

Advice to Students wishing to become Conference Interpreters

You're attracted to a career that would enable you to work with languages. You've heard about conference interpreting but you're not sure exactly what it involves, what studies to pursue, or what opportunities may be available. Here are some questions to consider, and some further information that may point you toward finding your answers.

AllC Training Committee

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What do conference interpreters do?

Conference interpreters:

- bridge the gap in all kinds of multilingual settings where speakers want to express themselves in their own language and still understand one another (conferences, negotiations, press briefings, seminars, depositions, TV broadcasts: you name it!);
- do not do written translation: translators work with written texts, interpreters convey ideas orally;
- do not just parrot: they convert ideas expressed in one language (the source language) into another language (the target language) as smoothly and idiomatically as possible, preserving the meaning, tone and nuance of the original speaker;
- interpret "[consecutively](#)": i.e. the interpreter is in the same room as the participants, listening carefully to what is said, perhaps taking notes; when each speaker pauses, the interpreter conveys the same message from source to target language;
- interpret "[simultaneously](#)": i.e. the interpreters work in a team sitting in a soundproof [booth](#); they take turns conveying each speaker's ideas from source to target language in real-time; the audience in the conference room listens through headsets;
- interpret using "chuchotage" or "[whispering](#)": i.e. the interpreter is in the same room as the participants providing a whispered interpretation in real-time to a small number of listeners;

Can I be a professional conference interpreter without proper training?

Perhaps: some have managed it, some still do...

- the interpreters who provided the first simultaneous interpretation at the post-World War II trials had to sink or swim: they had no choice but to train themselves, *but you don't have to reinvent the wheel!*;
- since the 1970s, [interdisciplinary research](#) has helped us better grasp the complex processes involved in interpreting and develop new and effective teaching methods;
- systematic training today is the surest route to expertise and successful practice in any profession;
- many hours of effective practice with other trainees and with guidance from experienced teacher/practitioners is essential;
- AllC promotes best practice in schools by [surveying training programmes](#) and providing [hands-on support to teachers](#).

What will a conference interpretation training programme teach me?

To interpret ... or more specifically

- to understand what the speaker wants to say,
- to grasp what lies behind the speaker's words,
- to keep the message in context,
- to convey it consecutively or simultaneously,
- to learn a special note-taking technique,
- to practice concentration, discourse analysis and fast reaction,
- to build useful glossaries,
- to develop public speaking skills,
- to prepare for different types of assignments,
- to manage stressful situations,
- to observe a code of conduct,
- to prepare for entry into the profession.

What kind of personal traits do I need to be a conference interpreter?

These are some of the key skills that interpreters make use of at one time or another:

- a polished command of their own native language over a range of registers and domains,
- a complete mastery of their non-native languages,
- a familiarity with the cultures in the countries where their working languages are spoken,
- a commitment to helping others communicate,
- an interest in and understanding of current affairs, plus an insatiable curiosity,
- world experience away from home and school and a broad general education,
- good training (and usually at least an undergraduate university degree),
- the ability to concentrate and focus as a discussion unfolds,
- a pleasant speaking voice,
- a friendly, collegial attitude,
- calm nerves, tact, judgment and a sense of humor,
- a willingness to adhere to [rules of conduct](#) (e.g. confidentiality).

Choosing a school: what should I look for?

- Choosing a school is one of the most important steps you will take on your path to becoming a trained conference interpreter. In order to assist you with your research and decision-making, AIIC regularly contacts many schools worldwide which offer [conference interpreting training programmes](#) and asks them to respond to a series of questions; the last time the survey was conducted 178 schools were contacted. The schools' answers are published on this website. For a variety of reasons (e.g. curriculum in transition, incorrect contact address, etc.) some schools did not respond to the survey questionnaire. This means that, for the present, you may not find them listed on the AIIC website.
- If you have not already done so, you might want to check out the online [Directory of Schools](#). This Directory will provide you with basic information about any school that has responded to the survey, and give you a link to its own website, if available.
- When comparing schools and training programmes, you might establish a list of specific criteria which are important to you (location, scholarship support, etc). You might also consult our guide to [best practice in training](#) and add some of the considerations below to your personal shopping list:
 - Don't be in a hurry! Conference interpreters need to have accumulated quite a broad general knowledge as well as an excellent command of their languages (this is one profession where age is in our favor!).

