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Court Language Access Services

How to Study Vocabulary for the Court Certification Exam

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When you take the Court Interpreting Oral Examination (Oral Exam) you are being tested on your interpretation skills. However, it is also very important to have extensive knowledge of a wide array of terminology.

Essentials to be a good interpreter include excellent communication skills, strong proficiency in English and your non-English working language (referred to in interpreting as your A and B languages) and in-depth knowledge of the subject matter you are interpreting. As interpreters for the court, we do not know what testimony is going to be on any given day, or how the attorneys are going to try their case, but we can have in-depth knowledge of how our legal system works and of the terminology that we are expected to be able to use in our daily work.

This document will review the categories of vocabulary you should be familiar with, ways to study that vocabulary, and include reference materials to get you started.

Keep in mind that interpreters should not be expected to be walking dictionaries. We are human and vocabulary is so vast that it is impossible to know it all. But we are expected to have extensive knowledge regarding all the specialized and non-specialized terminology that we use in our work as court interpreters. In the courtroom, if you are faced with a term you are unfamiliar with or unsure of you may pause the proceedings to consult the term. However, when you are taking the Oral Exam you **cannot** consult vocabulary during the examination, so the more vocabulary you attain beforehand the better.

Specialized Terminology and Slang

Vocabulary for the Oral Exam goes from very specialized terminology, like the various parts that make up the mechanics of a firearm, to the most vulgar slag and profanity. As interpreters for the courts, we are expected to be able to navigate all terminology with ease. Not only are we expected to navigate the wide range of vocabulary easily, but we are also expected to be able to adapt our register (the level of formality of language) from high to low within that vocabulary and the languages we interpret. Furthermore, we must also adapt to the use of language within the Limited English Proficiency (LEP) participant's experience, that is, we are to use whichever term the speaker uses even if it is different from our own experience, i.e.: use "vehicle" instead of "car" if that is the way the LEP participant we are interpreting for refers to car. Our function as interpreters for the courts is to facilitate communication, and the best way to do so is to use the term that the LEP participant is accustomed to using.



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Fields of Specialized Terminology

There are seven (7) main fields of specialized terminology that are often present in the Oral Exam. These areas are:

Legalese: Legalese includes everything from terms used by attorneys and judges, parts of the physical courtroom to Latin phrases. It is the formal and technical language of legal documents (which is inherently hard to understand).

Traffic and Automotive: Covers everything from road signs to parts of the road, parts of a car and sobriety tests.

Drugs and Drug Paraphernalia: Regional uses vary greatly in this area, and this type of vocabulary is constantly changing. I recommend you learn the English term and the most common one or two options in your B language for each term.

Weapons and Forensic Sciences: Includes the mechanics of firearms and the various forensic sciences that have to do with firearms, from collecting evidence to fingerprinting, analysis of spent bullets or wound types.

Medical: Muscles, bones, and all other body parts, together with vocabulary of appearance (i.e.: straight hair) and medical procedures. Medical vocabulary intertwines with forensics as well.

Profanity and Slang: Personally, this was one of the most difficult areas to gain proficiency in. I approached this glossary by country, since these terms vary greatly between Spanish speaking countries, and arranged my glossaries on slang and profanity in this manner.

This last category can seem daunting even when considering how to gather the information to put your glossaries together. I did it with a series of internet searches, consulting with colleagues from different Spanish speaking countries, attending webinars specifically on slang and profanities and by adding to my working glossaries when the interpreting practice I was working on specified “slang and profanities from X (Spanish speaking country).”

What is a working glossary?

When you first approach vocabulary study for the Oral Certification Exam, you might be tempted to start downloading glossary lists and adding them to a folder in your computer. In the long run, that will result in many lists of vocabulary that you are unfamiliar with.

The best approach is to have a series of “working glossaries.” Working glossaries are those that you work on and use, glossaries that are constantly being updated and that grow with you in your journey as an interpreter. That is, every time you encounter an unfamiliar term in your interpreting practices or when you are at work, you add that term to your working glossary.



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You can divide these glossaries into the 7 specialized terminology fields previously listed, and then add subfields as necessary, i.e.: the Weapons field can be divided into Firearms, Bladed Weapons, and Other Weapons. You could include Wounds created by Weapons in this section or in your Forensic Sciences section (or in both).

