A close-up photograph of a hand holding a purple pencil with a silver eraser. The hand is positioned on the left side of the frame, with the fingers gripping the pencil. The pencil is held horizontally, and the eraser is at the right end. The background is a solid green color. The text of the article is overlaid on the green background.

Note Taking for Consecutive Interpreting

By Hana Laurenzo

Notes, as an external storage mechanism of our memory, are present in many areas of human activity, from simple shopping lists to sophisticated business note taking systems. Despite this, note taking is sort of a neglected stepchild of consecutive interpreting. As interpreters, we learn early on that taking notes is beneficial, even crucial, to the overall success of our performance and optimal quality of our work for the benefit of the customer, but we are seldom introduced to the various techniques available. Granted, note taking styles differ from person to person. In the absence of any standards or typical schemes to follow, individuals develop their own technique and style. The problem with this is that we tend to develop habits that might make our interpreting more difficult and less effective, and, in some cases, nearly impossible. The main problems we typically see include:

- Writing too much.
- Writing unstructured notes.
- Noting words instead of ideas.
- Using nonstandard abbreviations, which are difficult to decipher when we look at our notes later.
- Taking notes on random or loose pieces of paper.

This article, although by no means exhaustive, includes some basic information and tips to better your note taking technique.

The Basics

Structured note taking is suitable for any consecutive interpreting scenario. Although we may have an

assignment where hardly any notes need to be taken, it is good practice always to have a notepad and pen available just in case we need to jot down numbers or names. In most cases, however, taking notes constitutes an inseparable part of the interpreting process. Interpreters also take notes during simultaneous interpreting, but these typically consist of short messages only, and the notes lack the structure that is necessary for interpreting larger chunks of speech during consecutive interpreting.

Students sometimes ask if their need to take notes makes them look unprofessional. The answer is absolutely not. Quite the opposite. Taking notes shows your client that you are doing everything you can to deliver the message in the target language accurately and completely.

Note Taking Tools

A consecutive interpreter must be prepared to take notes sitting down or standing up, so a simple piece of paper will not do. A 6"x9" spiral-bound steno pad is recommended, with the spiral located along the top side of the pad. The pad should have a cardboard back, which makes it possible to write while standing up. In addition, the spiraling at the top of the page will allow you to flip pages down, instead of over the hand.

The individual pages of the pad should be numbered at the bottom. During a fairly large chunk of speech, an interpreter will go through several pages of notes. When it is time to go back to the beginning of your notes and interpret, you will be able to use the numbers at the bottom of the page as a reference point to make sure that nothing is skipped in the final rendition. In addition, make sure you bring several pens with your favorite color ink to each interpreting assignment.

Taking notes shows your client that you are doing everything you can to deliver the message in the target language accurately and completely.

Chances are one or two of them will not work, so you will need a backup.

Notes Are Not Everything

Do not rely solely on your notes. An interpreter should first and foremost rely on his or her memory, the capacity of which can be strengthened through the use of proper visualization techniques. (See the links on page 29 for more information on memory training techniques.) Let us remember that, to a certain degree, note taking interferes with listening. Active listening, of course, is the cornerstone of proper interpreting. You must first hear and understand the message within a specific context to be able to interpret it effectively. Therefore, writing a minimum amount of notes as opposed to writing almost everything is key.

To maximize the success of your interpreting performance and to minimize the need for taking notes, request background materials from the client so you can study them ahead of time and research the topic. Aside from being able to do a better job overall, you will enjoy a boost in your confidence and the feeling of having things under control. It is also a good idea to try to have a short conversation with the speaker before the start of the event. This is an excellent way to "tune" your ear to the speaker's accent and intonation to enhance your listening experience, while finding out more about the speaker's message.

The Language of Our Notes

Most interpreters prefer writing notes in the target language. Writing notes in the original language works just as well for others. Just avoid mixing the languages and using both, which, in an already stressful situation, can cause you to forget which language you are interpreting into.

