*Getting Started as a Freelance Interpreter* is the essential guide for anyone looking to build a successful career as a spoken-language interpreter. Written by Corinne McKay, author of *How to Succeed as a Freelance Translator* (15,000 copies sold across three editions), this book walks you through everything you need to know to launch and grow your interpreting business.

**Corinne McKay** is an American Translators Association-certified French to English translator, a Colorado court-certified French interpreter, and holds a Master of Conference Interpreting from Glendon College. A full-time freelancer since 2002, she re-trained as an interpreter after 15+ years as a translator, and now works as a conference and legal interpreter in addition to her written translation work. Corinne is the author of *How to Succeed as a Freelance Translator*, a career guide for language professionals with over 15,000 copies in print. She runs the online professional development platform Training for Translators, and is a frequent presenter at conferences for translators and interpreters.

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**Getting Started as a Freelance Interpreter**

Corinne McKay

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# Getting Started as a
# Freelance
# Interpreter

*Essential Strategies for Launching and Growing Your Business as a Spoken-language Interpreter*

**Corinne McKay**

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# Freelance Interpreter

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# Introduction

Interpreting is an exciting and dynamic career, offering the chance to bridge language gaps in real-time, help people communicate across cultures, and work in diverse settings—from courtrooms to hospitals to international conferences. But getting started can feel overwhelming. What training do you need? How do you find clients? What can you expect from your first interpreting assignments?

This book is here to help. It's not a deep dive into every aspect of interpreting—that would take volumes—but rather a practical guide to getting started. Whether you're brand new to the field or transitioning from another language-related profession, this book will walk you through the key steps to launching a freelance interpreting career.

I write this as someone who has been where you are. I started my freelance career in 2002 as a French to English (written) translator, earning my American Translators Association certification in 2003. While I did some community and court interpreting early on—and loved it—life circumstances and the lack of remote interpreting options at the time made it difficult to pursue. For over 15 years, I worked exclusively as a translator, but I never lost the desire to return to interpreting. Eventually, I did.

Now, with five years of interpreting experience and two decades in the language professions, I want to share what I've

learned to help you navigate the first steps of this journey. If you're interested in spoken-language interpreting, this book will give you the foundation you need. And if written translation is more your focus, you might enjoy my other book, *How to Succeed as a Freelance Translator*, available at trainingfortranslators.com.

As I mentioned above, I was always interpreting-curious, but for more than 15 years, I took no action on my big interpreting dream. At the 2018 American Translators Association conference, I attended a presentation on consecutive interpreting by Athena Matilsky (athenaskyinterpreting.com), an English/Spanish/French interpreter and interpreter trainer. The session was great, and afterward, I had a bit of a "now or never" moment. At age 47, I thought, "I don't have to do this, but if I ever want to do it, I need to start taking action now." After that conference, I started working with Athena one-on-one, with the goal of passing the State of Colorado's French court interpreter exam. I was really starting from ground zero: I had a lot of work to do on my spoken French before I could even start learning proper interpreting technique. If you're a beginning interpreter and need some perspective, here it is: one of the most basic techniques that beginning interpreters learn as a precursor to simultaneous interpreting is called shadowing. Shadowing (sometimes referred to as "parroting") means that you listen to a piece of audio (the radio news, a speech, a podcast, etc.) and repeat after the speaker in the same language; it's like simultaneous interpreting without the language transfer, and it's how you learn to listen and talk at the same time. When I started my interpreter training, my spoken French was so rusty and slow that I could barely even shadow: I typically had to either slow YouTube videos down to 75% speed, or use materials for French learners with slow, clear speakers.

To make a long story short (more details appear throughout the book), I passed the Colorado court interpreter exam in 2019, started working as a contract interpreter for the Colorado Judicial Branch, and had the idea that "someday" I'd like to pursue a Master's in conference interpreting. At that time, the main roadblocks were the lack of conference interpreting programs and conference interpreting work near where I live. I definitely didn't anticipate that a global pandemic would resolve both of those roadblocks: all of a sudden, there were multiple online conference interpreting degree programs to choose from, and many more options for remote interpreting work. In August of 2020, I passed the advanced entry exams for the Glendon College/York University Master of Conference Interpreting program, which meant that I could do the degree in one year. After a very grueling 10 months of working part-time and attending the Glendon program full-time, I passed the exit exams in July of 2021, and immediately started looking for conference interpreting work. At this writing, three years later, I'm very satisfied with the quality and quantity of conference interpreting work that I've found and I'm enjoying it a great deal. I'm very happy with the interpreting path that I've pursued over the past five years, and I hope that what I've learned will be useful to you as you read this book.

## Differences Between This Book and *How to Succeed as a Freelance Translator*

I am also the author of *How to Succeed as a Freelance Translator*. That book is intended as a much more comprehensive guide to the marketing, legal, and management aspects of running a freelance business, while this book is intended for:

- Beginning and aspiring interpreters. Experienced interpreters may find some useful information here, but the book is aimed primarily at early-career interpreters.

