

Court Interpreter Written Examination:
Overview





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<http://www.ncsc.org/Education-and-Careers/State-Interpreter-Certification.aspx>

Publication Date: July 2012

Pennsylvania Revised: April 2015

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This document has been prepared to help persons aspiring to become certified court interpreters understand what the written test measures, how it is administered, and how to prepare for taking the exam. Each examinee should study this overview thoroughly in order to be more fully prepared for the written exam.

The written examination is only one part of the process for becoming a certified or approved court interpreter. Passing this test does not mean a person has become a “certified court interpreter;” rather, it means the examinee has met one of several requirements for certification.

The written test measures candidates’ knowledge of three areas central to the work of a court interpreter at the level of a minimally qualified court interpreter:

1. English Language. To function as a professional court interpreter, one indispensable component is a high degree of proficiency in the English language. Accordingly, the written examination assumes a high degree of literacy in the English language and familiarity with a range of language constructions. It tests comprehension of written English vocabulary and idioms.
2. Court-Related Terms and Usage. A second area of knowledge essential to successful professional performance is familiarity with the terminology and procedures of the court system. Accordingly, the written examination also measures recognition of common court-related situations and vocabulary, *especially in the area of criminal courts.*
3. Ethics and Professional Conduct. The third area of knowledge required of professional court interpreters encompassed in the written test is general knowledge of standards guiding the performance of duties. Accordingly, the written exam includes questions aimed at measuring candidates’ knowledge of ethical behavior and professional conduct.

What does the test look like?

In Pennsylvania the test consists of a multiple-choice exam which contains 135 questions and a language assessment exercise. In the multiple-choice test each question has four choices, labeled A, B, C, and D. The candidate is instructed to select the **best** choice and mark that choice on the answer sheet. Pennsylvania also administers a foreign language assessment exercise as part of the written exam. It consists of ten (10) items which the examinee is required to translate into his/her language of expertise.

The multiple-choice test has two parts:

Part I: General Language Proficiency, and

Part II: Court-Related Terms & Usage, and Ethics & Professional Conduct.

Within each part there are several sections, each of which contains a particular category of questions. There are specific instructions for how to proceed at the beginning of each section. A complete list of the sections, including one or more sample questions for each, is provided in Appendix A.

The language assessment exercise has ten items each of which may consist of one or more sentences. The legal vocabulary on the translation exercise is limited to those common legal terms with which the general public would be familiar. See Appendix C for more information and sample items of the translation exercise

How will the test be scheduled? What do I need to know?

The Interpreter Certification Program will notify you in writing by mail or e-mail a minimum of two weeks before the test date. The notice will advise you when and where to report for the test and may include directions to the test site.

Arrive early. No one will be admitted late. There are no exceptions and no one arriving late for any reason will be able to take the test at that test session.

Only small purses or wallets are allowed in the testing room. Leave everything else at home or in your car. Do not try to bring briefcases, palm pilots, tablets, dictionaries, gym bags, cell phones, calculators, paper, pens, pencils, or any other similar items into the test room as you will not be admitted to the test room with them. Pencils will be provided in the test room.

There may be a registration area where you will report and sign in. In the testing room, there will be a test administration supervisor, and there may be another test proctor present to assist.

Use the restroom prior to entering the testing room. If you ask to leave the testing room after the test has begun, you will be instructed to leave all of your test materials with the test administration supervisor prior to leaving the room. You may be escorted to the restroom to ensure that you do not use a telephone or converse with other individuals while you are outside of the testing room. No more than one candidate will be allowed to leave the testing room at the same time. No adjustments to the time allotted for completion of the exam will be made for any time you are outside of the testing room.

How will the test be administered?

The administration protocol, described below, is recommended practice. It is specifically noted here that from state to state, there may be some deviation from the exact recommendation. However the protocol described will, in large part, reflect administration practices.

In Pennsylvania, the test will be given in classroom style to a number of candidates at the same time in the same room. A test administration supervisor, who is responsible for oversight of the entire test administration process, will decide what staff members are present to assist with proctoring the examination.

Seating will be assigned. Depending upon the seating arrangements, some examinees may be asked to move from one seat and occupy another. If this happens, it is for test security measures and the candidates should not be troubled or concerned.

Security of the test materials is obviously essential. Examinees may not take notes or copy any portion of the exam.

Proctors will monitor examinees throughout the examination to prevent cheating and, if cheating occurs, detect and deal with it. They may circulate throughout the room, but they will not disturb the examinees. If a proctor suspects that an examinee is cheating in any way, including giving or receiving assistance during the examination, communicating with others, retaining or copying examination questions, or using prohibited aids, the proctor will follow specific protocol for addressing the situation.

