

# ATA Certification at a Glance

## ***ATA certification is***

- a testament to professional competence in translation
- currently offered in 24 language pairs
- open to ATA members
- awarded after a candidate meets certain requirements and passes an examination

## ***The examination***

- is administered at various locations around the year
- comprises three passages, of which the candidate must translate two (each approximately 250 words)
- is open-book; all print reference materials are allowed

## ***A completed examination is evaluated***

- by two graders: translator-peers who are themselves certified
- using a point marking system: 1, 2, 4, 8, and 16 point errors identified by category
- according to objective conventions, standards, and guidelines
- with attention to translation competence at the text, sentence, and word level

## ***Candidates sitting for the exam are advised to***

- allow time to review all of their work for careless errors and omissions
- carefully read the Translation Instructions at the top of the passage and ensure that the translated text is usable in the specified context
- make sure everything is legible to the grader
- pay particular attention to syntax; reproducing the source-language word order literally and inappropriately is a very common error
- remember that exams into English must reflect standard U.S. spelling and usage

# ATA Certification Examination

## Frequently Asked Questions

Version 2009

**Q: Does the examination come with instructions?**

A: Yes. Each examination passage includes Translation Instructions that provide information such as the source of the presented text and the purpose, audience, and medium of the target text. You are instructed to produce your translation for the specified purpose. The Translation Instructions may also specify that certain terms should be left untranslated or that term "X" is to be translated as "Y." Graders will penalize any failure to comply with the Translation Instructions.

**Q: What is the most common avoidable mistake?**

A: Careless omissions. When you finish translating a passage, take some time to check whether you have omitted a title, a heading, an item in a bulleted list, a sentence, or an entire paragraph.

**Q: Can I take more than one test at a sitting?**

A: You may take only one test at an exam sitting.

**Q: Can I break a long, complicated sentence into two or more shorter ones?**

A: Yes, provided nothing is added or omitted which results in changes in meaning. Be cautious about this in a legal passage especially.

**Q: What should I do if I find an error in the source text?**

A: If you find a typographical error, please tell us in a note at the end of your translation of that passage. (Don't just write it on the exam passage itself—it might not be noticed.)

If it's clear from the context what the correct spelling or wording should be, adjust your translation accordingly.

Example: *Brot un Butter* instead of *Brot und Butter* (don't translate as *bread an butter*).

If the error is debatable, do the best you can with what's there. Example: If you think *odd style* should really be *old style*, translate *odd style* and add a note suggesting that there's a typo. If you translate *old style* and you're wrong about the typo, an error will be marked.

**Q: When will I find out whether I passed or failed?**

A: Allow at least fifteen weeks. There are periods of the year with a high concentration of exam sittings, and the waiting period may increase.

**Q: Why does it take so long?**

A: The exams are sent to ATA Headquarters and photocopied, then mailed to two graders (working translators in the United States and abroad who receive an honorarium for their services to this ATA program). If these graders disagree on the pass/fail outcome of an exam, they consult each other to seek agreement. If they cannot reach agreement, the exam is sent to a third grader, who in turn may consult with the initial graders or other graders in the workgroup. These steps can add substantial time to the grading process. After the graded exams are returned to Headquarters, the results are recorded, and you are notified by mail.

**Q: Do the graders know who I am?**

A: No.

**Q: When will I get my exam back to see my errors?**

A: The exam is a no-comment, no-return exam. You will be notified only whether you pass or fail, and for fail you will be informed of the score range (18–25 points, 26–35 points, 36–45 points, or 46+ points).

**Q: Is there any way to see my exam and the marked errors?**

A: If you pass, you will not see your exam. If you fail, the Certification Review process? allows you to see your exam and the marked errors.

**Q: How do I apply for a review?**

A: The review process, like all other components of the Certification Program, is open only to current members of ATA. You must remain a member of ATA in order to apply for an examination review. You have six months from the date of your notification letter to pay the fee and apply for a review. Reviews are conducted after the close of the examination year, which runs from January to December. The first batch of reviews goes to reviewers in January, with subsequent batches going out as needed. The policy and request forms are available on the ATA website and from our office.

**Q: How does the review procedure work?**

A: Your record is scrutinized at Headquarters for possible processing errors and to make sure you are a current member of ATA. Photocopies of the graded passages are then sent to a reviewer, who evaluates the errors to determine whether they conform to the grading criteria. The reviewer also grades the exam again.

In the case of a reversal, the review fee paid is refunded, and you receive a certificate of certification, dated as of the original notice of failure. Your name is published in the ATA Chronicle with the names of other recently certified members. No disclosure is made of the fact that certification was awarded based on a review. You will not see your exam.

