

Supporting and developing
language professionals
worldwide

CIOL

Preparing for a Public Service interpreting assignment

Zora Jackman
MCIL DPSI



About the author

Zora Jackman

I grew up in the Czech Republic and graduated from the Prague School of Economics. Studying Tourism at the Business Faculty involved learning languages and I used my language skills first as a tour guide and later as a translator and interpreter for local businesses. After moving to the UK I worked as a public service interpreter and gained my Diploma in Public Service Interpreting (DPSI) in 2007, winning the Corsellis Cup for the best candidate in the Health pathway. Consequently, I was admitted as a Member of the Chartered Institute of Linguists. In 2018 I became a Qualified Member (Translator) of the Institute of Translation and Interpreting. As well as being a freelance translator and interpreter, I have been teaching public service interpreting courses at Cardiff University since 2010. In both 2018 and 2019 I had the privilege of collecting the Nuffield Trophy for the Best DPSI Centre on behalf of the School of Modern Languages. I have also been involved in training public service providers, medical students, clinical psychology students and student nurses and midwives.



Preparing for a Public Service Interpreting Assignment

When we are approached with a request to carry out an interpreting assignment, whether directly by public service providers or by an agency on their behalf, it is essential to act in line with our Code of Professional Conduct. As a member of the CIOL, you will be familiar with its principles, and you can always re-visit the Code at the CIOL website. As a public service interpreter, you may also be registered with NRPSI (the National Register of Public Service Interpreters) and therefore be bound by the NRPSI Code of Professional Conduct. And even if you are not, I would recommend becoming familiar with their Code as NRPSI is an independent, voluntary public interest body whose role is to ensure that good standards within the profession are consistently maintained for the benefit of not just the public but also the interpreters. Members of ITI (Institute of Translation and Interpreting) are also bound by their Code of Professional Conduct based on the same principles.

All the above-mentioned Codes include the principle of competence. In fact, Linguistic competence, Subject competence and Professional competence are three of the general principles of the CIOL Code of Professional Conduct.

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS

To comply with the principle of competence, I would like to start with finding out the **subject matter**, as we must be familiar with the specialist field involved in the work we are going to undertake. So, the important question we need to ask is – what is the nature of the assignment? Not just whether it is in a medical, legal or local government context; we will need more details, such as: What medical condition or procedure is involved? In the case of a court hearing, what type of hearing? What is the offence? Are we interpreting for the witness or for the defendant? If it is a police assignment, is it an interview with the suspect or taking a witness statement (in case of a witness statement, do I have a sufficient written command of English and the other language concerned?) It may sometimes be difficult to obtain that information for various reasons (e.g. the agency does not have all the details or there may be confidentiality issues) but the more we can find out, the better we can decide whether we are competent to accept the assignment and prepare ourselves so as to ensure the best possible outcome for the service provider and their client – the other language speaker.

We must also consider our personal limitations – is the subject matter sensitive? Could it have a deep emotional impact on us? This may apply, for example, to dealing with a terminal illness, mental health issues, domestic violence, rape or child pornography.

The next thing we need to try to find out is the **name of the other language speaker** in order to make sure there is no potential conflict of interest, to ensure our impartiality. If we feel that we know the person in other than our professional capacity or, in a case of criminal justice, that we have already been involved in another stage of the same case, we need to disclose it, and if we only find out when we arrive to the assignment, it may be too late and the impact on the outcome of the assignment may be negative if it is inappropriate for us to accept that particular assignment. In certain circumstances we may also need to consider whether the gender of the other language speaker is important.

It goes without saying that we need to check that we speak the correct **language** or **dialect** to comply with the principle of linguistic competence. Other obvious factors that are important for our decision to accept the assignment are the **date, time, location and expected duration** of the assignment. We always have to make sure that we can arrive at the venue in good time as being late can badly affect all the

parties present (think for example of missed hospital appointments that would need to be re-booked). Don't forget to ask about parking where appropriate, to save time looking for a convenient parking space. If you have limited availability, perhaps you have already accepted another assignment later that day, make it clear, even if you are told that "it is only a short job, you will be finished in an hour", and remind everyone again upon your arrival, so the client can make arrangements in case the interpreting session turns out to take longer than anticipated.

Your decision whether to accept or decline the assignment will also depend on **remuneration**. If we receive a request from our usual contacts, we can just assure ourselves that we will be working for an already agreed fee and under previously agreed terms and conditions. If it is a new client, you may need to quote your fees and check that travelling, mileage and parking will be paid as well as your attendance time and make sure you agree on a minimum fee, cancellation fee and payment terms. I recommend that all this is confirmed in writing, most likely in the form of a confirmation email with terms and conditions attached, and that you always read the "small print" (I once noticed, just as I was going to accept an assignment, that the agency's terms and conditions included the clause that I would only get paid when they receive payment from their client, which made me check any

terms and conditions very carefully ever since). To summarise, make sure that it is clear how much you are being paid per hour of attendance (and this may also be your minimum fee), for the time you spend travelling and how your travel expenses are paid (mileage or public transport fees). And don't forget any potential parking fees and tolls.