When adding a term into your working glossary it is useful to add the term in your A and B languages and to write a sentence in your A language and translate it into your B language. All the work that you do putting your working glossaries together represents instances in which you interact with the new term. The more times you face a term and the more you work with that term the more chances of retaining it¹.

For a sample of a weapons related working glossary please go to Addendum 1 on page 7.

How to interact with your vocabulary for maximum retention

The key to retain new terminology is to interact with it as much as possible. Do not try to memorize a list of terms and their translations; rather, learn new terms in context (write a sentence with the term), use all your senses (read the term while you voice it out loud and play games on QUIZLET²) and use illustrations and research the etymology of the term³. I always find it interesting when I learn the origin story of a specific term. Knowing that information increases my chances of remembering the meaning of the term in the future.

Since I am more of a visual learner than an auditory one, my favorite way to study vocabulary is with illustrations. *The Interpreter's Companion*⁴ has many illustrations, especially in the section dedicated to weapons.

How to study vocabulary using illustrations

To study vocabulary using illustrations you can follow this 3-step process:

1. First, create three copies of the illustration you wish to work on: a key copy, an English copy, and a B language copy.

¹ Bennett, Colette. "Top 17 Exposures to Learn New Words." ThoughtCo, Apr. 18, 2021, [thoughtco.com/vocabulary-reps-4135612](https://www.thoughtco.com/vocabulary-reps-4135612).

² Free online vocabulary learning tool with flashcards and games and many specific "court vocabulary" options: <https://quizlet.com>. Contributions are made by volunteers so be watchful and cross-reference any term you have doubts about.

³ Visual strategies to learn vocabulary [Illustrated Vocabulary | Learning for Justice](#)

⁴ Acebo Publications [ACEBO — Spanish-English Products](#). The Interpreter's companion is available in English and Spanish, Russian and Asian Languages editions.



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2. Secondly, mark your copies. One will be the answer key in English and your B language (the original illustration if you are using *The Interpreter's Companion*), the other two will be your English copy and your B language copy. If you are using The Interpreter's Companion illustrations, you have both English and B language on the same illustration. Dry erase the English on your English copy and the B-language on your B-language copy.

3. Finally, study the answer key. Repeat the terms out loud in English and in your B-language and write a sentence for each term in English and translate the sentence into your B language, do this while you pay attention to how the term fits into the illustration. It is useful to write sentences that define what the term is, what it is used for or what it looks like.

When approaching new specialized terminology, it is best to do it a few terms at a time. When I am preparing for a test, I do between 5 and 10 terms of new vocabulary per study session. The next day I review the terms from the previous day and add another 5 to 10.

For a sample of how to use illustrations to study vocabulary, please go to Addendum 2 in page 8 of this document.

How to study vocabulary with audio files

Since I love multitasking, my second favorite way to study vocabulary is with audio files. I make audio files of the length of my more standard walks, i.e.: between the courthouse and the office, which are mostly between 10 and 15 minutes long. I find that making shorter audio files helps with making less mistakes in pronunciation and aids in clear enunciation. This is just a personal preference, but I try to sound confident and positive when I record these vocabulary audio files.

To make an audio file, take the working glossary you want to turn into an audio file and open a voice recording app in your phone. For each term I say the term in English out loud to record it, say the translation of the term in my head so that a couple seconds go by and then I say the translation of the term out loud, so it also gets recorded. After that I say a sentence with the term in English, I interpret the sentence in my mind and then I say the interpretation of said sentence out loud to record it. You need to leave those seconds in between the term and the translation so that you can come up with the term on your own when listening to the audio file; if the pause is too short you will give away the answer to yourself.

I find that audio files are great to listen to while doing chores, walking or while in your daily commute.

To download a sample audio file click [here \(LINK\)](#).

The best and most entertaining way to acquire general vocabulary is to read different materials, from newspapers to scientific articles or novels in your A and B languages. If you feel one of your languages is much weaker than the other vocabulary wise, concentrate on reading materials in that specific language.



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And finally, and on exam day, be ready for the unexpected. It is completely normal to encounter terms you will be unfamiliar with in your exam, and you need to be prepared for that. When you encounter an unfamiliar term first, don't panic and keep on listening. You might be able to figure out what the term means from context. If not, either skip the term when you are giving your interpreted rendition or just render the term in English. The key is to continue listening and interpreting. Missing one word won't impact your score as much as freezing and missing one or two sentences.