- Interpreters seeking information about the interpreting profession, rather than about freelancing in general. If you're interested in big-picture information about running a freelance business as a translator or interpreter, visit my website trainingfortranslators.com, where there are over 1,050 blog posts you can read for free!

Additionally, this book is much more U.S.-specific than *How to Succeed as a Freelance Translator*. Information about interpreter certification is specific to the U.S. I present some general information about the European market, but most of what I've written about here is based on my work as a U.S.-based interpreter.

# The Essentials of Freelance Interpreting

## 1.1 What Is Interpreting?

Later in this book, you'll learn in more detail about the various modes of interpreting. For now, here's what you need to know: **Translators write, interpreters talk.** The subject of this book is interpreting, or spoken-language work. It's a confusing distinction; even reputable news outlets repeatedly use the expression "speaking through a translator" (you can't…translators sit in front of the computer and don't talk to anyone!) Additionally, many languages—but not English—simply use the term "spoken translation," which is less confusing. But for our purposes in this book, just remember that we're talking exclusively about spoken language work.

## 1.2 Language Skills

An interpreter's most crucial skill is, obviously, understanding and speaking at least two languages. There are other skills on the must-have list, but you really can't work as an interpreter without language skills.

Many beginning interpreters wonder, "Just how good do my language skills have to be?" The answer is, of course, "really, really good." But the specifics depend on what languages you speak and what markets you're planning on working in. For example, in the U.S., it is generally expected that most interpreters are bidirectional/biactive, meaning they interpret in both directions (i.e. English to Spanish and Spanish to English). In settings such as courts and hospitals, it is critical for the interpreter to be bidirectional, because they are always interpreting back and forth between various parties. In conference settings, it is more common for the assignment to be *primarily* in one direction (interpreting English into French for a conference that happens in the U.S. with participants from Canada, for example) with some bidirectionality (for example, if the non-English-speaking delegates want to ask questions). But in the U.S., it is relatively uncommon for interpreters to have a "passive" language, meaning a language they interpret only from, not into. And many, if not most interpreters in the U.S., have only one language combination; at the very least, it is not considered at all odd in the U.S. market to have only one language combination.

The situation in Europe is different: medical and court interpreting are less formalized in many European countries, or may be lumped into a broader category called "public service interpreting." It is more common for interpreters in Europe to interpret into their native language only, as translators in the U.S. typically do. It's also more common for interpreters in Europe to interpret from multiple passive languages into only one active language, for example from French, Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese into English.

There are also interpreters (known as "double A" in the conference interpreting world) who are native speakers of more

than one language: people who grew up speaking one language at home and another at school, or who spoke two languages at home, or who moved between countries during childhood. It's definitely possible to work as an interpreter without having language skills at that level, but it's also true that if you want to work on the U.S. market (where bidirectional interpreting is the norm) and you're a native English speaker who learned your non-native language primarily in school, you may need to do some significant work on your language skills before you can consider interpreting professionally.

## 1.3 A, B, and C Languages

In the translation world, languages are referred to as source (the "from" language) and target (the "into" language). Many translators (who work with the written word) work in only one language combination (for example French to English, or English to Japanese). In the interpreting world, the situation is different, typically using the following language designations:

- A: the interpreter's native language/mother tongue; interpreters who truly are native speakers of more than one language are often referred to as "double A," or having two A languages.

- B: a non-native language that the interpreter works both from and into; for example, a native English speaker who is a non-native speaker of German, and interprets both from and into German, would be referred to as an English A/ German B interpreter.

- C: a non-native language that the interpreter works from, but not into; more commonly seen on the European market, an interpreter might have one C language (for example,

French A, English B, Spanish C) or may work from multiple C languages into an A language with no B language (for example, French A, Spanish C, English C, Russian C).

Another convention that differs from the translation world to the interpreting world is the idea of working into your native language only. In the U.S. translation market, the vast majority of translators work into their native language only. It's really only in cases where a native speaker of the target language is very hard to find (for example, a translation from Thai into English) that a non-native speaker might be used. In the interpreting world, particularly in the U.S., this convention is much less applicable. Most interpreters work in both directions, and some interpreters may even prefer working into their non-native or B language because they are virtually guaranteed to understand everything the speaker says, which is often less true when interpreting from a non-native language.

## 1.4 Interpreter Certification in the U.S.

In the U.S., there are more specialized certifications available for interpreters than for translators. For some interpreters, such as Spanish court interpreters, certification may be mandatory at the state or federal levels. For conference interpreters, there really is no standard certification (but see below for other options), and for some interpreters, certification may be a plus but not a must. Following is a brief overview of the certification options available for interpreters in the U.S.

