In *sight translation*, the interpreter orally translates a written document, sometimes with little or no preparation. This is usually to relay key information and allow a meeting or other session to proceed.

In the legal system, sight translation may be needed for trial preparation or to translate exhibits or documents submitted in foreign languages. In a hospital, a patient may need essential information in a medical brochure on surgical procedures. In a community care setting, critical documents can describe program policies and legal rights.

Sight translation can pose a **serious liability risk** for a service organization that has hired an interpreter:

- if patients sign consent forms for procedures or services they do not fully understand.
- if patients receive medical instructions that they do not fully understand.

Reduce risk by planning ahead.

Rather than rely on sight translation, act now to have your important documents translated into the languages most in demand. (And be sure to use a professional translator for the job.)

Equally important: take the time to review and discuss critical documents with your patient or client with the assistance of an interpreter. That way, you are present to answer any questions, and you can be sure that the most important information has been understood.

If you can't avoid sight translation, give important documents to your interpreter in advance so that he or she can ask questions and look up any unfamiliar terms.

How can I find the interpreter I need?

- Start by identifying **which language(s)** you require. "Chinese" is not enough—do your clients speak Mandarin, Cantonese or Hakka? Likewise, Portuguese is spoken in Portugal, Brazil, Cape Verde, Angola and other countries. A skilled interpreter may be able to cope with all four, but advance notice of accents and dialects will make your session go more smoothly. Note that if the speakers being interpreted are not speaking their own native language, the challenge will be greater.

- Identify **where** the interpreter will be working. Manchester, not Mexico City—yes, that's essential. But the setting is also important. Do you need an interpreter for a court hearing, a medical conference or a factory tour? Let your interpreter know in advance, so that he or she can advise you on whether simultaneous or consecutive interpreting is the best solution for your needs, and prepare for the assignment.

ATA's online directory lists interpreters: atanet.org

Set the scene.

Background, please: The more technical your subject, the more important it is for your interpreter to be up to speed on the issues involved.

Concretely, be sure to specify what your meeting is about well in advance—life insurance? veterinary science? money laundering?—and provide background documents so that interpreters can prepare properly. If you will be using statements, slides or previous minutes and reports, make sure your interpreter has them.

"I was once told the speakers at a presentation were going to talk about dairy cows and milk production, when in fact the subject was fodder and animal feed processing. Not the same!

On another occasion I was able to interpret very confidently for a young patient because I had been told exactly which extremely rare eye condition he had and which specialist he was seeing, so I could read some of her published papers in advance."

Norwegian/English interpreter

Individual interpreter or agency?

If you are hiring a single interpreter in one language pair, you can contact him or her directly using the directory of a recognized professional association. Ideally you will look for someone with the experience and specialization that make them a good fit for your event.

For lengthy or complex assignments, you will need a team of two interpreters so they can take turns at defined intervals, usually 15 to 30 minutes.

If you need more languages plus equipment (e.g., for a major conference), you will require teams of interpreters—count two to four interpreters per language pair. In this case, it may be simpler to work with an event coordinator or a language services agency.

Any way you look at it, it's a tremendously stressful job. Interpreter fatigue is a major cause of inaccuracy, and even top professionals need to rest their minds and vocal cords at regular intervals.

Put technology to work (but test it first).

Review your technical requirements up front to avoid unpleasant surprises, and test equipment before the big day. Professional interpreters are your ace in the hole: unlike amateurs (including well-meaning friends-of-friends), they will know their way around the technical equipment you are using.

Note, however, that you must hire technicians (or assign people) to take care of the equipment. Interpreters will be focusing all their energy on facilitating communication.

In February 2007, the trial of foreign suspects accused of planting bombs on the Madrid metro system got under way. To dispense with headsets, officials arranged for the interpreters' words to be broadcast directly over the court's PA system—without checking first. When the Arabic interpreters started working into Spanish, their own voices were fed into the mikes, overpowering the speakers' voices. Recess!

"At one meeting, the main speakers had microphones but questioners from the floor didn't, so in our booths we couldn't hear anything they said."

German/English interpreter

"Speakers giving a PowerPoint presentation will often turn away from a static microphone to talk about their slides, so a lapel microphone is essential."

Spanish/English interpreter

"If a person doesn't understand anything at all, he knows he doesn't understand, or is aware he only has a vague idea. He looks for a solution. A danger scenario arises when a person with limited language skills thinks he understands, but has actually misunderstood, and therefore transmits the wrong, or at best misleading, information."

Public service administrator

It sounds like professional interpreters are expensive...