I hope these tips on how to study vocabulary prove useful to you. Vocabulary studying is important and can seem daunting at first, you might even be tempted to concentrate mostly on studying vocabulary but remember that when you take the Oral Exam you are not being tested on the vocabulary you know, but on your A and B language proficiency and on your interpreting abilities.

Contact staff interpreter Chantal Portillo for study related questions at chantal.m.portillo@ojd.state.or.us or contact Certification and Training for general exam questions at: court.interpreter.program@ojd.state.or.us

Free resources shared by Interpretrain in their newsletter (sign up, it is free!):

Glossaries for language pairs other than English Spanish:

https://interpretrain.com/blogs/news/legal-glossaries-for-language-combinations-other-than-english-and-spanish?goal=0_f15c06e2a0-67b6a65f93-491132346&mc_cid=67b6a65f93&mc_eid=f7dedff439

Common legal phrases used in Court in nine languages:

<https://interpretrain.com/blogs/news/flashcards-of-phrases-commonly-heard-in-court>

Interpreter Oral exam training: Expect Unexpected vocabulary:

[Interpreter Oral Exam Training: Expect Unexpected Vocabulary \(interpretrain.com\)](https://interpretrain.com/blogs/news/interpreter-oral-exam-training-expect-unexpected-vocabulary)

More Resources

What is high and low register: <https://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/article/register>

Do's and Don'ts when approaching vocabulary study: <https://www.learningsuccessblog.com/10-do%E2%80%99s-and-don%E2%80%99ts-effective-vocabulary-instruction-infograph>

10 techniques to effectively acquire vocabulary: <https://blog.powerscore.com/gre/10-ways-to-effectively-study-vocab-words/>

A simplified Guide to Firearms Examination (and other useful forensic science simplified guides, i.e., fingerprinting) <http://www.forensicssciencesimplified.org/firearms/index.htm>

Drugs of Abuse (2022 edition), a DEA resource guide [Drugs of Abuse \(dea.gov\)](https://www.dea.gov/drugs-of-abuse)



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Addendum 1. Working Glossary: Weapons and Ballistics

	Term	Definition and Translation of definition	Translation of the term
1.	action	Breech mechanism by which a gun is loaded, fired, and unloaded. Moving parts of a firearm. <i>Translation of definition in your B language here, same for all subsequent definitions</i>	<i>Translation of the term in your B language in this column</i>
2.	air pistol	An air gun or pistol is any type of firearm that functions with compressed air or gas.	
3.	assault rifle	Semiautomatic or fully automatic rifle designed for military use that typically features high-capacity magazines.	
4.	automatic rifle	An automatic rifle is a fully automatic shoulder firearm which can be fired continuously by pulling the trigger until the trigger is released or the rifle runs out of ammunition.	
5.	ballistics	The study of firearms and their ammunition.	
6.	barrel	The steel tube through which the projectile travels.	
7.	BB	A small pellet (approx. 0.18-inch diameter) fired from an air rifle or BB gun.	
8.	BB gun	An air gun that fires BB shots and is non-lethal.	
9.	bolt	A sliding bar that thrusts the cartridge into the cylinder and holds it in place while firing	



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10.	bolt-action	Used to describe a rifle with a manually actuated bolt. This type of rifle can be single shot or have a magazine. By opening and closing the bolt the user cocks the weapon.	
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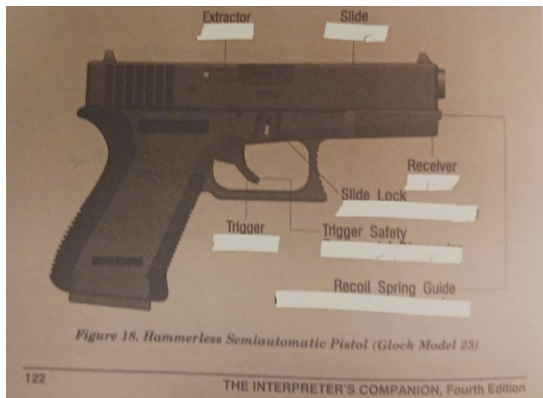


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Addendum 2. Vocabulary study using illustrations



English key



No