If an examinee is disruptive, engages in clear or flagrant cheating, or attempts to copy questions or retain or record test materials, the examinee may be expelled from the testing room and advised that his or her examination will not be scored. Documentation of the expulsion and the reasons for it will be maintained by the state.

Once all examinees are seated for the exam, the test administrator will hand out materials packets and two pencils to each person. He or she will read scripted instructions to the examinees in order to ensure that all candidates receive the same instructions each time the examination is given. Then the examinees will be directed to read and execute an Agreement and Oath Form. Next, examinees will prepare their answer sheets by entering their name and social security number, the test date, and the test site. Examinees must listen to the instructions carefully and must not begin the examination until the test administration supervisor says, "You may begin."

Candidates are allowed two hours and fifteen minutes to complete the multiple-choice part of the examination. A clock will be provided in each testing room to assist candidates who do not bring their own timepiece. The test administrator will mark time. Fifteen minutes before the end of the test, the test administrator will make the following announcement out loud: "You have fifteen minutes remaining."

At the beginning of each section of the multiple-choice test there are instructions on how to answer the questions in that section. As examinees work their way through the test, they should carefully read the instructions for each section to be sure they understand how to answer that section's questions. The types of instructions you will find will be to select the answer that:

- Is closest in meaning;
- Most appropriately completes a sentence;
- Best answers a question or provides the best solution to a situation;
- Has the correct sequence of events; or
- Is opposite in meaning.

See Appendix A for sample questions from the various sections of the exam.

The translation exercise consists of ten (10) items that the examinee is required to translate into his/her language of expertise. Candidates will have one (1) hour to translate all ten items. Dictionaries and other translation aides are not allowed during the test. See Appendix C for sample items of the translation exercise.

What is the passing score? How will I learn the results?

In order to pass the multiple-choice part of the test, 80 percent of the items must be answered correctly. That means the examinee must answer at least 108 of the 135 items correctly in order to pass. The language assessment exercise is graded on a pass/borderline/not pass basis. Candidates must demonstrate sufficient command of the grammar, vocabulary, syntax and punctuation of their language without excessive or critical errors. The Interpreter Certification Program will ordinarily advise the examinee of the results of the test by mail in four to six weeks. Reminder: Passing this test does not mean you are now a "certified" or "qualified" court interpreter.

What can I do to prepare for the test?

A list of possible activities and resources has been compiled to help you identify actions you can take to help prepare for the exam. Some of the resources may help you decide whether you are ready to participate in a test of this nature. The list is attached and marked as Appendix B. You should not attempt to take the test until you are confident that you have properly studied and prepared.

What if I don't pass the exam?

This written examination is constructed to measure entry-level knowledge of

- English general vocabulary
- common words and phrases likely to be heard in court
- the typical progression of cases through the court system, and
- provisions of a code of professional responsibility

that a minimally competent person entering the court interpreting field would need to know.

If you do not pass the exam, it is suggested that you resist the temptation to simply register to retake the exam. Experience shows that retaking an examination of this kind within a short time period will not substantially change the results. Instead, you are encouraged to review the section of this Overview entitled “What can I do to prepare for the test?” and Appendix B, and engage in some reading and preparatory study before retaking the examination.

In Pennsylvania, if you do not pass the multiple-choice part, you must wait at least six (6) months before registering to retake the test again and the language assessment exercise will not be rated. If you pass the multiple-choice part but do not pass the translation exercise, you must wait six (6) months to retake the language assessment again. It is recommended to every state that no candidate should take the same test more than once in a calendar year and in no event, the same version of the test more than twice.

Special Accommodations for Americans with Disabilities

If you have a disability recognized by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), you must request special accommodation *in advance*. In order to do so, you should complete the attached Request for Special Accommodation and submit it to the Interpreter Certification Program as far ahead of the test date as possible. You must describe your disability and describe the type or kind of accommodation you are requesting. In addition, you must submit a statement from an appropriate professional documenting the diagnosis or evaluation of your disability. These forms are also available from the program's website.

Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts

Request for ADA Accommodation

Complete this form only if you are requesting individual testing arrangements because you have a disability recognized by the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

APPLICANT NAME: _____

Have you been diagnosed with a disability that is recognized by the ADA: Yes___ No___

Describe the type of disability:

I request an accommodation, which is described on the *Documentation of Accommodation*, attached hereto.

