

# Guidance for **Trilingual Interpreters**

**1<sup>st</sup> Edition**



\*\*We recognize that the term “Trilingual Interpreter” refers to an interpreter that has three working languages. This guidance seeks to address Deaf, DeafBlind, DeafDisabled, Hard of Hearing or hearing interpreters that work with English (spoken and/or written), at least one signed/tactile language, and another spoken language (spoken and/or written).

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As the field of interpretation has become a profession with various specializations and certifications, groups such as trilingual interpreters continue to work without a set of basic guidance for decision-making and practice. This document seeks to provide guidance to trilingual interpreters practicing across spoken and signed languages in the United States.



**Disclaimer:** This document is intended to be a first step guide for novice and experienced professional Trilingual Interpreters. General guidance for Trilingual Interpreters is sparse in the United States. The few resources developed are language specific and/or outdated. Therefore, this document is an attempt to integrate and expand upon resources that have been previously published, formally continuing an open dialogue that could advance the field of trilingual interpreting. This document is in no way an exhaustive nor exclusive guide for trilingual interpreting. Any opinions expressed reflect the current judgement of the authors and do not represent the opinion of all working Trilingual Interpreters. The opinions within this document may evolve with more experience and with changes in the field. We invite other Trilingual Interpreters to join in the conversation with the purpose of improving resources and the practice of trilingual interpreting.

## Guidance: Knowledge



- ◆ Trilingual Interpreters must possess knowledge of the laws for language access provisions such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act and context-specific laws that guide practice in various settings, such as: HIPAA (medical contexts); FERPA (medical and educational contexts) and; case law United States v. Kovel attorney/client privilege and language interpreters (legal contexts).

*The aforementioned laws provide a framework for ethical practice within various settings. These laws also serve to protect trilingual interpreters and the consumers they serve. Knowledge of these laws supports advocacy and education about the roles and boundaries of the trilingual interpreter as well as prevents trilingual interpreters from (unintentionally) violating consumer rights based on conflicting protocols between spoken and signed language standards of practice. Additionally, Trilingual Interpreters greatly reduce liability by adhering to the aforementioned laws and provisions as they pertain to the different fields of specializations in which they navigate and work. One example of (unintentionally) violating consumer rights can be found with note-taking, which can be a beneficial skill and tool for interpreters working in some contexts. However, interpreters must be careful not to document information that could later be used to identify consumers which includes but is not limited to name of consumer, location of assignment, date and time, etc; details that are often also requested on interpreter invoices for payment. Another example is the shift in protocols that transpired within many agencies during COVID 19 and the switch to virtual work. Agencies often had to adopt new guidelines that explicitly expressed interpreters must work using headphone devices, in a room with closed doors, and away from other individuals working/studying from home in order to not violate the aforementioned laws.*

- ◆ Trilingual Interpreters should also know the standards of practice and code of ethics for both spoken and signed language interpretation - their similarities and differences.

Listed here are the standards of practice for legal, medical, and educational spoken language interpreters and the code of ethics for signed language interpreters in the United States:

- ▶ [National Standards of Practice - NCIHC](#)
- ▶ [IMIA - International Medical Interpreters Association Medical Interpreter Standards of Practice](#)
- ▶ [National Accreditation of Educational Translators and Interpreters of Spoken Languages](#)
- ▶ [National Association of Judiciary Interpreters & Translators Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibilities](#)
- ▶ [NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct](#)

