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# Tales from a traveling interpreter

Thinking of working as an escort interpreter?  
Or hiring one for your next business trip?  
Here are the skills that any interpreter should possess.

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Text by Afaf Steiert



Interpreting is somewhat like Yin Yang in Tai Chi: a precious balance and flow of energy between body and mind. While we need to remain physically fit to meet the demands of interpreting – prolonged sitting, extended walks with delegates to satisfy their sightseeing needs, standing on our legs for long periods of time – our mind has to be focused, quick-thinking, yet calm at all times.

Even when taking a break from traveling with delegates or doing conference interpreting for a few months (or in some cases even a couple of years), we need to keep our mind and body fit during this down time, rather than vacationing and just switching off. Taking a Zumba class, going on a hike or biking are easy ways to keep your body fit. Keeping your mind sharp is not as straightforward and might include studying glossaries of subjects relevant to your specialization or upcoming assignment.

Keeping the mind focused is perhaps the most important skill to help you get through long days of accompanying a delegate group and avoiding burnout during an assignment. Certain activities such as yoga, walking alone, or even just calling a friend or family member can be very helpful during an assignment to switch off the brain and help you relax before the next day.

Unfortunately, some clients, i.e. program organizers, need to be reminded of the fact that you need lunch breaks and food to fuel your brain. Quite regularly, I have found myself in assignment situations where the group seems to have forgotten that the interpreter is a human being in need of food, while delegates are indulging in a lunch presentation meeting. You might even be expected to interpret while eating and drinking – something that after years of experience might become less challenging both for your mind as well as for your digestive system. Luckily enough, these types of meetings are often easy and informal.

## The highlights and the challenges

As an interpreting contractor, you can see the entire world traveling, meeting different people from various cultures, and connecting with people from your home country. Despite all its challenges, it is a very exciting career, particularly during the first few years when you are learn-

ing and gaining experience. You may face many challenges during your first travel assignments, but there is always the chance to learn from colleagues who are more experienced in the field. It can be a great effort to keep focused, calm and pleasant with everyone at all times. During more than ten years as an interpreter, I had the opportunity to work as a consecutive Arabic interpreter, simultaneous Arabic interpreter, and project manager for interpreting assignments. As a simultaneous interpreter, it is important to make full clear sentences to deliver the meaning of the words, instead of following the speed of the speaker. A skilled interpreter can actually make the speaker follow his speed. While this is not an easy technique, it is very useful during simultaneous interpreting.

## A typical assignment

For both simultaneous and consecutive interpreting traveling with international delegates, it typically starts with an email or phone call by the organizer checking for your availability and pricing. The excitement of the moment is only enhanced by the fact that – for confidentiality reasons – often at this stage no details whatsoever regarding the program or the people in the group are disclosed. You might have to respond quickly in order to secure the project. Then you have to wait until the date of travel approaches.

You should use this time to read as much as you can on the subject, provided, of course, that at least this has been revealed to you. Finally, the agenda arrives with the details about the presentations and the program, giving you a good opportunity to study the specific terminology and prepare a glossary. At this stage, the adrenaline and excitement are very high, but remember to keep your emotions under control and your mind focused on the assignment. Also, try to avoid getting sick before, during or after the trip. Multivitamins, exercise and meditation have proven to be very beneficial during this time.

On the first day of the traveling assignment, everyone is usually very excited to get to know each other, and you are busy trying to answer all questions raised by the participants. The group will review the program together. This is still the “honeymoon part” of the assignment. About halfway through the assignment, you will start to hear complaints and experience

frustrations and lack of patience: This is the time when diplomacy, together with organizational skills, come in handy to the professional interpreter.

It all may sound like a school trip, but more often than not you are dealing with very important visitors and rather critical subjects. This puts quite a burden on the shoulders of the project managers and the interpreters – and there should be no complaints about them and their work style. They are often the key figures defining the success of the entire assignment and travel program.

It is very important to get to know the delegates/visitors and to be aware of their needs sooner rather than later: Among the group, you will usually identify the “leader”, the “demander of medical check-ups”, and the “complainer”. Remember that we, as interpreters and interlocutors, have to treat all of them with respect and a happy smile. The best way to work as a team is letting the visitors be part of it and sharing a common agenda. This is much more pleasant than trying to manage and lecture everyone during the entire trip, which typically lasts two to three weeks.

As an interpreter, it is good to get to know the leader of the visiting team, as he or she will be able to help with organizing the group. This way, the whole group will be happy and feel more like a family.

Returning home is always an emotional time, as some visitors wish to return sooner, while others wish to stay longer. Most importantly, be sure to finish the scheduled agenda in time and not to miss any planned meetings, as this is crucial for the success of the assignment.

The feeling at the end of a successful assignment when returning home is priceless, and to me it feels like finishing a marathon. This is now the time to rest and enjoy, but in fact, you might feel so pumped up from working more than 12 hours a day over a long period of time that you might just wish to go on to your next assignment.

My advice is to practice in between periods of traveling assignments in order not to lose your interpreting skills: Attend depositions, school meetings, or other local assignments to practice your speed in interpreting, patience and being a good professional listener and cultural consultant. These are all skills well-needed for the next three-week assignment that might soon come up.