And finally, when you are happy to say "yes, it will be my pleasure to accept the job", just make sure that you have all the necessary **contact details**, i.e. contact name and telephone number of the person who is booking you and the name of the contact person to ask for on arrival.

Here is a check list of the questions we need to consider:

- When and where will I be needed?
- Do I speak the correct language and dialect?
- What is the assignment about?
- What is the name of the other language speaker?
- Have I agreed on fees and payment terms and has it been confirmed in writing?
- Do I have all necessary contact details?

DO YOUR RESEARCH


So unless you have been asked to attend immediately due to the urgent nature of the assignment (such as a request from the police when they have someone in custody), you are ready to start with your research.

First, think of the following points:

- Where are you going (hospital, police station, home visit, solicitor's office); have you been there before?
- Who is going to be part of the interpreting session (patient/doctor, social worker/parent, victim of crime/police officer etc.)?
- What will they be talking about?

Then do your research:

There are various apps you can use to find out the best way to travel to a location and how long it will take you but I also tend to do some research in advance as we cannot always 100% rely on our smart devices (think what may happen if you insert a wrong postcode into your GPS navigation). Consider how long your journey to the assignment may take at that time of the day and the likely duration of the assignment, so you can plan your other commitments around it.



Look up the website of the service provider, you may find useful information including how to get there, patient information leaflets and even glossaries of terms.


Identify any specialist terminology; consult dictionaries, glossaries and online resources. Find websites related to the topic in both your working languages. I find Wikipedia very good for specialist terminology as there is often the relevant website in my language as well as in English. I also frequently come across useful YouTube videos, such as on medical conditions and procedures, and many videos can be found on the NHS website. The UK government website, gov.uk, is a good starting point for the range of documents and glossaries in a public service context.

Create your own glossary. This is an ongoing task for every interpreter as we need to be continuously learning new terminology to expand our knowledge, so I would like to offer some general advice here. A glossary, unlike a dictionary, is devoted to a specific topic and gives more information. It can be arranged in categories and subcategories, for example:

Law > Criminal Justice > Police > Custody procedures > Interview of suspect

Terms that overlap can be placed under several categories and subcategories. There should be room for an explanation of what the term means. The glossary should be expandable (it should allow for more terms to be added as they come up) and you should be able to sort it and search it. It is also a good idea to keep references to your resources, such as the link to a particularly useful website.

For those interpreting in the courts I recommend attending public court hearings, whether in Magistrates' courts or a Crown court; I still remember visiting our local court before my very first court interpreting assignment many years ago, where I was able to speak to a very supportive colleague interpreter and get some useful advice on my upcoming job from one of the solicitors. Please be aware, though, to follow the court etiquette. It is a good idea to ask a member of court staff if you can take notes and if permitted, write down all terminology that you are unfamiliar with to then research it at home and add to your glossaries. And although it may be tempting to audio record the hearing for further research, be aware that doing so would constitute contempt of court.



You can create your glossary in various ways, for example:

- Excel spreadsheets
- Word tables
- Ring binder etc.

The aim is to store all terminology in one place and make it easy to find and use. So when you are preparing for a particular assignment you can just add any new terms to it.

And finally, speak to other interpreters. Networking is a very useful tool for all professionals, whether it is in person at seminars, workshops or conferences or just meeting for a coffee, or through a number of online forums and social media groups. You may even find a Mentor through the CIOL's Mentoring Platform if you are a CIOL member.

PACK YOUR BAG

Once you have done all your research, you are ready to go. But before you set off, check that you have all you need to carry out the assignment with peace of mind.

Although there are certain items that we always carry with us, such as our mobile devices and chargers or power packs, reading glasses or regular medication, we need to consider additional items that should always be a part of professional interpreter's "grab bag".

Here is my checklist:

- my interpreter badge (or other form of ID)
- contact details of the person making the booking and address of the venue (although this would likely be in an email stored on my smart device)
- notepad and pens (for taking notes)
- some loose change (for car parks, vending machines or tolls)
- a snack and water (it may be a long day)
- small, specialist bilingual dictionary and my relevant glossaries (there is always time for last minute checks)
- written versions of commonly used speeches or documents, e.g. consent declaration, personal introduction, witness perjury declaration etc. (with translations – makes life easier)
- spare claim forms (for regular clients)
- something to do while I wait (a book or a magazine, to take a break from looking at the screen of my mobile)

ON ARRIVAL: BRIEFING

Cambridge Dictionary defines briefing as “Information that is given to someone just before they do something, or a meeting where this happens”.

