



Common Oral Interpreting Exam Performance Deficiencies

The National Center for State Courts develops bilingual oral interpreting examinations for use by state court interpreter programs to ensure an objective, uniform, and nationwide performance standard for court interpreter candidates. The scoring process for these exams is based on objective scoring units, which are specific linguistic phenomena that interpreters must be able to deliver for a complete and accurate interpretation. (For additional information on objective scoring units, see the descriptions at the end of this document. For detailed information on the overall scoring process, see the [Court Interpreter Oral Examination: Overview](#).)

Following the oral interpreting examination, candidates receive a *Results Report Form* which indicates test results, including the number of objective scoring units rendered correctly. Although there are a number of factors that may impact a candidate's performance, the Results Report Form *does not* include a holistic assessment or a diagnostic evaluation of the candidate's performance. Therefore, the following examples were designed to assist candidates who want to know why they may have obtained scores lower than they anticipated. Below are **common interpreting deficiencies** that negatively impact performance:¹

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Inaccuracies with Numbers	Candidates misinterpret numbers in any of a variety of ways, e.g., inverting some of the numbers (such as changing 2345 to 2354), omitting some of the numbers in a date or address (e.g., getting the month and year but omitting the number of the day in a date), or just getting them wrong (such as interpreting 86 as 56).
Language Interference	Candidates cannot keep the two languages separate from each other, allowing one language to affect how the candidate interprets into the other language. This often results in an interpretation that is awkward and confusing or even unintelligible to a native speaker of that language. One primary example of this is the use of false cognates, words that sound the same and/or are spelled the same but have completely different meanings in the two languages.
Literal Interpretation	Candidates tend to be bound too much by the source material, resulting in renditions that are too literal, stilted, or at times incomprehensible, and do not sound natural in the target language. Oftentimes, the renderings are "word for word" or driven by the mistaken assumption that the interpretation should be "literal." This is especially problematic for many interpreters during the sight translation section.
Omissions	Candidates completely leave out certain words, phrases, sentences and sometimes even entire paragraphs of source material.
Paraphrasing	Candidates render an approximate or condensed version of the original in his/her "own words" instead of preserving all the elements of the original message.

¹ Deficiencies presented here are meant to be general, and are not specific to particular language pairs.

Primary Causes for Exam Performance Deficiencies

There are several fundamental reasons why an interpreter candidate may demonstrate some or all of the exam performance deficiencies listed above.

1. Many candidates **lack the high level of language proficiency** in one or both languages tested that is required for successful court interpretation. The primary features of this deficiency are:
 - Inadequate range of general vocabulary (including idioms, slang, adjectives, adverbs, verbs and nouns) as well as legal terminology.
 - Inability to construct sentences and use one or the other language appropriately (i.e., grammar).
 - Failure to preserve not just the meaning of the source material, but also its pragmatic use in discourse (issues of emphasis, nuances, and subtleties).
 - Difficulty maintaining the level of language (register) of the source material.
2. Some candidates **lack developed professional interpreting skills** and cannot successfully perform one or more of the three modes of court interpretation. In the sight translation section, many do not know how to analyze a written document and then deliver a smooth oral rendition of it into another language. In the consecutive mode, many candidates have not adequately developed their short-term memory and do not know how to take and use notes effectively to handle utterances that vary in complexity and length. During simultaneous interpretation, many candidates cannot keep up with the speed of the recorded test material, which causes them to fall behind.
3. Candidates also exhibit a **lack of preparation** for the exam. Before the exam, all candidates should prepare by carefully reading and studying the test overview document located at the following link: [Court Interpreter Oral Exam: Overview](#). Candidates should also engage in sustained and frequent practice in each of the modes of interpretation, and be well rested on the day of the exam. Candidates who know exactly what to expect will be better prepared on test day.
4. Finally, candidates also often display a **lack of attention to detail** while taking the exam. During the exam, candidates should follow directions carefully, and pay close attention to every element of the source language material to be interpreted, being careful not to change, soften, harden, omit, or otherwise alter the meaning of the source material.

The field of court interpreting requires a superior command of two languages. Candidates must possess a mastery of both languages to be able to handle the widest range of language terms that may be presented in the courts—from specialized legal and technical terminology to street slang. Candidates must also possess professional interpreting skills. The wide base of knowledge and professional interpreting skills necessary can be acquired through taking college courses, reading widely in many fields of endeavor, observing many hours of court proceedings, internships, mentoring, studying reputable glossaries and dictionaries, and developing one’s own glossary and comparing terminological research with colleagues. Additionally, attending workshops and training events at professional court interpreter conferences may assist with the development of other knowledge, skills, and abilities essential for court interpretation.

It is also imperative for candidates to acquire interpreting techniques through training and practice. It is highly recommended that candidates record themselves while interpreting in a controlled environment. Practice materials, produced by the NCSC for court interpreter candidates to use for skills-building and interpretation practice, can be found at the following link: [Court Interpreter Practice Materials](#).

