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A roadmap for interpreters

Tips and advice for young professionals

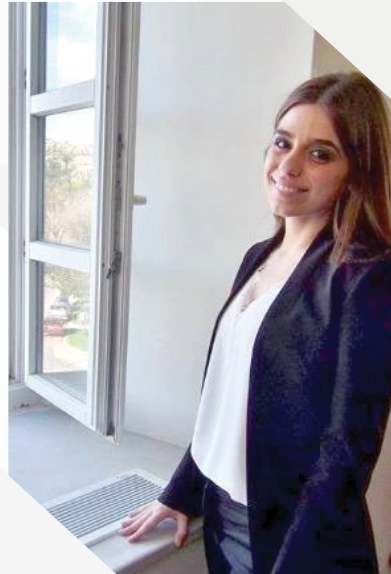
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About the author

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I am a translator and interpreter splitting my life between Berlin, Athens and Boston. I completed my BA studies in Translation and after working as a translation intern at the British Council and the Press and Communications Bureau of the Greek Embassy in Berlin, I moved to Scotland, where I studied for my MSc in Interpreting. Since then, I have been working as a translator and interpreter for private clients and agencies in the UK, Greece and Germany. I currently work as an in-house translator and interpreter in Berlin. My main areas of interest include health, nutrition, politics, diplomacy and the media.





A roadmap for interpreters

Interpreting is one of the most challenging and dynamic professions in the world. Attending international conferences, going to meetings, learning new words (or even new languages), moving from one country to another and catching up with the latest news are what one will see when taking a glimpse of an interpreter's life. Interpreters are always part of international events, summit meetings and conferences, where they play a vital role in helping people, who speak different languages, communicate. Many descriptions have been used to illustrate their complex role: They are *the voice of others*, *linguistic mediators*, *actors bridging linguistic gaps*. But who are these people who usually hide in a booth and yet play such an important role in multilingual events?

Contrary to popular belief, interpreters are not people who only speak two (or more) languages. Yes, speaking one (or more) foreign language(s) on top of your mother tongue is one side of the story and the first step towards becoming an interpreter, but delving into the culture of the respective language is the second and equally important step. This step basically makes interpreters go beyond the literal level

of understanding a language and helps them interpret terms, concepts or sayings linked to the social and cultural background of a country while conveying subtle nuances of speech.

But let's move on to the real work of interpreters. Interpreters do not only work during a conference or an assignment. In fact, their work takes much longer than the actual duration of the conference and includes extensive preparation. No matter how well interpreters speak a language or how much experience they have, thorough preparation safeguards an optimal professional performance.

This guide mostly focusses on preparation but also gives an insight to additional aspects that contribute to high-quality interpreting. It should be noted that the following section on preparation can be applied to all types of interpreting (e.g. conference interpreting, public service interpreting). Find out more about types of interpreting by visiting the following link: www.ciol.org.uk/types-interpreting.

BEFORE THE CONFERENCE: PREPARE FOR AN ASSIGNMENT

You've just got an interpreting assignment! Congratulations, but what's next?

Regardless of who contacted you, be it an agency or a direct client, get in touch straight away. Communicate with them, try to get as much information as possible about the assignment and find out more about the conference or its context. Who is going to attend? Is the conference open to the public or is it only for experts and people working in a specific industry? What will the register be? These are important factors that you should always consider at this stage.

It should be noted that you may skip that stage in cases where long-term clients contact you for an assignment. As you have already worked with them in the past, you may already be familiar with the context and you can directly move on to the actual preparation. However, building a relationship of good communication is generally recommended as understanding the real context of the assignment will give you extra confidence and will make your preparation more focussed.

After gathering more information on the conference, it's time to start your research: Recurring terms, synonyms, fixed phrases, prevalent

opinions on the topic(s) discussed. Nowadays we are lucky enough to have access to a plethora of resources such as online-magazines, newspapers, journals, videos and libraries from all over the world. By going through articles, texts, audio files and videos you can find useful terminology and search equivalent terms in unlimited language combinations. At the same time, you can get used to fixed expressions used in a specific field and avoid unpleasant surprises during the actual conference. I remember that one time I had to interpret in a conference on politics and decided to focus on fixed expressions frequently used in this field in my preparation. I was so relieved when these phrases were actually mentioned during the conference as, thanks to my preparation, I came up with the right term, instead of being baffled and wasting valuable time.

TIP: *While preparing and going through articles, keep references or links for revision purposes. You can take a quick look whenever you have some time and refresh your memory. After all, 'repetition is the mother of learning'!*

During your research, don't underestimate the power of writing down useful terms or concepts. Create your own glossaries, word documents or take some notes on your notebook, if your memory works better when you write things down. There may be moments when you think


that gathering numerous glossaries is pointless, but after a couple of years you will have a very well-structured pool of useful terms.

TIP: *Find reliable sources and double-check terms you encounter in suspicious webpages. Although the internet offers us a wide range of sources, make sure that you always check reliable ones, i.e. articles and texts written by native speakers – this can be a trap especially nowadays that Globish lurks everywhere! What you say, may sound correct to non-native speakers of English, but this is not the case for native English speakers, who may have a face of despair while listening.*

But what if I am highly specialised in my field and I am up-to-date with all relevant terms? Although this is rarely the case as both languages and scientific fields keep on evolving with new terms being constantly coined, preparation is not merely about your language skills. Thorough preparation will not only equip you with an advanced linguistic background but will also give you the gift of anticipation. Being familiar with prevalent opinions and controversial arguments on the topics discussed will help you anticipate potential remarks and opinions. Anticipation is important not only in terms of your actual

interpreting performance but also in terms of psychological well-being before and during the conference. The more prepared you are, the less stressed you feel about what can come up as you know that you have done your best to cover most aspects of the topics discussed. Of course, one may argue that an interpreter cannot always be completely prepared for what can come up with the element of surprise always being part of conferences, but in any case, in-depth preparation never hurt anyone.