### State Court Interpreter Certification

- If you would like to become a state-certified court interpreter, the best place to start is your state judicial

branch's office of language access or the closest equivalent department. There, you should be able to find out your state's process for becoming certified, and whether certification is available in your language pair(s). Many, but not all, states use the interpreter certification exams developed by the National Center for State Courts (ncsc. org), through its CLAC (Consortium of Language Access Coordinators), formerly known as the Consortium.  Other states (most notably, New York and California) use their own tests. Many states require that you first complete an orientation, then a written exam, then an oral exam. However, the specifics vary from state to state: some states put a limit on how often, or how many times, you can take each component of the exam, or how many times you can re-take the exam if you fail, or whether you can re-take only the components that you failed, versus re-taking the whole exam. The NCSC has oral exams for 17 languages, which you can view in the Interpreter Resources section of their website. The NCSC also produces a practice examination (only available in Spanish or language-neutral/all-English) that is an excellent resource if you're preparing for a state-level court interpreter certification exam. Most state-level exams (including the NCSC exams) will include sight translation in both directions, consecutive in both directions (for example, a conversation between a witness and an attorney, where the actor playing the attorney speaks English and the actor playing the witness speaks your other language), and simultaneous into your non-English language only.

**Federal Court Interpreter Certification**

• In the U.S., the federal Court Interpreter Certification Examination (FCICE) is offered for Spanish/English only and is a fairly long process. For current information, visit their website (uscourts.gov/services-forms/federal-court-interpreters/federal-court-interpreter-certification-examination ). The first step is a multiple-choice test in English and Spanish taken on a computer, with your scores returned the same day. The second and more challenging step is the oral examination, including sight translation, consecutive interpreting, and simultaneous interpreting. The testing process is currently administered by a contractor called Prometric, and you can find more information on their website (prometric.com/test-takers/search/aousc) which also includes a practice exam and an examinee handbook. Becoming federally certified is an excellent goal for Spanish interpreters, as it has become somewhat of a gold standard for Spanish court and legal interpreting and can open the door to a lot of work. It's important to prepare yourself for a fairly lengthy process since the written and oral exams are often administered in alternating years. You may also want to take a prep course or join a practice group. The University of Arizona's Court Interpreter Training Institute (nci.arizona.edu/interpreter-training/court-interpreter-training-institute-citi) and the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators (najit.org) are good places to start.

**Healthcare Interpreter Certification**

• Through the Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters (cchicertification.org). CCHI offers three healthcare interpreter credentials: the non-language-specific

CoreCHI ™ credential, the non-language-specific CoreCHI Performance™ credential (involving an English-to-English interpreting performance exam), and the CHI™ credential, available to Spanish, Arabic, and Mandarin interpreters. The bilingual CHI exam includes four consecutive interpreting passages, two simultaneous passages, three sight translation passages, and a multiple-choice translation section.

As of 2024, the CoreCHI™ test can be taken at any time, either in-person at a testing center or online, and the initial application/testing fee is $231. The English-to-English and bilingual CHI™ tests must be taken at a Prometric testing center, within a specific time window specified by CCHI (see their website for dates), and requires the $231 payment for the initial application fee plus a fee of $302 for the CHI exam.

• If you're looking for something more in-depth than a webinar but less committing than a certification or degree program, you might want to take a look at interpreter training programs such as Bridging the Gap (offered by various entities, developed by the Cross-Cultural Health Care Program (xculture.org/bridging-the-gap) or The Community Interpreter (thecommunityinterpreter.com/). Bridging the Gap is a 40 or 64-hour medical interpreter training program; the longer program includes modules on interpreting in mental health settings and for LGBTQIA communities. Courses offered through the Cross-Cultural Health Care Program cost $795 and run for 10 consecutive days, four hours per day. Other entities offer other types of schedules: the Academy of Interpretation (academyofinterpretation.com/product/bridging-the-gap) offers sessions that meet eight hours a day for five days;

current tuition is $685. The Community Interpreter is a 40-hour course in community interpreting currently being offered online, with most sessions running eight hours a day for five days.

- The U.S. Department of State has many opportunities for freelance interpreters (state.gov/freelance-linguists-ols/). The interpreting division in the Office of Language Services handles the screening and testing of interpreters at three levels: liaison, seminar, and conference (see the link above for descriptions of what these mean). The Department of State uses contract interpreters for travel assignments and for on-site assignments in Washington. Unlike the process to be tested as a court interpreter, the Department of State process has no set dates or deadlines; you simply apply via their website and wait for them to contact you if they need your language combination. The link above has sample speeches you can use to assess the interpreting skill level required for each level of interpreting.

- Lastly, there are two professional associations for conference interpreters that function almost like certifications, because they require peer recommendations in order to become a full member. AIIC (aiic.org/), the International Association of Conference Interpreters/ *Association Internationale des Interprètes de Conférence* is headquartered in Geneva, Switzerland, and is open to conference interpreters with at least 150 days in the booth, plus sponsorship from current AIIC interpreters who have been Active members for at least five years. Whether membership in AIIC is achievable or beneficial really depends on where you work and who you work with. Start by reading the information at aiic.org/site/ interpreter/active-members and consider becoming an

AIIC Pre-Candidate if you don't yet meet the requirements but may in the future. TAALS (taals.net/), the American Association of Language Specialists, accepts both translators and interpreters as members, and uses a similar sponsorship system to AIIC, but only 100 days of conference interpreting experience are required.