Find Out What Suits You

There is no unified note taking system to suit everyone's needs. Since everybody's memory works differently, has varied capacity, and stores information using different methods, it would be impossible to come up with a one-size-fits-all approach. Every interpreter eventually comes up with his or her own system, solidified through practice and experience, and finds out what impulses trigger retrieval of stored information from memory.

Notes Are Just for You

Contrary to popular belief, the notes you write are not intended for use by other interpreters or clients. Notes are written in a personalized way and are often illegible to others, and that is just fine. As long as you can read and understand them, there is no need for anyone else to be able to decipher your writing.

Why Take Notes?

Interpreting works best when we let the speaker deliver a mean- ➔

ingful chunk of speech, preferably two or more sentences. As interpreters, we need enough material to work with, to recognize context, and to be able to deliver the message properly in the target language. The longer the chunks of speech, the bigger the need for taking notes. Taking notes also helps the conversation flow with the least possible disruption.

At the same time, you should not fixate on using notes. When you take notes but feel you can deliver without them, do not use them. On the other hand, take notes when you interpret about a subject that is new to you. Memory associates with prior experi-

ence and knowledge. The fewer associations there are, the more difficult it is to remember and the more notes you will need to take.

Note Taking Structure

The most widely used note taking structure is based on the work of Jean Francois Rozan.¹ His method abstracts the source-language message into a symbolic form. Very few words are written down, and the focus is on ideas, or concepts, rather than words. This way, key words are identified, which will eventually trigger the memory of the entire concept. The most important techniques used in this method are:

- To write down key concepts and words diagonally across the page, from left to right.
- To use indentation, spacing, and vertical organization of words and symbols.

Notes written this way:

- Are easier to read as our eyes move naturally from left to right.
- Have an at-a-glance, simple to follow structure.
- Place the beginning of each concept on the left, where we will see it first.
- Eliminate syntactic interference in the target language (frequently the result of horizontal notes).
- Provide space for additional notes.

For example, the sentence “The police arrested a drug smuggler,” noted diagonally across the page, would look like Figure 1.

Notice how easy it would be to

expand on the sentence and include more notes when this diagonal structure is used. If our sentence changed to “The Police, together with the Port Authority, arrested drug smugglers, thieves, and suspected terrorists,” the notes would look like Figure 2.

Similar “skeleton” sentences are typically all you need to keep track of what is being said. For easier orientation, the individual concepts can be separated on the page using a horizontal line, as shown in Figure 3 on page 27.

Link Words

Logical connectors, called “links,” connect and clarify individual concepts or ideas. It is a good idea to draw a vertical line about an inch from the left side of your notepad and write such link words to the left of the line, while noting the subject-verb-object (S-V-O) concepts to the right of it. For example, typical link words, in their abbreviated form, include:

- COS because
- THO although, despite
- TO (in order) to, so that
- Eg for example
- + in addition, not only, also
- B but, however, in spite of this
- _ consequently, this means that, the result is

Figure 4 on page 27 shows an example of using link word abbreviations.

Using Symbols

Symbols are pictures, letters, and words that represent something. Rather than individual words, symbols typically represent ideas or concepts. Symbols are quick and easy to write. On a page with notes, they are easy to see and easy to read. Symbols can be used instead of verbs, nouns,

