

The Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibilities

Eight canons that govern the conduct of interpreters and translators

A great many of the people who appear before a court cannot conduct their own business in the language of the institution holding the proceeding. The interpreter's task is to lower that barrier as far as it can be lowered, so that a person who speaks little or no English leaves the room having had the same access, and the same opportunity to be understood, as anyone else in comparable circumstances. Everything else in this Code follows from that single purpose.

CANON 1

Accuracy

Interpreters are ethically mandated to provide a complete and faithful linguistic replication, ensuring semantic equivalence while respecting the natural syntax, idioms, and discourse patterns of the target language. The practitioner must meticulously preserve the source speaker's original register, tone, and speech including hedges, false starts, and repetitions without softening bluntness or simplifying eloquence. Arbitrary additions, omissions, paraphrasing, or unprompted explanations are strictly prohibited; when faced with auditory or semantic ambiguity, the interpreter must formally seek clarification rather than inferring intent.

CANON 3

Confidentiality

All information, data, and documentation acquired during an assignment are privileged and strictly confidential. This protective scope encompasses verbal communications, translation drafts, custom glossaries, and the identities of all involved parties. Disclosure is prohibited across all professional and personal networks, including anonymized case studies, unless expressly authorized by the client, court, or statutory mandate.

CANON 5

Protocol and Demeanor

Interpreters must maintain an unobtrusive professional presence, strictly adhering to the procedural protocols, dress codes, and decorum of the presiding forum. Interpretive delivery must utilize the direct grammatical person matching the source speaker, explicitly avoiding secondary narrative framing. Any necessary departure from this role such as requesting repetition or addressing technical audibility issues must be explicitly flagged on the record to maintain procedural transparency.

CANON 7

Accurate Representation of Credentials

All certifications, accreditations, and relevant professional experience must be stated with absolute precision, including the issuing authority, language pairs, and validity periods. Practitioners are strictly required to correct any inflated assumptions or misattributions of competence by clients or agencies, as misrepresentation compromises legal integrity and exposes the proceedings to formal challenge.

CANON 2

Impartiality and Conflicts of Interest

Professional interpreters must maintain complete neutrality, facilitating communication without demonstrating bias toward any participant. This standard prohibits engaging in ex parte conversations, offering emotional reassurance, or accepting gratuities. Furthermore, practitioners must recuse themselves or formally disclose any immediate, potential, or perceived conflicts of interest to the governing body and all active parties.

CANON 4

Limitations of Practice

The scope of practice for professional interpreters is exclusively confined to linguistic transmission. Interpreters are ethically bound to decline requests for advice, case predictions, or document clarification, deferring all non-linguistic inquiries back to the presiding professional (attorney, clinician, or official) to ensure compliance with legal boundaries.

CANON 6

Maintenance and Improvement of Skills and Knowledge

Professional competence is an ongoing obligation requiring active, deliberate development. Interpreters are required to continuously monitor linguistic evolution, actively cultivate specialized medical, technical, and legal nomenclatures, pursue continuing education, and seek peer-reviewed feedback to ensure standard-compliant performance.

CANON 8

Impediments to Compliance

Any environmental, physiological, or linguistic condition that compromises adherence to established ethical canons must be immediately disclosed to the presiding authority. Such impediments include acute fatigue, poor acoustics, overlapping dialogue, unfamiliar dialects, or unreviewed documentation. If mitigating remedies cannot guarantee a flawless record, the interpreter must formally decline or relinquish the assignment.

The eight canons above follow the framework long established for judiciary interpreters and translators in the United States. The commentary accompanying each canon is provided for instruction and does not replace the rules of any court, licensing authority, or professional association a practitioner is bound by.