*One important note is that signed language interpreters who work in medical and legal settings, are not distinguished from the medical and legal standards of practice and code of ethics. That is to say, they are expected to comply with these guidelines while working in these settings. Therefore, it is implied that signed language interpreters should be familiar with these guidelines. When studying these documents further, it is important to note that definitions may change based on context and/or language/modalities in which the interpreter is working. For example, “accuracy” which is explicitly defined in the National Association of Judiciary Interpreters & Translators Code of Ethics and Professional Responsibilities & National Standards of Practice (NCIHC) is not mentioned in the NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct and can be interpreted differently by spoken and sign language interpreters. With spoken language, interpreters cannot autonomously expand on a concept, word, or phrase to clarify understanding without the permission of or a direct interpretation from the provider. With signed language, expanding on concepts, words and phrases is a necessary component of a faithful rendition, this ability to naturally expand on concepts, words and phrases is commonly one of the added benefits of Deaf Interpreters. Another example can be found with “transparency”. For spoken languages, transparency includes interpreting everything that is said including hedges, false starts, repetitions, clarifications, side conversations, etc.*



- ◆ **Trilingual Interpreters should participate in bilingual interpreting training for all modalities and across language pairs in accordance with the field(s) of specialization in which they work.**

*Though there have been grant-sponsored trilingual interpreter trainings over the years in regions that have been recognized as high-need for trilingual interpreters, there has yet to be formal, sustained interpreter training programs that provide trilingual interpreter training. Therefore, Trilingual Interpreters must actively seek training in their various language pairs. Bilingual training provides opportunities for vocabulary, grammar, fluency, communication and error correction strategies, cultural and language competency development in two of the interpreter's target languages. Seeking these opportunities across all of the working languages, allows the Trilingual Interpreter to gain more linguistic competence which translate to skills and abilities to be applied on assignments.*

- ◆ **Trilingual interpreters should be able to articulate clearly to agencies and other entities that utilize interpreters in which settings Trilingual Interpreters are most appropriate.**

*On the whole, agencies and communities that use language interpretation still remain uninformed about Trilingual Interpreters and the distinct linguistic and cultural needs we satisfy. As a result, Trilingual Interpreters often educate about the existence of and advocate for the use of Trilingual Interpreters, when appropriate. Agencies and other entities that utilize interpreters should not dictate the terms by which Trilingual interpreters operate nor their professional fees. However, if Trilingual Interpreters are not well-versed in best practices, they will often be improperly utilized and/or undervalued. Due to the additional demands placed on a trilingual interpreter, the interpreter must know what to ask of the agency or entity in order to determine appropriateness based on the consumer(s)' linguistic needs/preferences, country of origin, cultural implications, etc.*

- ◆ **Because interpretation skills are perishable, Trilingual Interpreters should know and continually assess their own linguistic prowess and limitations across all of their working languages in order to make decisions about when their skills are properly aligned or misaligned for a given assignment and/or setting. \*Trilingual Interpreters should not rely on language proficiency as the sole indicator that they are qualified for a given assignment.**

*Certifications are often specialized with the exception of RID NIC which is a generalist certification. Specializations come with many expectations and responsibilities. Even more so for Trilingual Interpreters because there is only one Trilingual Interpreter certifying entity, the Board for Evaluation of Interpreters (BEI), and it is not nationally recognized or easily accessible. This means that Trilingual Interpreters have to seek to be evaluated and credentialed elsewhere. Trilingual Interpreters are faced with the additional challenge and responsibility of maintaining mastery of not only 2 languages like their bilingual counterparts, but an additional language and the multitude of cultural complexities that this entails.*

*Daily language use does not translate to interpreting skills. Skill development and skill building exercises should be part of a working interpreter's toolkit throughout their career and should be done regularly. These exercises should address vocabulary, register, memory, repair strategies, and more. Maintaining and developing these skills across all working languages, help a Trilingual Interpreter to continue to perform at an optimal and effective level for providing language access. Continued practice and development also assist the Trilingual Interpreter in recognizing their strengths and areas that need further development in order to make decisions about which assignments and settings they should/should not work in. Self-awareness and analysis are paramount to a Trilingual Interpreter's success.*

- ◆ Trilingual Interpreters should have knowledge about interpretation rates for spoken language bilingual interpreters and bilingual signed language interpreters for the market and domains for which they interpret.