Signature

Date

Attach the Documentation of Accommodation form and submit to:

Administrative Office of Pennsylvania Courts
Interpreter Certification Program
1515 Market Street, Suite 1414
Philadelphia, PA 19102

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE OF PENNSYLVANIA COURTS

DOCUMENTATION OF ACCOMMODATION

This section must be completed by an appropriate professional (doctor, psychologist, psychiatrist, or education professional) to certify that your disabling condition requires the requested exam accommodation.

If you have existing documentation of having the same or similar accommodation provided to you in another test situation, you may submit such documentation instead of having this portion of the form completed.

I HAVE KNOWN _____ SINCE _____
(APPLICANT NAME) (DATE)

AS A _____
(PATIENT OR OTHER PROFESSIONAL RELATIONSHIP)

I HAVE DIAGNOSED OR EVALUATED THE APPLICANT MYSELF AND I AM NOT RELYING UPON FACTS RELATED TO ME BY THE APPLICANT. MY DIAGNOSIS IS _____

(DESCRIBE THE MEDICAL OR OTHER CONDITION)

THE APPLICANT HAS DISCUSSED WITH ME THE NATURE OF THE TEST TO BE ADMINISTERED. IT IS MY PROFESSIONAL OPINION THAT BECAUSE OF THIS APPLICANT'S DISABILITY, HE/SHE SHOULD BE ACCOMMODATED BY PROVIDING THE FOLLOWING:

(CHECK ONLY THOSE THAT APPLY)

Large print type	Extra time (how much?)
Separate testing area	An examination reader
Other oral administration (describe)	Other accommodation (describe)

Signature and title of professional _____
Printed name and title _____
Date _____ Telephone Number _____

Sections in Part I, General Language Proficiency

Sentence Completion. Items 1 through 9 consist of unfinished sentences. The candidate is instructed to select from a list of four words or phrases the one that best completes the sentence.

Example: A person who feels persecuted in his/her home country may apply for political

- A. appellation
- B. appraisal
- C. asylum
- D. ascendance

(C is the best answer)

Synonyms in Context. Items 10 through 17 consist of sentences that contain an underlined word or phrase. The candidate is instructed to choose from a list of four words or phrases the one that is closest in meaning to the underlined word or phrase.

Example: It was done pursuant to the proceedings of the court.

- A. in accordance with
- B. in addition to
- C. in conjunction with
- D. in spite of

(A is the answer that is closest in meaning)

Synonyms. Items 18 through 38 consist of words or phrases. The candidate is instructed to select from a list of four words or phrases the one that has the same meaning or closest to the same meaning as the word or phrase provided.

Example 1: Scaffold

- A. platform
- B. table
- C. prop
- D. curtain

(A is the answer that is closest in meaning)

Example 2: Hubris

- A. exaggerated pride
- B. steadfast loyalty
- C. extreme shyness
- D. committed fidelity

(A is the answer that is closest in meaning)

Antonyms. Items 39 through 50 consist of words or phrases. The candidate is instructed to select from a list of four words or phrases the one that is opposite in meaning to the word or phrase provided.

Example: Excessive

- A. stingy
- B. large
- C. robust
- D. restricted

(D is the correct answer, opposite in meaning)

Idioms. Items 51 through 75 consist of sentences that contain an underlined idiomatic expression. The candidate is instructed to select from the list of four words or phrases the one that is closest in meaning to the underlined idiom.

Example 1: Do you need to make a pit stop before we get there?

- A. get some money
- B. go to the bathroom
- C. empty the trash
- D. make a phone call

(B is the answer that is closest in meaning)

Example 2: His career as an attorney is all washed up.

- A. off to a late start
- B. off to a good start
- C. completely over
- D. very profitable

(C is the answer that is closest in meaning)

Sections in Part II, Court-Related Terms & Usage, and
Ethics & Professional Conduct

(The legal terms found in items 76 through 125
are taken largely from criminal court case types.)

Sentence Completion. Items 76-111 consist of unfinished sentences that are likely to be heard in the court environment. The candidate is instructed to select from a list of four words or phrases the one that most appropriately completes the sentence.

Example 1: A case decided without prejudice means that

- A. there is no right to a new trial
- B. there is an automatic appeal of the case
- C. there is a right to a new trial
- D. there are no racial overtones in the case

(C is the answer that most appropriately completes the sentence)

Example 2: A defendant is required to give up certain constitutional rights

- A. after being found guilty at trial
- B. before entering a plea of guilty
- C. only if represented by a public defender
- D. only after probation is granted

(B is the answer that most appropriately completes the sentence)

Court-Related Questions. Items 112 through 121 consist of questions on court-related topics. The candidate is instructed to select from a list of four choices the one that is the best answer.

Example: Which of the following would be a concurrent sentence?