## 1.5 Professional Associations for Interpreters

Belonging to a professional association for interpreters can be a big boost to your interpreting career in terms of the contacts you can make within the association, the credibility of being a member of a professional association, and the professional development opportunities that many associations offer.

Because you have to pay dues to belong to a professional association, membership shows a commitment to professionalism. Even if you are not or cannot be certified by a professional association, belonging to one shows that you are serious about your interpreting career. You may want to take a look at some of the following associations:

- The American Translators Association/ATA (atanet.org) welcomes interpreters as members and has an Interpreters' Division. Membership in ATA is open to anyone "with an interest in translation and interpreting as a profession or as a scholarly pursuit." You do not have to apply or be sponsored for membership, and membership is open to residents of any country, not just the U.S. As of this writing (2024), ATA's individual membership dues are $249 per year, and there are various other member categories for students, businesses, and institutions. ATA certifies translators, not interpreters, but does offer the Credentialed Interpreter (CI)

designation that can be displayed on your ATA directory profile if you have passed another entity's interpreter certification exam, or if you are a member of a sponsorship-based association for interpreters, such as AIIC or TAALS (see above for more information on these associations). ATA also has many local and regional chapters that welcome interpreters and are relatively inexpensive to join. ATA has a multitude of professional development opportunities including a webinar series and an annual conference.

- The National Association of Judiciary Interpreters and Translators/NAJIT (najit.org) is an organization primarily for court interpreters, but "anyone with an interest in the field of legal interpreting and translating or who shares NAJIT's interests and objectives is welcome to join." Individual membership in NAJIT as of this writing is $125, and there are various other membership categories for organizations, students, or two members at the same address. NAJIT has a webinar series and an annual conference.

- For information on AIIC and TAALS, see the previous section on interpreter certification.

- The American Association of Interpreters and Translators in Education/AAITE (aaite.org/) is a relatively new but active association exclusively for educational interpreters and translators. As of this writing, AAITE's individual membership is $60 a year, and they are holding a webinar series of "Edu-Talks" and a national conference.

## 1.6 Modes of Interpreting: Consecutive Interpreting, Simultaneous Interpreting, Sight Translation, and a Few Other Terms

Before beginning your interpreting journey, you should be familiar with the various modes of interpreting and how they are used in real-life situations.

- In **consecutive interpreting**, only one person talks at a time. Actually, in reality, people talk over each other all the time in consecutive interpreting situations, but the idea of consec is that the speaker talks, then pauses while the interpreter talks, interpreting what the speaker said. This could range from just a few words, for example, a doctor asking a patient, "What is your date of birth?" Or, in a diplomatic interpreting situation, a speaker might give an entire speech while the interpreter takes notes and then interprets. These are sometimes referred to as **short dialogue interpreting** (typically seen in court, medical, educational, and community settings) and l**ong consecutive interpreting** (typically seen in diplomatic and conference settings, with speeches ranging from 5-20 minutes). Consecutive interpreting often requires note-taking. For short dialogue interpreting, note-taking may be less critical, but it's an extremely useful skill to learn, particularly for settings like court and medical where there's a lot of detailed information. For long consecutive interpreting, note-taking is essential, and is a key skill that conference interpreters put a great deal of time into learning and practicing. An advantage of consecutive interpreting is that it doesn't require any special equipment if the setting is a small group where everyone can hear each other, and the interpreter does not have to be able

to talk and listen at the same time. A disadvantage is that good consecutive interpreting is harder than it looks; it's easy to lose or confuse pieces of information, and people can easily become frustrated with the slow pace of consec and how long it takes to interpret everything. Consecutive interpreting can be a critical skill, or one that you barely ever use. Most community, medical, educational, and court interpreters will do consec at least some of the time, and perhaps all the time. On the other hand, it's not unusual to meet conference interpreters who almost never do consec, and at least some international organizations have moved almost exclusively to simultaneous, even for dialogue-heavy meetings, because consecutive interpreting slows things down and makes the meeting twice as long. Whether you need solid consec really depends on who you work for and how they organize their meetings.