If you feel like giving your interpreting preparation a twist, you can always use tools similar to the ones used among translation professionals (CAT tools). CAI (computer assisted interpreting) is a relatively new entry in the field of interpreting and aims to increase quality and productivity as well as improve interpreters' performance. Although according to professional standards, interpreters should always work in a double booth in order to take breaks and help each other, things do not always go as planned. This is where CAI tools can be employed and by using them correctly not only can we save time but we can also improve our performance and significantly decrease our stress levels. In contrast to some language professionals who believe that technology has already started substituting our role as linguists



(translators and interpreters), I am inclined to believe that technology can actually increase our productivity and boost our performance. This is why CAI tools (e.g. Interpret Bank) can be a life saver.

In any case, while preparing for an interpreting assignment check what works better for you! Interpreting and generally our way of working is tailored to our personality and everyone has their own special work system that does wonders for them.

DURING THE CONFERENCE: PRO TIPS

Mic is on and the conference has just started.


Teamwork is the key. Try to be as helpful as possible and remember that interpreters are not the stars of the conference. We are there to help participants communicate with each other. It's not a solo game and in fact, the audience rarely knows who the person interpreting is. They just hear a voice and what they know is whether the German, the Spanish or the Hungarian booth was professional and helped them understand the presentation as if it was in their native language(s). The common goal should be to work as a group and maintain high professional standards. Take turns and listen to your booth partners. Do they want to take a break earlier than planned because they had to interpret a highly specialised part of a speech? Do they need you to

write down some figures and abbreviations for them? Be helpful and be there for them to improve the overall performance of your booth.

In some cases, you may already know the people you are working with especially if the interpreting market is rather limited in your language combination. You may have worked or studied with them and this means that you may have already developed strategies and cooperation methods based on each interpreter's strengths or weaknesses. However, if this is not the case, don't panic! Find codes of communication beforehand, set the time that each of you wants to interpret or feels comfortable interpreting efficiently and be flexible! For instance, you may want to switch earlier than planned, if your booth partner had a rather difficult part to interpret.

AFTER THE CONFERENCE: FEEDBACK

Let's fast forward to the end of your assignment. You just turned off the microphone and you are ready to leave the conference venue after having a talk with your colleagues. On your way home, you start reflecting on your performance. As interpreters we know very well how to evaluate our performance. We know our strengths, we know our weaknesses, we know what we still have to work on and we know what makes us unique! But are we objective?



Like any other business, clients and their opinion are important. This is why you may think that your clients' opinion is vital to improving your performance. Indeed, getting feedback from your clients can help you in our next assignment as your approach will be tailored to the needs of each client, team or company (e.g. Do they prefer consecutive or simultaneous interpreting?). It can be very rewarding too. However, is client feedback a constructive means of improvement or is it just a tap on the shoulder for your good job? To what extent can a client, who does not have a professional background in the field of interpreting, help you substantially improve your performance?


This is where colleagues come into play. What is special about colleagues and building a strong professional relationship with them is the fact that not only do we share the same profession, but we also know the challenges and difficulties we usually encounter. Boothmates who share the same target language (TL) and have undergone common interpreting training are perfectly qualified to give a more personalised feedback as they have probably experienced similar difficulties and have made similar mistakes in their respective TL. This is what makes their feedback straight-forward and result-oriented. So far, I have seen many cases where colleagues who share the same spirit of cooperation in the booth, have been extremely helpful to one another in terms of spotting issues that need to be improved

and suggesting ways to resolve them. For example, there were cases where interpreters who had issues with figures were encouraged to practice with speeches full of figures or play an interactive game with native speakers of their source language (SL) who were listing figures that then needed to be interpreted in the interpreter's TL as fast (and accurately) as possible.

TIP: *See your colleagues as your allies. You are a team and you can learn from each other. As one of my favourite sayings goes: 'alone you go fast, but together you go far'.*

However, the fact that feedback should always be constructive and polite cannot be emphasised enough. The way we speak and express ourselves in any language is something very personal and someone may get offended by potential comments even though they may be well-intentioned.

TIP: *Feedback has to do with professional performance. Don't let the word 'feedback' trick you – it has nothing to do with making negative remarks on someone's personality or way of speaking.*



After listening to your colleagues' comments, take a deep breath before starting to reconsider your career path or getting frustrated. Nobody likes listening to negative comments. Who doesn't want to be praised for their good work? But seeing the positive in this seemingly negative situation is of paramount importance here. Interpreting is all about professional evolution in different contexts. It's all about learning different words and concepts in languages which evolve day after day. Don't panic – be constructive! Try to find patterns in your weaknesses (e.g. difficulties with figures, acronyms or a specific accent). Try to work on your issues by having a more learning-oriented approach. As we said, feedback should be constructive and so should your approach towards it.

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About CIOL

CIOL (Chartered Institute of Linguists) is the leading professional body for people using foreign language skills at work, setting the standard for linguists worldwide. Membership offers professional recognition, and our range of membership grades leads to Chartership, recognised worldwide as the gold standard for practitioners, whatever their profession, publicly understood as a badge of quality and competence. We offer many benefits and services, such as mentoring and access to networks. Our awarding organisation, CIOL Qualifications, delivers fully regulated professional language qualifications, such as the Diploma in Public Service Interpreting and the Diploma in Translation, recognised by government departments, agencies, business, universities and schools.

For more information on membership and qualifications, visit ciol.org.uk

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