But it costs even more when an important meeting falls apart because you can't really understand what your customer (or boss) wants. Or when you travel all the way to Indonesia and your supplier speaks no English after all. In a medical emergency, understanding a patient's history and symptoms can make the difference between life and death.

Prices for professional interpreting services can vary from one region to another, but choosing a supplier on price alone is courting disaster.

By phoning several providers you'll get an idea of average prices in your area and market segment. You can start with the online directory of the American Translators Association (atanet.org).

Interpreters don't usually charge for their prep time, which can be 10 hours or more, depending on the assignment.

Healthcare:

Interpreting *reduces* costs by improving doctor-patient communication.

"When a language barrier prevents the doctor from diagnosing the patient, he'll cover himself with extra tests," says Doug Green of the Texas Association of Healthcare Interpreters and Translators. "If you aren't using qualified interpreters in healthcare, you're hemorrhaging cash."

Dr. James Rohack, Past President of the American Medical Association, agrees: "Look at the common thread in lawsuits: it's that the patient feels the doctor didn't adequately explain why he did what he did. Inadequate communication means more tests, but there's also a higher risk of lawsuits."

Business:

Interpreting benefits your bottom line by bringing everyone on board.

"Calculate how much your company has already invested in airfares, accommodation, catering and simply time of busy executives attending a major meeting," says the marketing manager of a Fortune 500 company. "The fee charged by a team of professional interpreters pales in comparison—and their presence ensures that all delegates can follow exactly what is going on and participate actively."

An international civil servant adds: "If the aim of your meeting is to convey a message or exchange ideas, then you need to pay for professional interpreters. If, on the other hand, you are just meeting for the sake of meeting, well, then you can opt for a cheaper solution." (Think about it.)

Factors that influence price.

- **Common or rare language, simultaneous or consecutive, single or team:** Your own particular situation will determine what language(s) you need to cover, and whether you need a simultaneous or consecutive interpreter, a single interpreter or a team. The laws of supply and demand will naturally affect the price: the rarer the language and the more interpreters you need, the more you will pay.
- **Length of assignment** and **segmentation of working day:** time is the base unit for billing, with a 2-hour minimum for court interpreting. But practices vary, and in some markets a half-day or daily rate is used.

Be sure to discuss this with your language services provider and agree on basics—including overtime rates and cancellation fees—before the assignment starts.

Travel time is charged when it takes more than a defined time to reach the assignment site. Transportation costs are added to this. For a longer assignment, plan to cover all interpreter expenses, including meals and hotel. Reach an agreement on these items before the assignment starts, and put it in writing.

Location can affect price: hazard pay may apply in a country made unsafe by political unrest, or even in a prison environment. Likewise, some assignments will require special insurance coverage.

Professional standards.

ASTM International develops technical standards for materials, products, systems and services. Its publication ASTM F2089 deals with standards for the interpreting industry and offers practical guidelines for users of interpreting services.

ASTM F2089 recommends using teams of 2-3 interpreters per language pair in each session of continuous interpreting lasting longer than 45 minutes. Out in the field, the market standard differs only in the number of minutes per session: 30 instead of 45.

Should you venture abroad, be sure to check local conditions: in Brazil a full day of conference interpreting is 6 hours long and lunch break is 2 hours, compared with 7 or 8 hours and one hour in Europe.

In some countries, recording interpreters' work is an accepted practice in court, for legal depositions and in some medical settings. But if a recording is to be made, it is important to discuss this up front to clarify all related issues, including intellectual property rights.

Professional ethics.

Language industry associations have developed codes of ethics and professional responsibility for interpreters that are learned through specialized training.

These include treating any material you may provide or any information gained during their professional activities in the strictest confidence.

"Trained interpreters abide by a code of ethics that stresses confidentiality, impartiality, discretion and professional distance. That may seem basic, but it's critically important. It's always best to use trained interpreters."

Defense lawyer, Miami

In the United States, professional interpreters can be federally certified for court interpreting or nationally certified for healthcare interpreting. They may also be state licensed, certified or qualified. For more information, visit www.ncihc.org and www.najit.org.

Professional standards and ethics are areas in which an untrained bilingual "helper" simply cannot match the quality and performance of a professional.

For the same reason, it's a good idea to look for interpreters with formal training, credentials and professional affiliations.

ata American Translators Association

225 Reinekers Lane, Suite 590, Alexandria, VA 22314
(703) 683-6100. www.atanet.org

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By hiring a professional interpreter, you are harnessing the power of language to make sure your message gets across. You are also ensuring that investments you've already made are not wasted, and reducing risk for yourself, your partners and your clients.

For more information, including a directory of qualified professionals, glossaries and industry links, visit atanet.org.

ata American Translators Association

The Voice of Interpreters and Translators