- In **simultaneous interpreting**, the speaker and the interpreter talk at the same time. The interpreter maintains a certain amount of lag, or décalage, so that they can formulate a complete idea before speaking it, but the speaker does not pause to allow the interpreter to interpret. If you've seen the interpreters with headsets on at the United Nations or in similar settings, that's simul! Simultaneous interpreting is easy to describe and very time-consuming to learn. The first step in learning simul is a skill called **shadowing**, where you repeat after a speaker, in the same language (like "simultaneous" without the interpreting). This helps you learn to listen and talk at the same time. An advantage of simultaneous is that it's fast and reduces meeting participants' frustration at having to wait for the interpreter. A disadvantage is that, unless done in a mode called **chuchotage** (French for "whispering")

where the interpreter sits in close proximity to their client(s) and speaks in a low tone of voice, simultaneous requires special equipment so the interpreter can hear the speaker and the client(s) can hear the interpreter. This may be portable equipment, sometimes known as **bidule**, or may be a full meeting setup with booths for the interpreters and wireless headsets for the participants, or a remote simultaneous interpreting system, most commonly Zoom or Webex, but sometimes using specialized software designed just for interpreting.

- In **sight translation** (a confusing term, since it doesn't contain the word "interpreting"), the interpreter verbally interprets from a written document. For example, a public defender might give the interpreter a plea agreement and say, "Read this to the defendant in Spanish." Sight translation requires you to interpret while reading ahead, anticipating sentence structure, and scanning for tricky vocabulary. Sight translation is different from **simultaneous interpreting with text**, which is where an interpreter has a written document, typically a speech, but the speaker may not be following the written version word for word. In sim with text, the interpreter has to listen while reading, analyze the written document for differences from the spoken version, and interpret. Most court interpreting exams in the U.S. include sight translation, sometimes only from English into the interpreter's other language.

- The hybrid **sim-consec** mode exists, but doesn't seem to have gained much traction in the market. Sim-consec involves the interpreter recording a speech on a mobile device (phone, tablet, smart watch) while also taking notes, then listening to the recorded speech through a headset or earbuds while referring to their notes and interpreting

simultaneously. This method has a lot to recommend it, particularly because a lot of interpreters dislike long consecutive or never learned how to do it well, but it also has various issues: the interpreter has to be close enough to the speaker to get a good recording, participants have to consent to being recorded, and if the recording were to fail and the interpreter has minimal notes, the situation could be a disaster.

## 1.7 Flavors of Interpreting: Community, Educational, Court, Medical, Conference

You don't have to know right away what type of interpreting you want to do (I did not!), but it helps to have an idea of the various flavors of interpreting and which might appeal or not appeal to you. Each type of interpreting has its pluses and minuses: community interpreting is very much in demand and gives you direct contact with clients who really need your services, but tends not to pay very well; conference interpreting tends to pay quite well, but requires extensive training and either a robust remote interpreting setup, a willingness to travel, or both. Medical and court interpreting may offer interpreters, particularly Spanish interpreters, the possibility of an in-house job, something that's hard to come by in other languages and specializations. It really all depends on your location, languages, income needs, and what type of interpreting you enjoy and are good at.

- **Community interpreters** definitely do consecutive interpreting, probably do sight translation, and may do simultaneous interpreting in certain settings. Community interpreting is a very broad term, encompassing aspects of social services, medical, legal, and educational interpreting.

Some people who serve as community interpreters might not even self-identify as interpreters. Rather, they think of themselves as "the person who speaks English and Navajo," or "the person who helps out when someone speaks only Spanish." It can also be difficult to differentiate between community interpreting and specialized educational, medical, and legal interpreting. An interpreter who helps a parent enroll their child in school might be considered a community interpreter, while an interpreter with a higher level of training who interprets for educational assessments or IEP meetings would be considered an educational interpreter. An interpreter who helps out at a legal aid agency might be considered more of a community interpreter than a court interpreter. If you're particularly interested in community interpreting, The Community Interpreter (thecommunityinterpreter.com) offers various resources and online courses. There is currently no certification specific to community interpreting.

- **Educational interpreters** have recently begun to differentiate themselves as a specialization separate from community interpreting. Educational interpreters generally work in K-12 settings, interpreting for anything from parent-teacher conferences to school board meetings. Educational interpreters will typically be called on to do consecutive interpreting and sight translation, and may provide simultaneous interpreting for larger-scale meetings. There is currently no certification specific to educational interpreting.

- **Court interpreters** work in all types of court settings, from city, county, and state courts to federal courts, and in private-sector settings such as depositions and attorney-client conferences. Court interpreters do consecutive and

simultaneous interpreting and sight translation, with the bulk of their work in the courtroom consisting of simultaneous interpreting into their non-English language for defendants with limited English proficiency. Court interpreting often requires certification at the state or federal level if it is available for your language, and some sort of registration or approval process if certification is not available. In many parts of the U.S., it is now difficult to impossible to find work as a Spanish court interpreter if you are not certified. Prior to COVID, court interpreting was done almost exclusively in person, then went almost exclusively remote for the next two years, and is now (like many things!) in a hybrid situation. To get the maximum amount of work as a court interpreter, you need to be able to work both remotely and in person. If you're interested in pursuing certification as a court interpreter, start with your state Judicial Branch's office of language access, or the closest similar department.