If the reviewer upholds the grade of fail, you will receive copies of one or both passages with at least the minimum number of errors marked to substantiate the result, along with the source text.

**Q: Why can't ATA schedule the exam in my hometown?**

A: ATA schedules only those exams given at the annual conference. Other exams are scheduled by local groups and chapters, by agencies, or by translators who combine their efforts to schedule a sitting. If an affordable site is available and a certified ATA member is willing to serve as proctor, an exam sitting can be held for a small group of candidates. Contact Headquarters or visit the ATA website for more information.

**Q: How does a person become a grader for the ATA certification program?**

A: Graders are selected from among ATA members who are certified in the language combination they will grade. Some are translators who performed especially well on the examination; others are recommended by current graders, or express an interest to the program administrator at ATA Headquarters. As part of the selection process, potential graders are asked to grade a previously marked exam, which is then reviewed to determine that the grading conforms to the established grading guidelines.

Being a grader also requires special talents. Not all good translators make good graders. Grading requires a mix of translation skill and knowledge in the source language and the target language, flexibility, creativity, an open mind, and a commitment to ATA and the profession.

There are often opportunities for new graders to join the program. Graders are paid a stipend, but it does not come close to matching a translator's salary. If you are ATA-certified and interested, please contact Headquarters for more information.

**Q: Why can't we use computers for the exam?**

A: ATA is working to make keyboarded examinations possible, but no certain date has been set at which this change from handwritten examinations will take place. For the time being, no electronic equipment of any kind is permitted in the examination room. At the certification exam sitting, an exception is made for disabled persons, who may write their examination on a non-memory typewriter.

**Q: Do I need to bring a calculator to convert measures, distances, currencies, and the like?**

A: Calculators, like other electronic equipment, are not permitted at the exam sitting. You are not expected to make these mathematical conversions. However, if you choose to make any such conversions, you will not be penalized if you convert correctly, but you will if the conversion is wrong.

**Q: How often are the exam passages changed?**

A: The passage rotation schedule depends on several factors, such as demand for exams in the respective language pair and number of fail results that have been reviewed or appealed. However, any candidate who fails the exam in a given calendar year is assured of having the opportunity to take the exam in the following calendar year with a different set of passages. Because passages may be used again, candidates are bound by a confidentiality agreement not to discuss or reveal the contents of the examination. Violation of this agreement may be grounds for loss of certification.

**Q: I'm a well respected medical [legal, technical] translator, but I can't seem to pass the certification exam. Why not?**

A: The only way to be sure of the reasons you failed is to apply for review. If you don't want to do that, another option is to take a practice test, which will give you some feedback on the types of errors you may be making. Keep in mind that candidates frequently do well in one passage category, but not in another. The exam is not directed to one particular specialty area.

**Q: I have X years of experience as a translator already. Is there any value to practice tests for me?**

A: Again, the practice test is a way for you to see what a certification passage is like, how it is graded, and what types of pitfalls to avoid when taking the exam.

**Q: How does the practice test program work?**

A: Practice tests are exam passages from previous years, graded by the same individuals who grade the exams. Your practice test will be returned with any errors marked and explained.

**Q: Which of the three passages is used for the practice test?**

A: You can request a practice test in any of the three passage categories. If you do not specify, a general passage will be sent. Each practice test costs \$50, and you can request as many as three.

**Q: How will certification help me? Will it guarantee me a job?**

A: ATA certification will not guarantee you work, but it can help. While there are other ways to prove yourself in the marketplace, translation agencies, bureaus, and clients often look for certification as an initial criterion when hiring a translator. ATA certification is the only widely recognized measure of competence in translation in the United States.

# ATA Certification Program

## Introduction to the ATA Certification Examination

Version 2009

### What does the certification examination consist of?

An ATA certification examination offers the candidate three passages of about 225 to 275 words each (the actual text for passages with English as a source language and the English equivalent for passages with English as a target language). Two of these passages must be translated. Passage A is required. Candidates must choose either Passage B or Passage C (but not both).

- **Passage A** must be translated. It is a general text that expresses a view, sets forth an argument, or presents a new idea. Examples include an excerpt from a newspaper editorial, an essay, or a nonfiction book.
- **Passage B** may be technical, scientific, or medical in content. It may be written by an expert, but not for other experts in that field. Examples include an excerpt from a patient education brochure, operating or installation instructions, or an encyclopedia article.
- **Passage C** may be financial or legal in the broadest sense. It may be written by an expert, but not for other experts in that field. Examples include an excerpt from a contract or lease, a financial report, or a government regulation.

Each type of examination passage is chosen in such a way as to avoid highly specialized terminology challenges requiring research. There are indeed terminology challenges, but they can be met with a good general dictionary and a general specialty dictionary (medical, technical, legal, and financial).