*Knowledge about market rates for bilingual interpreters allows Trilingual Interpreters to set their rates based on their experience, certification(s) and trainings and the following formula as the minimum compensation for a Trilingual Interpreter: spoken language local standard bilingual hourly rate + local standard bilingual ASL interpreter hourly rate. With this information in mind, trilingual interpreters have a potential minimum and maximum rate they may consider charging, based on their experience, certification(s) and training(s) to where the hiring entity benefits from not having to hire two separate interpreters - or four when teams are deemed necessary.*

#### **Example Formula 1:**

Language A + Language B = Total Rate/hour for 2 interpreters ÷ 4 + Language A  
= Trilingual Interpreter Rate/hour

LSM (\$65) + Spanish (\$45) = \$110 for 2 interpreters/hour ÷ 4 + LSM (\$65) = \$92.50  
(example range \$70.00-\$95.00)

#### **Example Formula 2:**

Language A (Higher Rate) + Language B (Lower Rate) = Total Rate C  
(What Agency Would Pay if Hiring Two interpreters)

Trilingual Interpreter Rate > Language A

Trilingual Interpreter Rate < Total Rate C

*It is important to note that the example provided above is not with the intention of advocating for a specific rate or service price for Trilingual Interpreters. It is also worth mentioning that the rate range for a Trilingual Interpreter could be very large if there is a major rate gap between spoken language interpreter and signed language interpreter rates. In these instances, it is essential that the Trilingual Interpreter consider the local standard in addition to their certification(s) and experience. Trilingual Interpreters must also keep in mind that they may very well be the first Trilingual Interpreter encounter for an entity and therefore, their decisions about rates may have an impact on future Trilingual Interpreters who work for/with said entity.*

- ◆ **Mentorship**

*Oftentimes interpreters seek out a mentor or mentors based on their experience or field of specialization. This has indeed proven to be beneficial particularly for emerging interpreters. However, due to the immense level of cultural and linguistic diversity and varied professional trajectory, this guidance encourages more of a unified approach to mentorship. We acknowledge that many Trilingual Interpreters face intersectionality due to language, race, class, nationality, ability and more. Additionally, Trilingual interpreters must be well versed in the nuances of many different cultures. The majority of the interpreter training programs offered in the United States are bicultural and void of critical lenses that address the daily experiences of minoritized interpreters. Interpreter training programs do not prepare Trilingual Interpreters to address any of the aforementioned points of intersectionality that are part of the daily life and work experience of Trilingual Interpreters. For this reason, Trilingual Interpreters must develop ways to leverage collectivity to grow and support one another not only in linguistic and interpreting abilities but also in the various ways of navigating life and work as marginalized professionals. This approach to mentorship should be devoid of typical power relationships that are based on time in the profession, years of language use, and specializations and instead acknowledge that all Trilingual Interpreters have skills and knowledge that can benefit others and from which they can also benefit.*



## Guidance: Skills



- ◆ Trilingual Interpreters should possess proficiency in understanding, writing, signing, and/or speaking in three written, signed, tactile, and/or spoken languages including specialized vocabulary, terminology and phraseology in all target languages as determined by an interpreter skills assessment and/or certification by a recognized certifying entity (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters, Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters, Board for Evaluation of Interpreters, to name a few)

*Variations in language competencies, use, and contexts in which each language is used is common among multilingual individuals. However, as an interpreter working across various languages and modalities, it is essential to have an accurate depiction of a Trilingual Interpreter's language use as well as their ability to interpret in the various languages they know and use. Language skill assessments and certification tests provide a more accurate depiction of how a Trilingual Interpreter is able to leverage their language knowledge for the purpose of accurately conveying information across various languages in specific domains.*

*Trilingual Interpreters should possess domain-specific vocabulary in all their working languages and the ability to accurately convey messages from one or more languages to another within the given context, understanding that trilingual encounters can quickly become bilingual encounters.*

- ◆ Trilingual Interpreters should be able to work in a variety of interpreter team configurations.

