

**TRANSLATING DIVISION  
OFFICE OF LANGUAGE SERVICES (LS)  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

**GUIDANCE ON: BECOMING A PROFESSIONAL TRANSLATOR**

Translation is art of reading a text in one language and rendering it into a written text in another language, accurately and completely, without embellishment. So many different experiences may inspire one to become a professional translator:

- Foreign language study that included translation exercises;
- Informal translation of written materials for friends and family;
- Exposure to interpreting (rendering the spoken word across languages);
- Frustration with existing translations, *e.g.* toy assembly instructions and hotel signs;
- Travel to foreign countries for business or pleasure;
- Admiration for translations of literary works;
- A desire to use foreign languages on the job.

Such inspiration is only the beginning. As in any profession, translation requires education and experience. Unlike some professions in the United States (medicine and law, for example), translation is relatively unregulated—requirements for being a practicing translator are not uniform, and are largely left up to the translator’s employer or translation agencies. Certification or licensing (which LS does not offer) is not a prerequisite for many translation jobs, and indeed, there is no all-purpose certification available to translators comparable to passing the bar exam or the medical boards. Most translators in the United States today are independent contractors (freelancers); relatively few hold staff positions as full-time translators in government, private industry, and academia. Here are some suggestions for how to become a professional translator:

1. Pursue advanced study of one or more foreign languages;
2. Hone your writing skill in your native language;
3. Develop your research skills, using both online and conventional sources;
4. Master office automation, especially MSWord, PowerPoint, and Excel;
5. Join the American Translators Association (ATA) and/or one of its regional affiliates ([www.atanet.org](http://www.atanet.org));
6. Consider a degree or certificate program in translation at a university;
7. Find an experienced mentor to guide you in your work.

Be aware that there are many areas of specialization within the translating industry: military, medical, legal, patent, and literary translation, to name a few. Localization, particularly of computer-related manuals, is a growing area of the translation industry). Most translators strike a balance between being a generalist and pursuing one or two areas of specialization, though translators who work in a single specialized niche are not uncommon. These publications may also help in your quest to become a professional translator:

- The “Skill Level Descriptions for Translation Performance” approved by the Interagency Language Roundtable ([www.govtflr.org](http://www.govtflr.org));
- The “Standard Guide for Quality Assurance in Translation” (F2575-06), available for purchase from ASTM International ([www.astm.org](http://www.astm.org)).

You are a professional translator when one or more of the following are true:

- You occupy a staff/in-house translator position;
- You are regularly employed on the freelance/contract translation market;
- You earned an academic certificate or degree in translation from a university;
- You are certified as a translator by a professional association or other body with accrediting authority (LS does not have such authority).

When you become a professional translator, please read LS’s guidance on choosing the right moment in your career to take the LS translation test. Good luck!