

# The Three Modes of Interpreting

*Simultaneous, consecutive, and sight translation*

Interpreting is a specialized linguistic profession comprising three distinct working methods, each characterized by its own operational rhythm, cognitive demands, and systemic role within legal and healthcare proceedings: simultaneous interpreting, consecutive interpreting, and sight translation.

## 1 • Simultaneous interpreting

Listening and speaking at once, so nothing stops for the interpretation.

### WHAT IT IS

The core mechanic of simultaneous interpretation requires the practitioner to render an ongoing spoken source language into the target language concurrently as the speaker articulates their message. The interpreter operates with a minimal linguistic delay (known as *décalage*), trailing only a few words behind the primary speaker. This modality demands a complete and faithful replication of the source text, strictly prohibiting omissions, additions, or structural alterations designed to smooth over awkward phrasing. Because delivery occurs in real time, the procedural flow of the environment remains uninterrupted; neither the judicial officer nor the medical provider pauses for the interpretation.

### WHEN TO USE IT

The simultaneous modality is indicated primarily when the Limited English Proficient (LEP) participant is required to process passive auditory information rather than actively generate speech. Usually for fast paced or group settings. This mode is utilized across environments during phases where multi-party dialogue, testimony, or formal administrative statements occur continuously. Examples include legal arraignments, conferences emergency medical

settings or public health education seminars. In all settings, every statement is interpreted in real time to ensure the individual remains fully present, informed, and capable of understanding the environment, without disrupting the natural pace of the proceeding or conversation.

Simultaneous work is usually delivered in a whisper at the listener's side, through portable equipment, or from a booth. Long assignments call for two interpreters working in shifts.

### HOW TO DO IT WELL

- Interpreters must maintain absolute auditory focus on whoever holds the floor, accurately capturing interruptions, overlapping speech, formal objections, or sudden interjections.
- Keep the rendition complete and register-faithful; hesitation and profanity belong in the target language too.
- Interpreters must remain alert to shift modalities instantly the moment the LEP individual is addressed directly. The simultaneous mode must immediately give way to consecutive interpretation without requiring explicit prompting from the professional staff.
- Prepare in advance: names, charges, medications, technical terms.

## 2 • Consecutive interpreting

Speak, pause, interpret

### WHAT IT IS

The interpreter waits for the speaker to finish a thought, then renders it in the other language. Speech moves in short, successive segments, each one interpreted completely and accurately. The conversation is slower and more deliberate, and every utterance exists cleanly in both languages.

### WHEN TO USE IT

Use consecutive interpreting when **maximum accuracy**, **detailed precision**, and **natural pauses** are more important than a continuous flow of speech. In this mode, the speaker pauses after a few sentences or a short segment, and the interpreter delivers the message in the target language.

### HOW TO DO IT WELL

- Interpreters must listen for the entire unit of meaning and conceptual thought before initiating the interpretation, rather than translating prematurely based on the initial clause or phrase.
- Interpreters must employ a structured note-taking system focused on capturing critical high-risk data such as numerical figures, proper names, dates, lists and etc.
- The interpretation must be rendered in the first person immediately after the speaker concludes their segment, maintaining the original speaker's grammatical perspective, tone, and vocal presence.

- Interpreters must actively and openly manage the communication flow of the interaction. If a speaker's segment runs excessively long, the interpreter must

professionally intervene on the record to request a pause or repetition rather than guessing or omitting information.

### 3 • Sight translation

Written in one language, spoken aloud in another, on the spot.

#### WHAT IT IS

Sight translation turns a written document into spoken oral rendition, complete and accurate, of what the page actually says. It sits between interpreting and translation, and it demands both: the reading comprehension of a translator and the real-time delivery of an interpreter.

#### WHEN TO USE IT

The sight translation modality is indicated when an interpreter is required to read a written document in one language and immediately render it aloud into a target language. This mode is utilized during interactive encounters where immediate access to written text is required for consent, procedural execution, or administrative compliance. Examples include vital documents such as legal plea agreements, court waivers, standard police forms, medical informed consent documents, pre-surgical checklists, patient intake forms,

and post-discharge care instructions. In all settings, this modality bridges the gap between written text and spoken communication, ensuring the Limited English Proficient (LEP) participant fully understands enforceable legal conditions or critical clinical protocols prior to execution.

#### HOW TO DO IT WELL

- Interpreters must scan and preview the entire document or a complete, self-contained section before beginning to read aloud, allowing them to grasp the structural framework, legal or medical context, and overarching syntax.
- Scan for structure and difficulty: defined terms, boilerplate, numbers, anything handwritten or illegible.
- Read aloud at an even pace in full sentences, without paraphrasing or explaining what the form means.
- Say so on the record when a passage is illegible, ambiguous, or beyond sight translation.

## The three modes at a glance

One reference for choosing the right mode in the moment.

| MODE                     | THE LEP PARTY IS      |    | TYPICAL SETTINGS                                                    | WATCH FOR                                                   |
|--------------------------|-----------------------|----|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Simultaneous</b>      | Listening             |    | Arraignments, hearings, trials, conferences, group briefings        | Fatigue; team interpreting on long assignments              |
| <b>Consecutive</b>       | Speaking<br>answering | or | Examinations, interviews, attorney–client meetings, clinical intake | Overlong segments; note-taking discipline                   |
| <b>Sight translation</b> | Reading document      | a  | Rights and plea forms, orders, consent forms, foreign records       | Review time; when a written translation is required instead |

#### NOT A FOURTH MODE

Summary interpretation: Defined as the condensed or summarized rendering of a spoken message is explicitly excluded from the recognized modalities of professional interpretation and is prohibited within both judicial and healthcare environments. Requesting an interpreter to summarize communication inappropriately shifts the burden of evidentiary and clinical gatekeeping to the interpreter, forcing them to make subjective determinations regarding what information is legally or medically material.