

ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) Answers to Frequently Asked Questions

What is the ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview?

The ACTFL Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) is a testing method that measures how well you speak a language by comparing your performance with the criteria described in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines- Speaking (Revised 1999)

It is a one-to-one telephonic or face-to-face conversation with a real person conducted entirely in the target language.

How can I best prepare to take the OPI?

It is helpful to read the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines in order to be familiar with the functions, discourse length and accuracy features of the level that you need to achieve.

Practice speaking as much as you can, practicing the functions that you will need to demonstrate during the interview, i.e., telling stories, giving full descriptions, etc.

How is the interview structured?

The OPI is structured so that you have a chance to provide the very best sample of real communicative language you can produce.

The interview will also stretch your abilities, and push you to your limits in the language.

What happens during the interview?

Through a conversational format, you will be asked to talk about yourself, your interests, your daily routine, etc.

The tester may use a variety of direct information questions, or ask for a description, ask you to narrate, or ask for your opinion on a familiar subject.

Will I only be required to answer questions?

During most of the interview, the tester will ask you questions about a variety of topics that are of interest to you.

The tester may also ask you to take part in a role-play situation intended to find out how well you may be able to handle a real situation.

What should I do if I cannot remember a particular word?

If you do not know a specific term, try to describe or paraphrase what you want to say in the language. Avoid using English, slang or making up words.

If you do use English, slang or a made-up term, do not be surprised if the interviewer asks you to describe what that word means in the language of the test.

What are the best strategies for success on the OPI?

When taking the oral proficiency interview, listen carefully to the questions asked by the interviewer before answering.

When answering, give as detailed a response as possible. Saying little to avoid making mistakes will not improve your rating.

Your participation in the interview is very important in order to demonstrate your language proficiency at its best.

Remember to relax and, engage fully in the conversation.

SUPERIOR

Speakers at the Superior level are able to communicate in the language with accuracy and fluency in order to participate fully and effectively in conversations on a variety of topics in formal and informal settings from both concrete and abstract perspectives. They discuss their interests and special fields of competence, explain complex matters in detail, and provide lengthy and coherent narrations, all with ease, fluency, and accuracy. They explain their opinions on a number of topics of importance to them, such as social and political issues, and provide structured argument to support their opinions. They are able to construct and develop hypotheses to explore alternative possibilities. When appropriate, they use extended discourse without unnaturally lengthy hesitation to make their point, even when engaged in abstract elaborations. Such discourse, while coherent, may still be influenced by the Superior speakers' own language patterns, rather than those of the target language.

Superior speakers command a variety of interactive and discourse strategies, such as turn-taking and separating main ideas from supporting information through the use of syntactic and lexical devices, as well as intonational features such as pitch, stress and tone. They demonstrate virtually no pattern of error in the use of basic structures. However, they may make sporadic errors, particularly in low-frequency structures and in some complex high-frequency structures more common to formal speech and writing. Such errors, if they do occur, do not distract the native interlocutor or interfere with communication.

ADVANCED HIGH

Speakers at the Advanced-High level perform all Advanced-level tasks with linguistic ease, confidence and competence. They are able to consistently explain in detail and narrate fully and accurately in all time frames. In addition, Advanced-High speakers handle the tasks pertaining to the Superior level but cannot sustain performance at that level across a variety of topics. They can provide a structured argument to support their opinions, and they may construct hypotheses, but patterns of error appear. They can discuss some topics abstractly, especially those relating to their particular interests and special fields of expertise, but in general, they are more comfortable discussing a variety of topics concretely.

Advanced-High speakers may demonstrate a well-developed ability to compensate for an imperfect grasp of some forms or for limitations in vocabulary by the confident use of communicative strategies, such as paraphrasing, circumlocution, and illustration. They use precise vocabulary and intonation to express meaning and often show great fluency and ease of speech. However, when called on to perform the complex tasks associated with the Superior level over a variety of topics, their language will at times

break down or prove inadequate, or they may avoid the task altogether, for example, by resorting to simplification through the use of description or narration in place of argument or hypothesis.

ADVANCED MID

Speakers at the Advanced-Mid level are able to handle with ease and confidence a large number of

ADVANCED LOW

Speakers at the Advanced-Low level are able to handle a variety of communicative tasks, although somewhat haltingly at times. They participate actively in most informal and a limited number of formal

INTERMEDIATE LOW

Speakers at the Intermediate-Low level are able to handle successfully a limited number of uncomplicated communicative tasks by creating with the language in straightforward social situations. Conversation is restricted to some of the concrete exchanges and predictable topics necessary for survival in the target language culture. These topics relate to basic personal information covering, for example, self and family, some daily activities and personal preferences, as well as to some immediate needs, such as ordering food and making simple purchases. At the Intermediate-Low level, speakers are primarily reactive and struggle to answer direct questions or requests for information, but they are also able to ask a few appropriate questions.

Intermediate-Low speakers express personal meaning by combining and recombining into short statements what they know and what they hear from their interlocutors. Their utterances are often filled with hesitancy and inaccuracies as they search for appropriate linguistic forms and vocabulary while attempting to give form to the message. Their speech is characterized by frequent pauses, ineffective reformulations and self-corrections. Their pronunciation, vocabulary and syntax are strongly influenced by their first language but, in spite of frequent misunderstandings that require repetition or rephrasing, Intermediate-Low speakers can generally be understood by sympathetic interlocutors, particularly by those accustomed to dealing with non-natives.

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