*Trilingual Interpreters should work in teams whenever possible due to the management of the cognitive load of the interpretation process, the use and monitoring of multiple languages and the content of the assignment.*

*Trilingual Interpreters should be able to work with (Certified) Deaf Interpreters, bilingual spoken language interpreters, bilingual signed language interpreters, as well as other trilingual interpreters.*

*Trilingual Interpreters should recognize their own skills and advocate for a team that complements their skill set for a given assignment. For example, a Trilingual Interpreter who may have additional certification as a legal spoken language interpreter may benefit from a team who is a bilingual ASL/ENG interpreter certified in ASL/ENG legal interpreting.*

*Trilingual Interpreters should recognize the skills the assignment requires and set their teaming strategies in a way that plays to the strengths of each interpreter in a given assignment. This may entail departing from traditional teaming approaches such as alternating interpreters based on time intervals (e.g., 15, 20 or 30-minute switches).*

*Some settings should always be worked as a team, such as depositions, court hearings, victim statements about traumatic experiences, press conferences\*\*, to name a few. Trilingual Interpreters should be able to identify these situations and advocate for a team pre-assignment or upon arriving at the assignment and becoming aware of the need for a team.*

*\*\*When Trilingual interpreters are called to interpret press conferences given in multiple languages, it is important to self-assess and ensure that they have the appropriate skill set to render an interpretation that is accessible by the broadest group of consumers with varying linguistic needs. Trilingual Interpreters should be able to effectively understand and render the message in all 3 of their working languages if/when called to do so. If the message is conveyed in English followed by one of the target languages, the Trilingual Interpreter is to interpret the message according to the target language's syntax supported by mouth morphemes for the source language.*



**Press Conference:**

Content	Message 1		Message 2	
Sources	English	Spanish	English	Spanish
<b>Interpreter Actions:</b>	Simultaneous ASL with English mouth morphemes	Simultaneous ASL with Spanish mouth morphemes	Simultaneous ASL with English mouth morphemes	Simultaneous ASL with Spanish mouth morphemes

*\*\*This example format only applies when the statements being read are exactly the same in the source languages. If the messages are different or improvised, the Trilingual Interpreter should seamlessly interpret from the two languages into the target language. Some interpreters may choose to identify the language being spoken before rendering the interpretation.*



Guidance: Skills

- ◆ Trilingual Interpreters should have Individual Errors & Omissions (Professional Liability) Insurance - especially if they are not credentialed in the particular specialization in which they are working (minimum \$1,000,000/\$2,000,000 insurance policy).

*Mistakes happen. The probability increases with the addition of more working languages in a single encounter. The #1 mistake made by interpreters is in “Additions and Omissions”. If these mistakes are ever called into question, interpreters usually only have their credentials, experience, and reputation to fall back on. Because the trilingual field is relatively new, it is recommended that trilingual interpreters have an additional layer of protection especially since the Trilingual Certification through the BEI is not nationally recognized.*

- ◆ Trilingual Interpreters and Video Relay Service (VRS)

*VRS interpreting is a specialized modality that requires a unique skill set. It is important to recognize that many VRS calls and scenarios are actually bilingual scenarios. Therefore, language assessments designed for VRS settings often do not take into account third languages used by VRS interpreters. Many Trilingual Interpreters receive in-depth extensive training in ASL <> English interpreting, but not ASL <> 3rd language or English <> 3rd language. As a result, Trilingual Interpreters in these settings often must rely on their proficiency in their 3rd language with no formal preparation, training, or assessment to measure their skills. Language proficiency should not be conflated with interpreting abilities; these are distinct skills.*

*There is an urgent need for the recognition of various other spoken languages in VRS interpreting; language assessments that measure language competency and interpreting skills across all of an interpreter’s working languages; and resources that support English language development for interpreters who use ASL + another spoken language and desire to work in VRS settings. There is also a need for expanded VRS services to include other signed languages (e.g., LSM) + English.*