## What makes a successful interpreter?

It is always great to refresh your techniques and see which interpreting skills might be useful by attending workshops or practicing during TED talks. It takes years of experience and training to be comfortable as an expert escort interpreter. Image 1 summarizes the characteristics that will distinguish you as a successful escort interpreter and get you ready for your first (or next) assignment.

## What to look for in an escort interpreter

Taking a look from the other side of the table, when hiring an escort interpreter, you want to be sure that your interpreter is an expert regarding the local language, culture and locations.

### 1. Language(s) expert

Knowing a language is one thing, but knowing the local idioms and dialects is quite another. When hiring an escort interpreter, make sure your escort interpreter is not only bilingual, but also fully fluent in both languages. Ideally, you want an escort interpreter who was raised as a native speaker of both languages.

### 2. Culture(s) expert

Beyond language, there is also an abundance of local nuances that come with any culture. You want an escort interpreter who is well-versed in both your own as well as the target culture. A good escort interpreter has in-depth experience living in both cultures and can interpret cultural differences back and forth seamlessly to avoid any cultural confusion. In this role, a qualified escort interpreter can give advice and help clients navigate cultural divides in order to avoid embarrassment that can come from cultural misunderstandings.

### 3. Location(s) expert

It should go without saying that when hiring an escort interpreter, you want one who knows in detail the area to be traveled. A good escort interpreter can not only get you from the airport to your hotel and to the scheduled meeting, but also recommend places to eat and even give you background information on the respective location along the way.

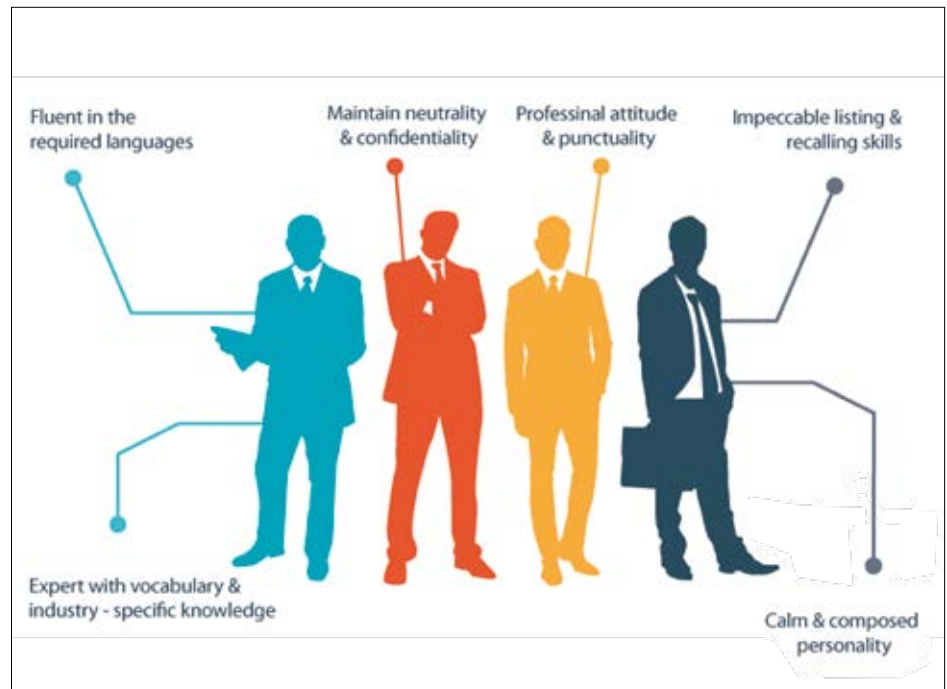


Image 1: What makes a good interpreter?

Source: [www.cmmlanguages.com](http://www.cmmlanguages.com)

### 4. Personality, professionalism and trust

You typically spend a lot of time in close contact with your escort interpreter. It is important to look for one who is friendly, personable and trustworthy. After all, you will be depending on him to be your voice as you travel. You will also want an escort interpreter who maintains professionalism throughout all interactions.

Escort interpreters can help make your international trip a success, giving you the confidence and self-sufficiency to navigate any location for business reasons.

## Like a duck on water

While interpreting, I often imagine myself as a duck paddling hard with its legs under the water while it sits gracefully and seemingly still above the water, radiating an air of tranquility and control. Without a doubt, it is great to get paid for traveling and for using your language skills. However, it is vital for any traveling interpreter to keep his Yin Yang balance, where the brain, health and emotions are in harmony, allowing him to enjoy the journey and to return with knowledgeable memories of interesting people and places around the world.

## Further reading

- [www.languagescientific.com/what-is-escort-interpreting](http://www.languagescientific.com/what-is-escort-interpreting)
- [www.cmmlanguages.com](http://www.cmmlanguages.com)

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

#### Afaf Steiert

is President and co-founder of Afaf Translations and works as a conference Arabic interpreter. She speaks five languages and has good knowledge of all Arabic dialects. Currently residing in the U.S., she has lived in Holland, Italy and Switzerland.



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