

# Interpretation

**Interpretation**, or [interpreting](#), is an activity that consists of establishing, either simultaneously or consecutively, oral or gestured communications between two or more speakers who are not able to use the same set of [symbols](#).

For more information, see [interpreting](#).

## Interpreting

**Interpreting** (or **interpretation**) is an activity that consists of establishing, either simultaneously or consecutively, oral or gestured communications between two or more speakers who are not speaking (or signing) the same [language](#).

Note that the words *interpreting* and *interpretation* can both be used to refer to this activity, the word *interpreting* is commonly used in the profession and in the field of [translation studies](#) in an attempt to avoid the secondary meanings of the word *interpretation*. (See the article on [interpretation](#).)

## Interpreting vs. translation

A distinction is made between **translation**, which consists of transferring ideas expressed in *writing* from one language to another, from **interpreting**, which consists of transferring ideas expressed *orally*, or by the use of *gestures* (as in the case of sign language), from one language to another.

## Modalities of interpreting

There exist several types of interpreting. Sometimes we talk of techniques or modalities (simultaneous, consecutive, liaison, whispered); other times we classify them according to where the interpreting takes place (conference interpreting, public service interpreting, etc.):

### Simultaneous interpreting

In simultaneous interpreting, the interpreter will speak while the source-speech speaker is still speaking.

Normally, in simultaneous interpreting the interpreter sits in a sound-proof booth, usually with a clear view of the speaker, at a microphone, listening through headphones to the incoming message in the source language; the interpreter relays the message in the target language into the microphone to whoever is listening. Simultaneous interpreting is sometimes referred to as "simultaneous translation" and the interpreter referred to as the "translator. These terms are incorrect, as discussed in the distinction between interpreting and translation above. In fact, simultaneous interpreting is not strictly "simultaneous" either; except when the interpreter anticipates correctly, there is always a slight time lag.

### **Consecutive interpreting**

In consecutive interpreting, the interpreter starts speaking after the source-text speaker has finished. (The speech may be divided into sections).

Normally, in consecutive interpreting the interpreter is alongside the speaker, listening and making notes as the speech progresses. When the speaker has finished, or comes to a pause, the interpreter reproduces (consecutively) the message in the target language, in its entirety and as though he or she were making the original speech.

### **Whispered interpreting**

In whispered interpreting, the interpreter sits or stands next to a person and whispers the interpretation to him.

Whispered interpretation is often used in situations when the majority of a group speaks one language, with a limited number of people who do not speak that language.

### **Gestured interpreting**

In gestured interpreting a spoken language is interpreted into a visual one (such as [ASL](#), for example) or vice versa.

### **Conference interpreting**

Conference interpreting is simply interpreting in a conference environment. Conference interpreting may be simultaneous or consecutive.

### **Escort interpreting**

In escort interpreting an interpreter accompanies a person or a delegation on a tour, on a visit or to a meeting or interview. An interpreter in this role is called an *escort interpreter* or an *escorting interpreter*.

### **Public Service interpreting**

Also called community interpreting. The mode of interpreting which covers legal, health and local government services, social services, housing, environmental health and education welfare. This modality of interpreting must not be confused with volunteer interpreting and is done by professional interpreters. In community interpreting there appear factors which are determinant and affect production, such as emotional content, hostile or polarized surroundings, created stress, the power relation between the participants, and the degree of responsibility of the interpreter - in many cases more than extreme; even the life of the other person depending, in many cases, on his work. Some legal and medical interpreting practices may be included in public service interpreting.

### **Volunteer interpreting**

See external link below on volunteer interpreting and social commitment.

### **Legal interpreting**

Legal interpreting, or court or judicial interpreting, takes place in courts of justice or administrative tribunals and wherever a legal proceeding is held (such as a conference room for a deposition or the location of a sworn statement). Legal interpreting can take the form of consecutive interpreting of witnesses' statements, for example, or simultaneous interpreting of the entire proceedings by electronic means for one or more of the people in attendance.

Depending on the regulations and standards adhered to per state and venue, court interpreters usually work alone when providing consecutive interpreting services, or as a team when simultaneous interpreting is required. In addition to mastery of the source and target language, an excellent knowledge of law and court procedure is required of court interpreters.

### **Medical interpreting**

Medical interpreting consists of communication between a medical caregiver and a patient and / or family members, facilitated by one qualified to provide such a service. Often, the interpreter is a native speaker of the target language, though this is not always the case. The interpreter must have a strong knowledge of medicine, common procedures, the patient interview and exam process, and the day-to-day workings of the hospital or clinic, in order to be able to serve both the patient and the caregiver. Medical interpreters often act as cultural liaisons for those who are not familiar with, or particularly comfortable in, a hospital setting.

## **Where interpreters work**

The majority of professional full-time interpreters work for international organizations like the [United Nations](#) or the [European Union](#).

The world's largest employer of interpreters is currently the [European Commission](#), which employs hundreds of staff and freelance interpreters working into all of the official [languages of the European Union](#). The [European Union](#)'s other institutions (the [European Parliament](#) and the [European Court of Justice](#)) have smaller interpreting services.

The [United Nations family of organisations](#) employs interpreters at almost all its sites throughout the world. Because it has only seven official languages, however, it is a much smaller employer.

## See also

- [Translation](#)
- [Interpreter](#)

## External links

- [International Association of Conference Interpreters](#)
- [European Commission's Directorate General for Interpretation](#)
- [European Court of Justice Directorate for Interpretation](#)
- [BABELS International network of volunteer translators and interpreters in Social Forums](#)
- [Translation and Interpreting: Volunteer Work and Social Commitment](#)