

## Freelance Interpreter



Name: **Svetlana Guggenheim**  
Profession: **Freelance Interpreter**  
Number of years in this line of work: **16 years**  
Native Language: **Russian**  
Other Languages: **English, French**

### 1) What is your profession?

I am an interpreter, which is not to be confused with a translator. These are two completely different professions. Interpreting presupposes verbal communication, while translation is presenting material in a written form. I work with both the Russian and English-Russian pairs. Of course, since I'm a Russian native speaker, it's easier for me to work with the Russian side, which constitutes about 60% of the work that I do. However, when I do have to go in the other direction, I find myself struggling not only to keep up with the speaker, but also to rephrase what I hear in a way that is understandable to the other party, which was severely imposed on me in college!

### 2) Describe a "typical" day as an Interpreter.

I'm a freelancer (which is pretty typical for this field of work) which means that each day I have a different contract with a particular agency or employer. For example, I work with both the public and private sectors. My clients include the US State Department, Department of Commerce, Department of Energy, etc. Working with the federal agencies and other public organizations is very different than working with private clients. The latter is more interesting because you are working with somebody who looks as though they just happened to walk out of IBM, Stanley Morgan, etc.

That is to say, a clean-cut image is probably something that they would prefer or the other party. But even if you look different, ultimately the quality of your work, the ability to be professional, and the ability to work with different parties is something that will get you more work in the future. Also, private clients expect you to work long hours, usually not being compensated for overtime and working with private clients is more interesting, and more challenging, because of the need to be concise, and initiate deeper discussions.

### 3) What do you enjoy about it? What do you not enjoy about it?

I love my work. Sometimes it drives me insane, especially when speakers are unable to understand what the interpreter is saying. The interpreter, however, is just trying to digest and rephrase what the speaker is saying. Sometimes the pace of a speaker is challenging later on by the other side through Q & A. Sometimes the pace of a speaker is incredibly difficult to follow. The Russian syntax is very different from that of English and it's often a matter of pleading ever convinces the speaker to slow down.

People who are not interpreters simply cannot make this connection and very often a just repeating what the other person is saying, only in a different language?" Also, in the newspaper and pulp industry, securities markets, space craft launches, etc., I have to constantly be on my toes. In almost every instance, I'm not provided with any materials ahead of time. So, by the time I get to the event, I have to do a lot of maneuvering and diplomatic skills to get both sides to clarify and explain some of the more complex issues. In the ideal setting, I would have been provided with all the materials available weeks in advance. But in the real world, I leave an interpreter with nothing and not bother speakers for their presentations ahead of time. It's a completely new topic for me. But still, it creates an enormous amount of stress. I get so tired of it that it makes me doubt whether I should stay in this line of business. But I love it. I get two parties to understand each other and make it look effortless, it's worth all the stress.

### 4) Do you speak any other languages besides the ones you work with? Which language is your favorite and why?

I'm ashamed to admit that my once-working knowledge of French has been reduced to a minimum. I can't communicate in it. This only proves that one must practice foreign language constantly. My favorite language is Russian because after years and years of studying and using it in my work, it's the only one that I can speak fluently. I'm only starting to scratch the surface.

### 5) How did your love of languages begin?

I can't think of a particular reason or event that prompted my interest in this area. I remember, I've always been trying to understand the mystery of unknown alphabets,

### 6) What do you think helped you the most in mastering the foreign/second language?

Initial interest, good teachers, and the desire to push myself a little harder than most would expect nothing less than perfect and sometimes they did it not in the nicest way. I made sure that my students were striving for the best results possible but I wasn't pu

**7) Did learning foreign languages become progressively easier as you we**

By all means. Especially since my second foreign language was French, which bears absolutely no trouble mastering most of the grammatical concepts and of course, the sounds. The only explanation for that I can provide is that a lot of words sound practically the same. The sounds are similar to the ones in Russian. Actually, for some reason Russians use French, which native French speakers always comment on.

**8) Do you think it is important to learn not just a language, but also the culture spoken?**

Absolutely. It would be hard for me to generalize, but based on my experience of working in the Soviet Union, I have to be versatile in fifteen cultures and subtleties associated with their languages. I have a very diverse audience - ethnically, religiously, and age-wise. For example, since Russia was the Soviet Union, but each republic speaks its own language (not dialects of Russian!), it doesn't present a problem for the delegates of the older generation.

On the other hand, after the split of the Soviet Union, Russian has virtually stopped being used and all official documentation is now done only in their local languages. Younger generations are either very poor Russian or none at all. This is especially challenging with the representatives who generally feel uncomfortable with a female interpreter (perceived as one of the reasons for their inability to approach these people tactfully and respectfully, yet firmly, enables me to do so).

**9) What language do you think in?**

I think in a combination of Russian and English, especially when I dream. And sometimes I hear a non-existent accent in English, only to find it here to stay by the time I wake up.

**10) If you had the time to learn another language now, what language would you choose?**

I would learn Arabic, because I'm totally fascinated with the culture and history of the Arab world. I know the language well enough to at least be able to figure out what some of the decorative calligraphy they see say!

**11) How do you think your life would have turned out if you had never learned English?**

Every good thing that happened to me was somehow related to my interest and knowledge of English. My fluency in English made my entrance exams into college a piece of cake, because by participating in various competitions that the college staff basically waived me through the oral part.

Also, my seventeen year-old daughter has developed a passion for foreign languages. It's becoming more common. This adds a whole new dimension to our relationship, which makes me feel like I should travel around the US and be able to analyze from a linguistic standpoint, the differences between various regions. Finally, if not for my knowledge of English and my interpretation career, I wouldn't have been an American visiting Moscow with a delegation for whom I was interpreting!

**12) In your opinion, are there more career opportunities for people who speak multiple languages?**

In theory, yes. But in reality, a lot of people who speak two or more languages are not taken seriously. The "natural selection" process in favor of somebody who only speaks English but has a lot of other qualifications. There is a whole list of qualifications and requirements that are considered before a person is hired. This makes me sad, as I feel it demonstrates a very shortsighted view of the world.

**13) What advice would you give to someone aspiring to have a language-related career?**

If you don't feel 100% passionate about it, don't waste your time. This is a blood, sweat, and tears rewarding experience. The sheer joy of realizing that you are communicating with someone from a different culture is probably the most exciting thing one can ever experience.