- Spend some time living and studying or working where your languages are spoken before applying to any training programme. The more you are familiar with the relevant cultural context, the stronger your understanding and expression will be.
- Opt for a graduate training programme rather than an undergraduate programme. Graduate programmes assume that applicants' have a solid command of the languages in their combination and can therefore focus more on skill acquisition as well as advanced language enhancement and an introduction to the theoretical basis of interpreting.
- Don't be put off if the school you like best requires you to take an aptitude test! This is intended to help both you and the teachers on the jury get a glimpse of your current abilities in order to assess your readiness to start the programme...and is nothing personal! In some countries, the local legislation does not permit aptitude testing.
- Take a look at the school's curriculum:
 - Does the school provide any advice on career prospects?
 - Are the classes offered going to cover your specific training needs?
 - Are classes designed and taught by practicing professional interpreters?
 - Do some of the teachers share your native language?
 - Does the programme offer classes in both consecutive and simultaneous interpreting?
 - Is there a class which explains professional practice (ethics etc.)?
 - Do outsiders, especially potential employers, attend final exams?
- Final suggestion: you might consider the possibility of visiting one or more schools and observing a couple of relevant classes. You might also arrange to meet some of the instructors and speak to current students or graduates.

How can I prepare?

- Some things you can do to increase your chances of success before starting a training programme:
 - to enhance all of your languages, selectively and actively read, watch TV and listen to radio in all your languages,
 - expand your range of command of your native language,
 - go and live where your languages are spoken and immerse yourself in the culture,
 - learn more about your planet and your immediate environment,
 - increase your general knowledge,
 - follow international affairs,
 - learn to use a computer,
 - learn to take care of yourself and to manage your stress well,
 - develop good study skills,
 - cultivate patience and the ability to integrate feedback,
 - research your training options carefully.

Will a professional conference interpreter's lifestyle suit me?

Try this self-quiz to test your preferences! (There are no wrong answers!)

<i>Question</i>	<i>Staff</i>	<i>Freelance</i>
Will I have to pass a test or competition to get work?	yes	probably
Will I have to develop my own competitive professional profile?	no	essential
Will I be responsible for finding my own work?	no	yes
Will I usually work for the same institution/s?	yes	your choice
Can I work with agencies or a range of employers?	unlikely	yes
Will my employer schedule my workdays?	yes	no
May I decline assignments?	not usually	yes

Will I get a regular pay check?	yes	no
Will I get benefits?	yes	it depends
Will I have to assess my own tax liability?	no	yes
Can I live where I wish?	doubtful	yes
Will I have to travel extensively for work?	not necessarily	more likely
Will I have to travel for language enhancement?	maybe	maybe
Will I have in-house opportunities for career development and training?	often	less likely
Will I need to belong to a professional network or association?	preferable	important

★ To find out more about the professional conference interpreter's lifestyle, check out [VEGA](#).

Will my languages be in demand when I have finished training and am looking for work?

- A very important question... and hard to predict!
 - plan your profile BEFORE you train: some combinations are more “useful” and more portable than others; beware of a flavor-of-the-month push to add a language which is likely to be dropped in the future
 - the tsunami of English continues on its course, no doubt about it: English is more widely used than ever, in all its permutations – and you probably want it in your language combination, specially if you plan to work on your local market;
 - your decision to work in-house for an international organization or free-lance will probably affect your choice of languages;
 - the good news: A recent [study by the AIIC Staff Interpreters Committee](#) shows that, as the impact of staff changes and retirements becomes more serious, international institutions now are cooperating with schools to try to predict future training needs and cater to a changing kaleidoscope of interpreting needs.

★ If you are interested in working for an international organisation, visit their websites to find out more about their current and future staffing needs; see how often there is a competitive exam for applicants with your language combination. Scroll down to find a [list of organisations](#).

Will I find work after training?

AIIC provides all kinds of [advice and support](#) for newly trained conference interpreters entering the profession, even offering you the chance to ask questions.

What other questions should I ask before taking the plunge?

The AIIC Training Committee will do its best to answer any specific questions you may have. Please post them on the message board below: we will try to help you the answers.