- A. two years for burglary, two years for robbery: two years in jail
- B. two years for theft, two years for assault: four years in jail
- C. four years for rape, three years for a second rape: seven years in jail
- D. four years for rape, two years for assault: two years in jail

(A is the best answer)

Sequence. Items 122 through 125 consist of questions about the proper sequence of events in court-related situations. The candidate is instructed to select from a list of four choices the one that correctly describes the order in which the events should occur.

Example: Which of the following is a correct sequence of event?

- A. Jury Charge, Jury Deliberation, Jury Instructions, Jury Verdict
- B. Jury Sworn, Jury Verdict, Jury Charge, Jury Deliberation
- C. Jury Deliberation, Jury Sworn, Jury Instructions, Jury Verdict
- D. Jury Sworn, Jury Charge, Jury Deliberation, Jury Verdict

(D is the correct sequence of events)

Professional Conduct Questions. Items 126 and 127 consist of questions about the appropriate course of professional conduct an interpreter should take. The candidate is instructed to select from a list of four choices the one that is the best answer.

Example: Which of the following is most important for you to do when you are interpreting at the witness stand?

- A. keep your eyes on the jury
- B. keep your dictionary and note pad at hand
- C. keep eye contact with the witness at all times
- D. keep the judge informed of contradictory testimony

(B is the best answer)

Scenarios. Items 128 through 135 consist of brief scenarios describing situations an interpreter might encounter while interpreting in the courts that would pose ethical or professional problems. The candidate is instructed to select from a list of four alternatives the best solution or course of action.

Example: An expert witness is giving testimony regarding blood alcohol content while you are interpreting for the defendant. The testimony is very complex, and even though you can interpret it at the same level, you sense that the defendant does not understand such technical language. What is the best thing for you to do in this situation?

- A. advise the judge that the defendant does not understand
- B. interpret at the same level as the witness
- C. ask the judge for permission to explain for the witness
- D. summarize the testimony for the defendant in language he can understand

(B is the best solution)

If you are not familiar with taking written, multiple-choice tests, you may find it beneficial to:

1. Review instructions and suggestions on taking multiple-choice tests such as:
 - a. “Information about the Written Examination,” Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination (<http://www.ncsc.org/fcice/>) on page 16.
2. Study preparation material developed for similar exams, or even take the exams
 - a. TOEFL: (<http://www.ets.org/toefl/ibt/prepare/>). There are many other publications available as well.

With respect to Part I, General Language Proficiency, one needs to have a very broad command of the English language. That is not something that is quickly or easily acquired. However, some of the following activities might be helpful in expanding one’s knowledge of the English language and preparing for the test:

1. Take upper-level English courses at a college or university.
2. Read widely such items as books and professional journals in many fields, American literature, and editorials and articles in major newspapers.
3. Brush up on English vocabulary and lexical concepts (go back to the basics and review antonyms, synonyms, and idioms).
4. Review sample tests from other interpreter certification programs:
 - a. Administrative Office of the United States Courts: For a description of the written portion of the Federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination (FCICE), go to www.ncsc.org/fcice/. A sample test can be found in the Examinee Handbook.
5. Consult other resources, such as:
 - a. The Idiom Connection, available online at: <http://www.idiomconnection.com/>.
 - b. The ESL Idiom Page, (Dennis Oliver), available online at: www.eslcafe.com/idioms.
 - c. The Synonyms Page, available online at: <http://www.synonyms.net/>.
 - d. SAT and GRE workbooks.
 - e. Vocabulary-building books found in the reference section of libraries and bookstores.

With respect to Part II, Court-Related Terms & Usage, and Ethics & Professional Conduct, the following activities would be helpful in expanding or acquiring the substantive knowledge pertinent to these fields:

Court-Related Terms & Usage

1. Read news items related to legal matters, law enforcement, and the courts in major newspapers, consulting a dictionary to look up unfamiliar words.
2. Visit courthouses and observe court proceedings in civil, criminal, and family matters.
3. Take college/university courses in criminal justice and court administration.
4. Read any standard introductory textbook on the criminal justice system.
5. Read publications about the administration of justice such as the following documents issued by the American Bar Association (<http://apps.americanbar.org/abastore/index.cfm?section=Main&fm=Product.Search&type=b&sgcd=&k=law+and+the+courts>), which are available for \$2.50 each:
 - a. Law & the Courts, Volume I, *The Role of the Courts*, 2000.
 - b. Law & the Courts, Volume II, *Court Procedures*, 1998.
 - c. Law & the Courts, Volume III, *Juries*, 2001.
6. Study legal terms from the following sources:
 - a. Black's Law Dictionary
 - b. Glossary of Commonly Used Court & Justice System Terminology (a publication that is available at <http://www.ncsc.org/Education-and-Careers/~media/Files/PDF/Education%20and%20Careers/State%20Interpreter%20Certification/Glossary%20of%20Legal%20Terms%2010-10.ashx>).
 - c. The Pennsylvania glossary of legal terms is available in the Unified Judicial System website at: <http://www.pacourts.us/learn/legal-glossary>.