## Guidance: Abilities



- ◆ Trilingual Interpreters should be able to recognize and navigate the shifting roles of an interpreter in various settings (e.g., legal versus medical versus educational)

*The expectations of a Trilingual Interpreter may vary when they are practicing within a predominantly spoken language environment (e.g., spoken English to spoken Spanish) versus a cross-modal environment (e.g., spoken English to American Sign Language) as well as based on the context in which interpretation services are being provided (medical versus legal). For example, in a medical setting, the interpreter may assume similar expectations as the medical professional(s) to “do no harm” which may entail frequent comprehension check-ins with the patient to ensure the message is being received. Whereas in the legal setting, the interpreter’s role is more procedural and the responsibility to ensure comprehension of the proceedings falls on the client’s attorney and/or advocate. It is essential that the Trilingual Interpreter is able to recognize the various roles and embody the different roles as appropriate to the context.*

- ◆ Trilingual Interpreters should be able to navigate and mitigate language power.

*On occasion, trilingual interpreters work across all three of their working languages. When approaching various modalities, it is important to prioritize those who have less linguistic power. **When in doubt, err on the side of access and inclusion.** Three recommended practices are provided below:*

*1) When working assignments with consecutive interpretation of the source message, the Trilingual Interpreter should interpret source 1 and source 2 of the message even though the content is the same in the target language.*

*2) When working assignments from a spoken language into both a spoken language and signed or tactile language, convey all information into the signed or tactile language first and then into the spoken language. **This is one way for interpreters to combat audism and linguicism. As many know, sign language users are often the last to get access to information. In this way we take a trauma-informed approach in our interpreter practices to prioritize these language users in the interpreted interaction.***

*3) Simultaneous Communication (SimCom) is discouraged as a standard practice when working across various modalities because of the demands of each language for accurate interpretation (e.g., the level of specificity needed in spoken language is different from that in signed language because of grammatical features like indexing and classifiers that can be used in signed language).*

- ◆ Trilingual Interpreters should be able to create an environment conducive to maximum linguistic efficiency including, but not limited to:

### Before the Assignment: Pre-session

- *Identify all of the parties involved in the encounter (Team, client(s), consumer(s))*
- *Discuss the communication rules and flow of the session (interpreter signals, feeding preferences, managing clarifications, positioning, raising hands to be acknowledged, speaking one at a time, etc.)*
- *Identify linguistic/dialectical variation(s) involved in the setting*
- *Relevant personal and cultural factors that could impact interpreter language choices*



### During the Assignment: Control the Session

- *Flow of communication*
- *Optimal positioning for linguistic inclusion*
- *On-going self-assessment based on the interpreters' strengths, skills, and performance*
- *Monitoring and supporting team*
- *Navigating conflicting or opposing standards of practice*

### After the Assignment: Debrief

#### Team

- *What worked? What didn't?*
- *What would you do differently next time?*
- *Team Dynamics*
- *Feeds/Support*

#### Client(s)

- *What worked? What didn't? How to improve for next time?*
- *Application and incorporation of takeaways to future assignments*



## Next Steps:

As previously mentioned, this guidance seeks to build upon other resources that are already published and available. The goal is to continue making progress towards establishing “industry standards” for the field of trilingual interpreting while harmoniously merging with both the spoken and signed language interpreting industries.

Unfortunately, many trilingual interpreters are forced to address these different situations with little to no guidance and oftentimes don’t have the opportunity to meet, work, or network with other more experienced Trilingual Interpreters. We hope that this document serves as the catalyst for more in-depth open discussion about the information provided in this document. We also hope that others will continue to advance the discussion and the field by providing more guidance in topics such as: interpreting in virtual spaces, working as a Trilingual Interpreter in rural areas, working with spoken language interpreter teams, and more.

Our desire is for our spoken language and sign language interpreter counterparts to join us as we work to provide the best and most effective service to the communities that we serve.