*AIIC Training Committee
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See also:

- [AIIC Directory of Schools](#)
- [Conference Interpreter Training Programmes: Best Practice](#)

International Organisations

[Africa](#) – [Americas](#) – [Asia](#) - [Europe](#)

AFRICA

[ADB](#) (African Development Bank), Abidjan
[African Training and Research Centre in Administration for Development](#), Morocco
[AIPO](#) (African Intellectual Property Organisation), Cameroon
[Arab Maghreb Union](#), Morocco
[COMESA](#) (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa), Zambia
[ECA](#) (Economic Commission for Africa), Addis-Ababa
[HABITAT](#) (United Nations Division for Human Habitat), Nairobi
[ICTR](#) (International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda), Arusha and Kigali
[AU](#) (African Union), Addis-Ababa
[UNEP](#) (United Nations Environment Program), Nairobi
[UNON](#) (United Nations Office at Nairobi), Nairobi

AMERICAS

[CBD](#) (Convention on Biological Diversity), Montreal
[ECLAC](#) (Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean), Santiago de Chile
[FTAA](#) (Free Trade Area of the Americas), Panama
[IDB](#) (Inter-American Development Bank), Washington DC.
[ICAO](#) (International Civil Aviation Organization), Montreal
[IMF](#) (International Monetary Fund), Washington DC
[MF](#) (Multilateral Fund for the Implementation of the Montreal Protocol), Montreal
[OAS](#) (Organization of American States), Washington DC.
[PAHO](#) (Pan American Health Organization), Washington DC.
[UNO](#) (United Nations Organization), New York
[World Bank](#), Washington DC.

ASIA

[ADB](#) (Asian Development Bank), Philippines
[ESCAP](#) (Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), Bangkok
[SPC](#) (South Pacific Commission), Noumea

EUROPE

[BIS](#) (Bank for International Settlements), Basel
[COE](#) (Council of Europe), Strasbourg
[CERN](#) (European Organization for Nuclear Research), Geneva
[CEU](#) (Commission of the European Union), Brussels
[CICR](#) (International Red Cross Committee), Geneva
[ECJ](#) (European Court of Justice), Luxembourg
[EP](#) (European Parliament), Luxembourg, Brussels and Strasbourg
[EPO](#) (European Patent Office), Munich
[ESA](#) (European Space Agency), Paris
[EUROCONTROL](#), Brussels
[FAO](#) (United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization), Rome
[IAEA](#) (International Atomic Energy Agency), Vienna
[ICDO](#) (International Civil Defence Organisation), Geneva
[ICC](#) (International Criminal Court), The Hague
[ICJ](#) (International Court of Justice), The Hague
[ICTY](#) (International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia), The Hague
[IFAD](#) (International Fund for Agricultural Development), Rome
[IFRC](#) (International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies), Geneva

[ILO](#) (International Labour Office), Geneva
[IMO](#) (International Maritime Organization), London
[INTERPOL](#) (International Criminal Police Organisation), Lyon
[IOC](#) (International Olympic Committee), Lausanne
[IOM](#) (International Organisation for Migration), Geneva
[IPU](#) (Inter-Parliamentary Union), Geneva
[ITU](#) (International Telecommunications Union), Geneva
[Latin Union](#), Paris
[NATO](#) (North Atlantic Treaty Organization), Brussels
[OECD](#) (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development), Paris
[OPCW](#) (Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons), The Hague
[OSCE](#) (Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe), Vienna
[UNESCO](#) (United Nations Education, Science and Culture Organization), Paris
[UNIDO](#) (United Nations Industrial Development Organization), Vienna
[UNO](#) (United Nations Organization), Geneva, Vienna
[UPU](#) (Universal Postal Union), Bern
[WCO](#) (World Customs Organization), Brussels
[WEU](#) (Western European Union), Brussels, Paris
[WFP](#) (World Food Programme), Rome
[WHO](#) (World Health Organization), Geneva
[WIPO](#) (World Intellectual Property Organization), Geneva
[WMO](#) (World Meteorological Organization), Geneva
[WTO](#) (World Tourism Organization), Madrid
[WTO](#) (World Trade Organization), Geneva