Ethics & Professional Conduct

1. Become familiar with the Rules of Conduct and Professional Responsibility for Judiciary Interpreters and the Interpreter Regulations pertaining to court interpreting. Pennsylvania's code is at: <http://www.pacourts.us/judicial-administration/court-programs/interpreter-program/interpreter-rules-of-conduct>.
2. Study the model code of professional responsibility, which is available at: <http://cdm16501.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/accessfair/id/162>.
3. Join and participate actively in a professional association such as the National Association of Judicial Interpreters and Translators (www.najit.org) or the American Translators Association (www.atanet.org), studying their respective codes of ethics.
4. Read at least one of the classic texts in the field:
 - a. Berk-Seligson, Susan (1990). *The Bilingual Courtroom: Court Interpreters in the Judicial Process*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
 - b. de Jongh, E.M. (1992). *An Introduction to Court Interpreting: Theory and Practice*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
 - c. de Jongh, Elena M. *From the Classroom to the Courtroom: A guide to interpreting in the U.S. justice system*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2012. ISBN 978 90 272 3194 9
 - d. Edwards, Alicia B. (1995). *The Practice of Court Interpreting*. Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

- e. Gonzalez, R.D., Vasquez, V.F., and Mikkelson, H. (1991). *Fundamentals of Court Interpretation: Theory, Policy and Practice*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press.
- f. Hewitt, William E. (1995). *Court Interpretation: Model Guides for Policy and Practice in the State Courts*. Williamsburg, VA: National Center for State Courts (available online at <http://cdm16501.contentdm.oclc.org/cdm/ref/collection/accessfair/id/162>).
- g. Mikkelson, H. (2000). *Introduction to Court Interpreting*. Manchester, UK: St. Jerome Publishing.

Overview

A court interpreter is considered a "language expert." Therefore, it is important that candidates for certification have a college-level command of their working languages.

The Language Assessment Exercise of the written test consists of 10 items that the examinee is required to translate into his/her language of expertise. Examinees will have one (1) hour to complete the translation of all ten items. The legal vocabulary on the translation exam is limited to those common legal terms with which the general public would be familiar. The translation exercise is administered on the same date, and immediately after the completion of the 135 multiple-choice written examination.

Dictionaries and other translations aides are not allowed during the test. Please do not bring them with you as you will not be able to use them.

The Language Assessment Exercise is graded on a pass/borderline/not pass basis and each test is rated and reviewed by trained and certified interpreters or language experts. Examinees must demonstrate a basic command of the grammar, vocabulary, syntax, and punctuation of their language without excessive or critical errors. Candidates will receive an assessment of their performance with indications of the areas needing improvement.

Who has to take the Language Assessment Exercise?

Candidates who interpret in a language for which there is a full or abbreviated oral examination must take the Language Assessment Exercise of the written exam. When there is no full or abbreviated oral exam in any of a candidate's working languages, they will not have to take the translation exercise. Sign language interpreters are exempt from the translation exercise.

Important instructions to remember

- Please print your translations. If a word is illegible it will be marked incorrect.
- Do not give more than one translation for any word.
- Do not write in all upper case letters or outside the printed margin.

What areas are evaluated when the exam is rated?

- Grammar, syntax, and punctuation
- Accuracy of translation
- Command of general and legal vocabulary
- Spelling, sentence construction, and correct placement of accents (if applicable)

Sample items

The following are representative of the length and difficulty of the translation exam items.

- The truck sideswiped the car while the motorist was trying to jumpstart his vehicle on the shoulder of the highway. He was told at the body shop that it would cost over \$1,500 to pound out the dents.
- The victim's family identified his corpse in the morgue on the night of the drive-by shooting. The witnesses will receive subpoenas to appear in court for the first hearing.
- There were many things missing from my carport when I returned home. They included an electric screwdriver, a sawhorse, a dolly and some sheets of plywood. A police report has been filed.
- Many women suffer from the so-called "battered woman syndrome." Courts are becoming more sensitive to these kinds of cases. The county has set up several shelters for abused women.
- Ms. Myers said that she observed the defendant pull the trigger of the gun before he fled. She also testified that she remembers that the barrel of the gun was about eight inches long