- **Medical interpreters** work in a variety of medical settings such as doctors' offices and hospitals. Medical interpreters do consecutive interpreting, sight translation, and may do simultaneous interpreting for meetings or conferences. Medical interpreting requires specialized training (for both the technical and human aspects of the job) and requires the interpreter to remain professional in potentially very emotional situations. Medical interpreters may or may not need to be certified, by either the Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters (which offers the Certified Healthcare Interpreter, or CHI™, credential), or the National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters (which offers the Certified Medical Interpreter, or CMI, credential).

Aspiring medical interpreters might also want to look at the Bridging the Gap 40-hour training program (xculture.org).

- **Conference interpreters** tend to work mostly in settings that require simultaneous interpreting, from business meetings, to diplomatic settings, to professional conferences. Conference interpreting does sometimes involve consecutive and long consecutive interpreting, if the interpreter is called on to interpret an entire speech. But the vast majority of conference interpreting is simultaneous, which requires specialized training and a lot of practice. Government entities such as the U.S. State Department use conference interpreters, as do international institutions such as the United Nations, but conference interpreting might also take the form of a bank's employee town hall, or an NGO's stakeholder meeting, or a community health organization's annual conference. Many conference interpreters hold a Master of Conference Interpreting. If you are interested in pursuing conference interpreting training, a good place to start is the International Association of Conference Interpreters (known by its French acronym, AIIC, at aiic.org).

## 1.8 Freelancing and Salaried Jobs

One factor to consider before you embark on an interpreting career, particularly in the U.S., is whether you are interested in being a freelancer or if you would prefer a salaried job. This is a key decision because the vast majority of interpreters in the U.S. are freelancers. If you interpret between Spanish and English, there may be full-time positions in medical or court interpreting, and if you live in a major city (particularly New York or Washington, DC) and are a trained professional conference

interpreter, you may see salaried positions advertised within government institutions, national security entities, large NGOs, international financial institutions, etc. However, outside those specific situations, it's likely that you will find yourself as a freelancer working with multiple clients.

Freelancing has its advantages: specifically, the freedom of working when, where, and how you want to, and the ability to set your own rates. However, many freelancers struggle more with the business aspects of their work than with the language aspects. Finding and retaining clients, figuring out how much you need to charge in order to achieve the same level of financial security as someone with a traditional job, balancing remote and in-person interpreting so you have enough work, setting your rates so that you are earning a viable living while having a healthy work volume---all of these things are very challenging if you've never run a business before, which most freelance interpreters have not.

If you are *only* interested in salaried jobs, you should do a significant amount of research and groundwork before you make the leap to interpreting. Many salaried jobs that pay well are not open to beginners, and many entry-level jobs that require interpreting skills are going to be more on the level of a call center rep or a bilingual customer service rep. For conference interpreters, finding a salaried job may mean being open to moving, even internationally, to a location where salaried jobs are more plentiful, such as the hubs of the European Union and international institution epicenters in Brussels and Geneva. Definitely do not embark on an interpreting career with the assumption that there will be a salaried job waiting for you.

## 1.9 What You Need to Get Started

The space and equipment you need to get started as an interpreter depends a lot on whether you're going to work remotely, in-person, or both. If you're going to work primarily or exclusively in person, you honestly don't need much, unless you work for clients who expect you to provide your own listening and transmitting equipment for on-site interpreting (in most cases, the client will provide this). For in-person work, you may simply need some professional clothing, a notebook (most interpreters use top-bound steno pads), and pens.

For remote interpreting, you'll need a physical space that's conducive to the job, and you'll need a robust technology setup. See this book's section on remote interpreting for more information. At a minimum, you'll need a quiet space, a fast internet connection (I **strongly** recommend using wired internet rather than wi-fi), a computer that can run remote interpreting software, a second monitor, and at least one good headset or a standalone microphone and headphones.

To market your interpreting services, you'll need some sort of web presence: this could be your own website, a LinkedIn profile, and/or a profile in the directory of one or more associations for interpreters. See this book's sections on marketing your interpreting services for more information.

## 1.10 Tax and Legal Issues

For thorough information about setting up a freelance business in your state and paying taxes as a freelancer, talk to an accountant or attorney who knows your state's requirements well.

Following is a brief look at the tax and legal implications of working as a freelancer in the United States.