Briefing is good practice in a public service interpreting context but is not always possible. In some cases, you may have the contact details of the service provider; you can contact them by telephone or email and explain that having prior information about the assignment will help you prepare better.

If you are not able to contact the service provider in advance, see if you can speak to them when you arrive, before the start of the interpreting session. This is more likely to happen in courts with solicitors or in police stations with police officers but less likely in busy hospitals. If you are going for a home visit (with a social worker, health visitor etc.) make sure you meet the service provider outside – you should never go into the house alone – and if possible, agree on a meeting place in advance; this should give you some space for briefing, explaining your role and agreeing on how to proceed before you knock on the door.

If you get an opportunity, ask for any information you can, such as:

- **Who will be there?** This will give you an idea about the number of people present and their roles.
- **What is the main purpose of the session?** This will help to achieve a good outcome.
- **Will any special terms be used?** This will give you an opportunity to ask for an explanation and do some quick research before the start of the session.
- **Are there any documents that you can see or have a copy of?** You may be asked to do sight translation, documents may be read during the session or forms may need to be filled.
- **Is there anything special you should know?** Don't allow yourself to be caught by surprise.

You can also use the briefing to explain your role as not all service providers have worked with a professional interpreter before. I always make sure to make it clear that I am impartial and unable to offer advice or give my opinion, that I am bound by confidentiality and that I will be interpreting everything that will be said. At that point I would

ask the service provider that they address the other language speaker directly, rather than addressing me, the interpreter, and that I will be using direct speech, rather than reporting on what the speaker said. I may also explain the mode of interpreting I will be using, most likely consecutive (unless simultaneous interpreting is more appropriate if I am interpreting in court for a defendant or possibly in a meeting where the other language speaker is not addressed directly), and ask them to pause after a sentence or two to allow me to interpret, and that I may take notes to assist my memory. I also like to say that I will use a hand signal if I need to intervene, addressing myself as “the interpreter”, and will explain the reason for intervention in both languages.

I will then advise that I will also inform the other language speaker(s) and any other people present about my role, unless the service provider is happy to do it themselves with me interpreting it for the other language speaker(s).

STARTING THE INTERPRETING SESSION


If there is no briefing, the introduction should be done at the beginning of the interpreting session and every time someone new joins the conversation, if at all possible. There is generally no prescribed wording for the introduction (although some police forces may formally introduce the interpreter at the beginning of the interview) so I recommend that you explain your role in your own

words depending on the context of your interpreting assignment, but don't forget to do it in both languages.

When everyone is present, do your best to sit in a place that allows you to see and hear both parties well, getting as close as possible to the ideal triangular position where you are sitting at an equal distance from both the service provider and the other language speaker. However, this may not always be possible; in courts you will be required to sit or stand next to the defendant or the witness; in police stations the chairs or benches may be firmly fixed to the floor; in hospitals you may need to stand behind a screen during a medical examination. But whatever position you assume, whether you are sitting or standing, try and think of your posture – we do not want to end up with bad backs or stiff necks after hours of interpreting.

BE PREPARED FOR A CHALLENGE

Now all is left for you to do is to use your best knowledge and skills to help the speakers of different languages to overcome the language barrier and allow them to communicate with each other in often stressful circumstances, maintaining your impartiality at all times. The Codes of Professional Conduct are here to help us and provide guidance and support in difficult situations, as we all face dilemmas at times. And if we are ready to deal with them, we will most likely achieve the best possible outcome for everyone involved.



Interpreting is not just about terminology; we will never know all the specialist terms however well prepared we are, due to the very nature of public service interpreting. We may come across medical terminology in court or legal terminology within the social services. I believe that interpreting in public services is also about effective communication, including clearly communicating our role to all the parties and working together whilst staying impartial.

IMPROVING AND EXPANDING KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

After the interpreting session it is helpful to analyse your own performance in order to be even better prepared next time. Try to think about the following points:

- **What went well?** This gives us satisfaction and we can further build on good practice.
- **What did not go well and why?** We may face an unexpected challenge or people we work with may have different expectations.
- **What did I do well?** Reflecting on how well we were prepared and how we have learned from previous experiences.
- **What could I do next time to help a similar session go more smoothly?** Learning from our experience and putting it into practice.

It is also important to ask: How do I feel? Was I emotionally affected? This may help you make decision next time you are offered a similar assignment and also prompt you to try and follow some self-care strategies.

We should also consider taking up an appropriate type of insurance; having professional indemnity insurance in place is recommended by the CIOL's Code of Professional Conduct and this can be obtained for example through your professional organisations, such as the CIOL.

And finally, let's not forget that we are professionals with a very specific set of skills, enabling effective communication whilst delivering a public service.

Supporting and developing
language professionals
worldwide



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

Contact

CIOL | Chartered Institute of Linguists
7th Floor, 167 Fleet Street
London EC4A 2EA
United Kingdom
+44 (0)20 7940 3100
info@ciol.org.uk

