

## We Need Your Feedback

A companion piece to the popular “Translation, getting it right” brochure is in the works, this time aimed at clients and potential users of **interpreting services**.

As with any writing project of this type, there is a danger of missing the forest for the trees (or leaving out essential information!) which is why we are asking interpreters – ATA members or not – to read this online draft and send in their feedback. The coordinators will be reading all of your comments and taking important points on board. Many thanks in advance.

Please send your comments to: [int\\_brochure@atanet.org](mailto:int_brochure@atanet.org). Deadline for comments is Friday, January 2, 2009.

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#### Translator or interpreter?

Translators write, interpreters speak.

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

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

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#### So what do interpreters do?

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 ally in any 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 make sure that patients get the care they need, whatever their language. And in courts they play an essential role in ensuring that justice is done.

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## **Interpreters have nerves of steel**

When working in a booth, interpreters receive the original message through earphones, and almost instantaneously relay the same information back through a microphone, in another language.

### **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. Don't even think of using a dictionary for words you don't know: there's no time!

Now imagine you are doing the same thing, but restating the message in a different language.

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.

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

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## **Bilingual? That’s like my brother-in-law. He speaks Spanish.**

Red alert! Self-proclaimed 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 accurate. Many over-estimate their communication skills altogether.

Most importantly, they are not necessarily good at *moving information between two languages*.

That’s where professional interpreters come in. Familiar with different interpreting techniques, they are trained to get your message across—smoothly, accurately, efficiently—and let you know what the other guys are saying, too. Note that: smoothly, accurately and efficiently.

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Nine times out of ten, relying on untrained volunteers is a huge waste of human and financial resources. It 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.

In a medical setting, using untrained relatives or staff can have catastrophic consequences. In police work, improper communication of Miranda Rights has resulted in reversal of sentences.

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## How do interpreters work?

### (1) *Consecutively*

In a small, informal group, 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 medical consultations and for court hearings. Electronic equipment may be used but is not necessary. Professionals call this *consecutive* interpreting.

Because of the repetition, meetings will generally take longer than usual; plan this into your schedule.

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## How do interpreters work?

### (2) *Simultaneously*

*Simultaneous* interpreting is different. In this case, the speaker and the interpreter talk at the same time. It's what you see at the UN, at international conferences and in some courts. Normally the interpreter is some distance from the speaker (usually in a glass booth) and you use earphones to hear him/her.

Simultaneous interpreters may also use a portable system with microphones and earphones. This is particularly handy when interpreting for a large group on a tour of, say, a noisy factory.

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## How do interpreters work?

### (3) *Sight translation*

In *sight translation*, the interpreter translates an essential document orally with little or no preparation, 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, to determine what kind of charges should be filed, or to translate exhibits or documents submitted in foreign languages. In hospitals, a client might 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 clients sign consent forms for procedures or services they do not fully understand.
- if patients receive medical instructions that they do not understand.

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## Forewarned is forearmed—plan ahead!

Do not wait for an emergency: act now to ensure all key documents are translated into the languages most in demand. (And use a professional translator.)

Also, rather than rely solely on sight translation, take the time to review and discuss critical documents with your patient/client in the presence of the interpreter. That way, you are sure that the most important information has been relayed—and present to answer any questions.

If you cannot avoid sight translation, try to give key documents to your interpreter well in advance. This allows her to ask questions and look up any unfamiliar terms. You might also consider recording what gets said so that both sides can refer back if necessary.

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## How can I find the interpreter I need?

- Identify *the language(s)* you require. “Chinese” is not enough—do your clients speak Mandarin, Cantonese or Haka? Likewise, Portuguese is spoken in Portugal, Brazil, Cape Verde and Angola—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 helpful, even 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, since the skills required are not necessarily the same.

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## Set the scene: background, please

The more technical your subject, the more important for your interpreter to be up to speed on the issues and vocabulary.

Be sure to *specify what your conference/assignment is about* well in advance—life insurance? veterinary science? money laundering?—and provide background documents so that interpreters can prepare properly.

“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 silage and silage processing.

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 also read some of her published papers in advance.”

*Norwegian/English interpreter*

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## **Individual interpreter or agency?**

If you are hiring a single interpreter for consecutive work, 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.

If you need more languages plus equipment (e.g., for a major conference), you will require a team of interpreters. In this case, it may be simpler to work with a single coordinator or an agency.

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## **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.

In February 2007, the trial of foreign suspects accused of planting bombs on the Madrid metro system got under way in the Spanish capital. To dispense with cumbersome headphones, 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!

Recently a case was postponed in London after everyone, including the interpreter, had waited for hours: a child had been interviewed on video, and the Crown Court was equipped with DVDs only.

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## **It sounds like professional interpreters are expensive!**

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 mean life or death.

While there is no fixed price for professional interpreting services, 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 ([www.atanet.org](http://www.atanet.org)).

Calculate how much your company has already invested in airfares, accommodations, catering and simply time of busy executives for a major meeting. The fee charged by a team of professional interpreters pales in comparison—and their presence ensures that all delegates (1) can follow what is going on and (2) can participate actively.

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## **Other factors that influence price**

**Simultaneous or consecutive:** A consecutive interpreter may be able to work longer segments at a time than a simultaneous interpreter. But any way you look at it, it's a tremendously stressful job; interpreters need to rest their vocal chords and minds at regular intervals.

**Length of assignment and segmentation of working day:** Time is the base unit for billing, with a 2-hour minimum fee the standard. But practices vary: in some markets a half-day or daily rate is used. In others, 15-minute or 30-minute units may apply. Be sure to discuss this with your interpreter and agree on basics—including overtime rates and conditions—before the assignment starts.

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## Other factors that influence price

**Travel time** is charged when it takes more than a defined time to reach the assignment site—often one hour. Travel costs and mileage are added to this. Note that an interpreter on a longer assignment will expect all expenses—meals, hotel, etc.—to be covered. Reach an agreement on these items before the assignment starts, and put it in writing.

**Location**, too, 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.

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## Delving deeper: 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. And should you venture abroad, be sure to check local conditions: in Brazil a full day of conference interpreting is six hours long and lunch break is two hours, compared with eight and one, respectively, in the US.

Recording interpreters' work is an accepted practice in court, for legal depositions and in some medical settings. If a recording is for commercial purposes, it is important to discuss this up front to clarify issues related to intellectual property rights (ASTM F2089-10.13).

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## Professional ethics

Organizations involved in interpreter training have developed their own standards of professional ethics, confidentiality and procedure, which can only be learned through structured, specialized input.

Needless to say, professional interpreters treat any material you provide in the strictest confidence.

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“If a person does not understand anything, he knows he does not understand, or is aware he only has a vague idea. The danger scenario is when a person thinks he understands, but has actually misunderstood, and therefore transmits the wrong, or at best misleading, information.”

*Public service administrator*

By hiring a professional interpreter, you are harnessing the power of language — making sure your investments upstream are not wasted, and reducing risk.

For more information, including a directory of qualified professionals, glossaries and industry links, visit [www.atanet.org](http://www.atanet.org)