Whether you are a contractor (freelancer) or an employee is defined by how you are paid. If you are an employee, you receive an IRS form called a W-2 at the end of the year and your employer pays certain taxes on your behalf. If you are a freelancer, you receive an IRS form called a 1099 and are responsible for paying all your own taxes, and specifically for paying both the employer and the employee portions of certain taxes. Most importantly, you need to:

- Clarify with every client whether you are working for them as an employee or as a contractor
- Save an appropriate amount of your freelance income to pay your taxes and other business expenses
- Establish a set of business bank accounts that are completely separate from your personal bank accounts

It's always painful to hear about freelancers who are either unaware that self-employment tax is a thing, or who earn more than they expected (a good problem to have!) and don't have the funds they need to pay their self-employment tax. This should never happen, if you:

- Deposit your freelance earnings into an account that is separate from your personal funds
- Earmark a percentage of each payment for taxes

Setting up such an account is easy; many banks now allow you to open a new account online, and you don't need a business-specific account unless it gives you some financial advantages. At the very least, just set up a checking and savings account in your own name and use them as your business accounts. Deposit all of your freelance earnings into those accounts. How much to earmark for taxes and business expenses depends on your tax bracket and how much you earn. Unless you are in a very low tax bracket, you should probably reserve at least 30% of your income for taxes. Something more like 40% will definitely cover your taxes and allow you to put some money into retirement and a paid vacation account.

In most U.S. states, you do not have to have a business license or any other formal paperwork in order to do business as a sole proprietor, which is the default business structure for freelancers who haven't explicitly formed a corporation or other entity. The upside is that working as a sole proprietor is easy: you just start earning money as a freelancer (as long as your state doesn't require any other formalities, which most do not). The downside is that, as a sole proprietor, you pay self-employment tax on every cent you earn, and U.S. self-employment tax is a pretty big hit: currently over 15% on top of the taxes you would pay if you worked for an employer—because you pay both the employer and the employee portions of certain taxes.

Incorporating, typically as an S-Corp or LLC (Limited Liability Corporation), can allow you to legally avoid paying self-employment tax on a portion of your income, by assigning some of your income to yourself as "wages" (on which you do pay self-employment tax) and some to the corporation as "profit" (on which you do not pay self-employment tax). Although this distinction is somewhat arbitrary when the corporation consists only of you, it's legal, as long as you pay yourself what the IRS defines as "a reasonable wage." Talk to a good accountant before you set up a corporate structure, but if you make more than about $50,000 per year in self-employment income, this could be a good option for you.

## 1.11 Your First Year as a Freelancer

Unless you have a built-in client such as a court system that is required to use you, your first year as a freelance interpreter is likely to involve a lot of marketing; perhaps more marketing than interpreting.

Marketing yourself as a freelancer is partially a question of supply and demand: there is a ton of work for Spanish interpreters in the U.S., but there are also a lot of qualified Spanish interpreters. There is a lot less work for Amharic or Tagalog, but there are also far fewer interpreters. Remote interpreting has been a game-changer for interpreters; arguably, the changes have been both positive and negative, but it's true that as a beginning interpreter, your location is no longer as much of a factor as it was pre-2020. It's now possible to find remote interpreting work from almost anywhere with a good internet connection, and you no longer have to move to a major city or live in hotels 300 days a year to find work as a conference interpreter.

I've started from zero as a freelancer-- twice. In 2002/2003, I launched my freelance French to English translation business with a Master's degree in French Literature and not much else; I had very little translation experience, and no contacts in the industry. When I finished my conference interpreting Master's in 2021, I had only one interpreting client: the Colorado state court system, which generally uses certified interpreters before non-certified interpreters. I had no conference interpreting clients, and my only real conference interpreting experience was as a student at Glendon College, where we were required to interpret for on-campus events as part of our degree program. At that time, I honestly was not sure if or how I was going to find a significant amount of work as a conference interpreter. Pre-2020, the only U.S.-based conference interpreters I knew who had a good

amount of conference work either lived in the major coastal cities in the U.S. (which I don't) or essentially lived on the road, flying from assignment to assignment and spending perhaps 200+ nights per year in hotels (which I don't want to do).

And yet, things worked out! I hate to mention the silver lining of a pandemic that killed more than a million Americans, but my first year as a freelance interpreter was greatly facilitated by the increased availability of remote interpreting work. I was referred to a couple of excellent Canadian agencies, I found some of my own U.S.-based clients, and the demand for French interpreting in general was greater than I anticipated.

One tricky decision encountered by every beginning freelancer is the balance between rates and work volume. Many beginning interpreters lack confidence in their abilities and are afraid of not having enough work, which leads them to offer or accept low rates. Add to this the fact that interpreting rates are all over the map: in a quick online search, I came across Spanish community interpreter jobs paying $17 an hour and a Spanish federal court interpreter job paying (on salary) $147,000 per year; this huge range can make it really difficult to know what to charge as a beginner.

The dilemma is that you have to start somewhere, and working is better than not working, **but** starting at low rates has a lot of disadvantages: you risk burning out, you don't have time to market to better-paying clients because you're exhausted, your acceptance of low rates may drive down rates for other interpreters, and you may feel unmotivated to do your best work at low rates. As a counterexample, I always feel that when I have a particularly challenging assignment and I think, "Am I getting paid enough to deal with this??" I want the answer to be a resounding, "Yes!"