In addition to the text to be translated, each examination passage includes Translation Instructions specifying the context within which the translation is to be performed (text source and translation purpose, audience, and medium) and providing specific instructions such as “use U.S. English” or “translate xxx as XXX.” Translation Instructions can be thought of as reflecting the client's expectations, were the examination a real-life translation assignment.

### What is the purpose of the ATA certification examination?

The ATA certification examination tests for professional translation skills. It is designed to determine whether a candidate is able to produce a translation that is professionally usable within the framework provided by the Translation Instructions. The skills in question are defined by the positive answers to four broad questions:

*Does the translation demonstrate compliance with the specifications of the Translation Instructions?*

*Yes, if:*

- The translation is usable and intelligible in the specified context.
- The register, style, and wording match comparable documents written in the target language.

*Does the translation demonstrate an understanding of the overall content, purpose, and argument of the examination passage?*

*Yes, if:*

- Attention to and understanding of the topic are used to help solve challenges and arrive at a correct rendering.
- Attention to and understanding of the topic help the candidate use dictionaries competently.
- Everything integral to the source text is included in the target text, and nothing that is not implicitly or explicitly stated by the author is added.
- Accurate analysis of the source text ensures that the target text reflects the view, argument, or presented information on all levels (text, sentence, and word).

*Does the translation demonstrate competent familiarity with translation strategies of various kinds?*

*Yes, if:*

- The view, argument, and information are presented appropriately for the target culture.
- The syntax is appropriate to the target language; the target text does not necessarily imitate the sentence structure of the source text.
- The idioms in the source text are rendered so as to convey a comparable meaning in the target text.
- The wording is as unambiguous as possible.

*Does the translation demonstrate good writing in the target language?*

*Yes, if:*

- The target text flows smoothly and does not contain awkward expressions that mark it distinctly as a translation.
- There are few or no mechanical errors (relating to grammar, usage, spelling, or punctuation).

### **How is the examination evaluated?**

ATA's graders strive to be objective and consistent. In reviewing and grading examinations, they are guided largely by three documents:

1. A Flowchart for Error Point Decisions that looks at how an error affects the explicit meaning, understanding, usefulness, or content of a translation.
2. A Framework for Standardized Error Marking that specifies errors by type.
3. A Rubric for Grading, which permits a rather precise articulation of what is inadequate in the translation.

The ATA standard for a passing examination is a level of obvious competence with some room for growth. Candidates can obtain an idea of what this means in practical terms by consulting the Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Skill Level Descriptions for Translation Performance (<http://www.govtilr.org/Skills/AdoptedILRTranslationGuidelines.htm>). A passing grade on the ATA examination is roughly equivalent to a minimum of Level 3 as described in the ILR document.

# ATA CERTIFICATION PROGRAM

## FRAMEWORK FOR STANDARDIZED ERROR MARKING

Version 2009

1	2	4	8	16	Code	Reason
<b>Errors that concern the form of the exam</b>						
Treat missing material within the passage as an omission.					UNF	Unfinished (If a passage is substantially unfinished, do not grade the exam.)
					ILL	Illegibility
					IND	Indecision, gave more than one option
<b>Translation / strategic / transfer errors: Negative impact on understanding / use of target text.</b>						
					MT	Mistranslation (use a subcategory if applicable)
					MU	— Misunderstanding of source text (if identifiable)
					A	— Addition
					O	— Omission
					T	— Terminology, word choice
					R	— Register
					F	— Faithfulness
					L	— Literalness
					FA	— Faux ami (false friend)
					COH	— Cohesion
					AMB	— Ambiguity
					ST	Style (inappropriate for specified type of text)
					OTH	Other (describe)
<b>Mechanical errors: Negative impact on overall quality of target text. Points may vary by language. Maximum 4 points.</b>						
					G	Grammar
					SYN	— Syntax (phrase / clause / sentence structure)
					P	Punctuation
					SP / CH	Spelling / Character (usually 1 point, maximum 2; if more than 2 points, another category must apply)
					D	— Diacritical marks / Accents
					C	— Capitalization
					WF / PS	Word form / Part of speech
					U	Usage
					OTH	Other (describe)
	x 2 =	x 4 =	x 8 =	x 16 =	<b>Column totals</b>	
A grader may stop marking errors when the score reaches 46 error points.		A grader may award a quality point for each of up to three specific instances of exceptional translation.			Quality points are subtracted from the error point total to yield a final score. A passage with a score of 18 or more points receives a grade of Fail.	
<b>Total error points</b> (add column totals):		<b>Quality points</b> (maximum 3):			<b>Final passage score</b> (subtract quality points from error points):	

# FLOWCHART FOR ERROR POINT DECISIONS

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