Additional Information on Scoring Units

Scoring units represent objective characteristics of language that the interpreter must understand and render appropriately during the interpretation. Each scoring unit is a word or phrase that captures a logically complete linguistic unit.²

Tests are scored on the basis of these scoring units. The following table lists the ten categories of scoring units and their corresponding testing goals:³

Scoring Unit Descriptions and Testing Goals

SCORING UNIT CATEGORY	DESCRIPTION	TESTING GOAL(S)
A: Grammar	“Grammar is a system of principles that govern the way a language works. Grammar describes how words are related to each other, particularly how they function in sentences.” ⁴	Ensure that candidates recognize and, within the limits of the source and target languages, satisfactorily handle the interpretation of grammar, especially verbs.
B: Language Interference	Terms or phrases that may invite misinterpretation due to interference of one language on another (e.g., false cognates, awkward phrasing, terms or phrases susceptible to literal renditions resulting in loss of precise meaning).	1-Measure the ability to keep languages separate, speaking them as an educated native speaker would, with no interference from the other language, and 2-Measure the ability to avoid being constricted unnecessarily by the source language resulting in interpretations that are literal or verbatim.
C: General Vocabulary	Vocabulary that is widely used in ordinary parlance and could be spoken by native speakers appearing in any courtroom.	1-Measure the ability to preserve lexical content of general source language terms when interpreted into the target language, 2-Measure the depth and range of candidate’s vocabulary, and 3-Measure the ability to tap into a deep reservoir of vocabulary without hesitating or stumbling.
D: Legal Terms and Phrases	Any word or phrase of a legal or technical nature, or which is not common in everyday speech, but is commonly used in legal settings.	Measure the candidate’s range of knowledge and recognition of common legal terms and styles of language used in courtrooms and the ability to faithfully interpret them into the target language, going into both languages, but especially from English into the other language.
E: Idioms and Sayings	An <i>idiom</i> is a speech form or an expression of a given language that is peculiar to itself grammatically or cannot be understood from the individual meanings of its elements ⁵ . <i>Sayings</i> are short expressions such as aphorisms and proverbs that are often repeated and familiar setting forth wisdom and truth.	Determine the candidate’s breadth of knowledge and understanding of a language’s common idioms and sayings, and the ability to interpret the meaning or an equivalent idiom or saying in the target language.

² William E. Hewitt, *Court Interpretation: Model Guides for Policy and Practice in the State Courts*, (National Center for State Courts, 1995), 104.

³ *Court Interpreter Oral Examination: Test Construction Manual*, National Center for State Courts.

⁴ DiYanni, Robert, and Pat C. Hoy II. *The Scribner Handbook for Writers*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 199, p. 221.

⁵ *The American Heritage College Dictionary*, Third Edition, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1997, p. 674.

F: Register	Style of language drawn upon in various social settings; a key element in expressing degrees of formality, including curses, profanity, and taboo words. Register shows, through a pattern of vocabulary and grammar, what a speaker or writer is doing with language at a given moment.	Assess the candidate's ability to preserve the level of language so that others' impression of the speaker is not raised or lowered by the interpreter and assess the candidate's ability to interpret offensive terminology.
G: Numbers and Names	Any number, measurement, or proper name.	Measure the candidate's ability to be precise and accurate with all numbers, maintain weights and measures as stated in the source language without conversion, maintenance of names of businesses, streets, etc. without interpreting them (except that "Avenue," "Street," etc. may or may not be interpreted, but the actual name is not to be interpreted), and conservation of every letter of a spelled name in the proper order.
H: Markers, Intensifiers, Emphasis and Precision	Any word or phrase giving emphasis or precision to a description (e.g., adverbs, adjectives) or statement (e.g., can be grammatical in form), including time movement (e.g., the day after tomorrow, last night, next week).	Ensure that the various ways of marking speech are preserved so the same degree of impact and precision is conveyed to the listener of the interpretation.
I: Embeddings and Position	Words or phrases that may be omitted due to position (at the beginning or middle of a long sentence, second in a string of adjectives or adverbs) or function (tag questions).	Ensure that candidates preserve all elements of the source language, especially those that they may deem to be unimportant, or forget due to their location or function in the utterance.
J: Slang and Colloquialisms	Slang and colloquialisms are informal, nonstandard words or phrases that are used in informal, ordinary conversation but not in formal speech or writing and are identified in standard dictionaries as "slang," "colloquialism," or "informal" or are listed in published dictionaries of slang and/or colloquialisms or in scholarly articles and books so identifying them. Slang items, which are coined by social groups, may be used in test texts only when they have passed into widespread usage across the United States.	Measure the candidate's range of knowledge of nonstandard, informal forms of speech and their ability to interpret the meaning of such words and phrases without being bound to preserve their low register.