A lot of your first year is going to be spent simply finding work and testing the waters to locate the intersection between what you are good at, what you enjoy doing, and what clients have the budget to pay for. It can be an advantage to earn a certification (such as court or medical) relatively early in your interpreting career, because this can give you access to a "captive audience" client (a client that is obligated to use you, such as a court or hospital system), where at least some of your marketing is done for you. This is how I started: I passed the Colorado state court interpreter exam before I had ever done a paid interpreting job, and as soon as I passed, all of the managing interpreters in all of the Colorado judicial districts were informed of everyone who had passed the exam. Some offered me work right away, and I was able to follow up with all the managing interpreters and generate even more work. This was an easy, low-stress way of generating an initial flow of work (the interpreting itself was not easy or low-stress, but it didn't require a lot of marketing!).

## 1.12 What if You're Not 22 Years Old? Are You Too Old to Do This?

I hear, with some regularity, from freelancers and aspiring freelancers who worry that they're "too old for this." Depending on the individual, "this" might mean:

- Starting a freelance business in general
- Pursuing higher-level clients
- Pursuing a new specialization or niche (i.e. transitioning from translation to interpreting or vice versa)
- Adding something like a new language to their range of services

Of course, "old" is relative. For the record, I'm 53 as of this writing. I started freelancing when I was 30, and I know freelancers who are still going strong in their 70s, and even a few in their 80s. One individual in ATA who is mentally sharper than I am is north of 85. But still, this "too old" thing keeps cropping up.

### Main Question: Does Your Brain Still Work?

This sounds laughable, but I include it here for perspective. If "too old" is on your radar screen, you probably are too old to be lots of things. An Olympic gymnast. A fighter pilot. An organ transplant surgeon. But an interpreter's main asset is mental acuity. Bottom line, if your brain still works, I'm reasonably certain you'll be OK. You're not too old for this.

### Secondary Point: The Time Will Pass Anyway, So You May as Well Use it Productively

I thought about this when I took up playing the lute (a pretty difficult instrument to learn to play, as it turns out!) at 42. When I asked a musician-translator-friend whether she thought I was too old to learn to play lute, she said, "Let's say you give yourself 20 years to get really good at music. You'll be 62. But guess what… with any luck, you'll be 62 someday anyway, so why not put the time to good use?" The same can be said of freelancing. Let's say you're currently 60. If you live in a developed country and are in reasonably good health, statistically you have something like an 80% chance of living at least 20 more years. I think that's long enough for a viable freelance career, definitely.

### Tertiary Point: Working as a Freelancer Protects You–to a Large Extent–From Real or Perceived Age Discrimination in a Salaried Job

The "grey ceiling" is a real thing in the salaried world. Study after study has found *zero relationship* between age and job performance. But if you're over 45 (45! Not 70!), you're less likely to be hired, more likely to be laid off, and more likely to take longer than average to find a new job. If you want or need to work past the usual retirement age, that alone could be a good reason to freelance.

### However…

**Starting on the bottom rung** of any profession requires you to hustle. When I launched my freelance business in 2002, I was determined to make it work. I really wanted to a) work from home while my daughter was little, and b) make a healthy living without moving to a major city. Failure was not an option, so I hustled. I worked nights and weekends. I sent handwritten thank you note after handwritten thank you note. I did informational interviews that led nowhere. I had coffee or lunch with anyone who seemed like a remotely promising contact. I worked for the borderline-lousy clients that other people didn't want. I spent two years in the application process for an FBI Contract Linguist position that required an hour commute each way–not to mention the polygraph test. It worked, but it was tiring. Whether you're launching your freelance business at 22 or 75, you have to be ready to hustle.

**Older freelancers have to be aware of stereotypes.** In our profession, you may encounter the stereotype that older freelancers are not good with technology, for example. As an older freelancer, I would advise you to become a technology guru. Be

the technology expert; be the person clients and colleagues come to for help when they have problems with translation-related software. Beat that stereotype before it even gets out of the gate. Again, learning how to use technology is just learning a new skill; you can do it.

On the plus side, you can **capitalize on positive stereotypes of older freelancers.** They're out there, so exploit them. Many clients think of older freelancers as more stable and dependable, more self-aware, more patient, and less dramatic than their younger counterparts. One client even told me, "My favorite translators were all born before 1980." Hey–take it. Emphasize to your potential clients how easy it will be to work with you.

Be prepared to be **older than a lot of the people you work for.** This is one difference I've noticed since about my mid-forties. For some time, I've been older than the average entry-level employee on the client side. In recent years, I've moved to another level. Example: I work at a co-working office, and I've noticed that when one of the office twentysomethings gives me a recommendation for something–a movie, a restaurant, a place to buy jeans–it's from their compendium of "stuff old people like." Realistically, this puts a different spin on your marketing efforts. About a year and a half ago, I lost a major direct client when they hired an in-house translator. For the first time in a long time, I actively looked for work. And I'll be honest; the age thing was a little weird. Hustling for work from people six or seven years older than my own daughter was a new experience–an experience that ultimately worked out and resulted in some excellent new clients, but one that took a bit of a mindset shift on my part.