Figure 1

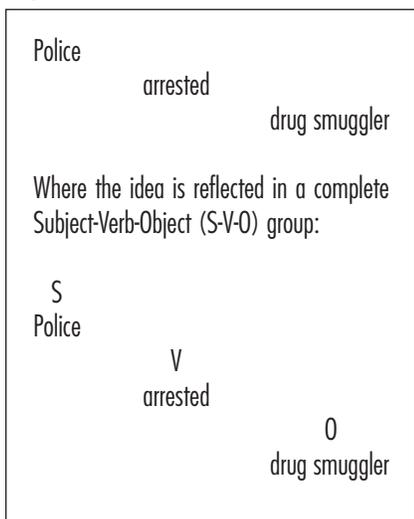


Figure 2

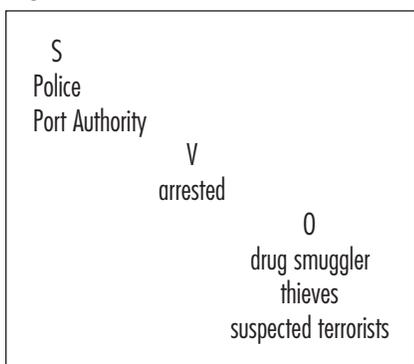


Figure 3



and recurring ideas. Examples include:

Verbs

- ♥ (want, desire)
- >> (suggest, propose)

Nouns

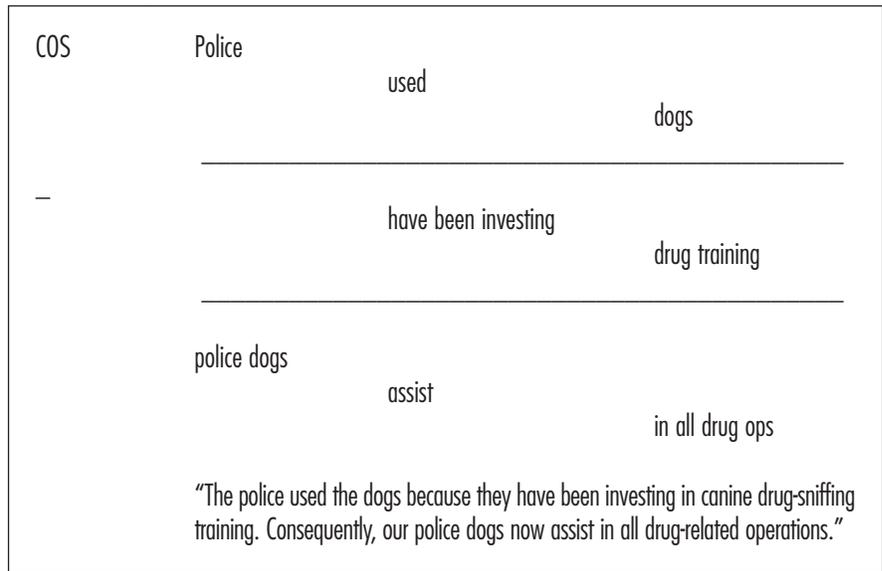
- O (world, planet)
- \$ (money)
- (consequence, result)

For example, to represent recurring ideas in a speech about Rotary Clubs in Texas, the interpreter could come up with two simple symbols, such as RC and TX, to save time when writing notes. Limited to one particular speech, the RC symbol will not be confused with anything else, while TX can be used at any time to denote Texas.

One of the most versatile symbols is the arrow, which is used more frequently than most other symbols. Some examples of its use include:

- ↗ (increase, rise, grow, etc.)
- ↘ (decrease, fall, decline, drop, etc.)
- (leads to, consequence of, therefore)
- ← (return, come back, reverse)

Figure 4



You must first hear and understand the message within a specific context to be able to interpret effectively.

↔ (relations, exchange, mutual)

The arrow can modify meaning in many different scenarios. Figure 5 on page 28 uses examples taken from Jean Francois Rozan’s pivotal work, *Note-taking in Consecutive Interpreting*. (Note: The word the arrow designates appears in bold.)

Figure 6 in page 28 shows more symbols you can use for various concepts.

Take-home Tips

Here is a rundown of some basic tips highlighting the areas covered in this article.

Use Symbols

1. Figure out which symbols work for you and practice using them in advance of the assignment. Never

improvise during the speech.

2. Symbols must be clear and easy to draw.
3. Be consistent when using symbols. If “I” denotes “industry,” do not use “I” somewhere else in your notes to stand for “international.”
4. Symbols create associations in your mind, so have a set of symbols that you have made your own. Since we are all unique, with different educational backgrounds and life experiences, no one’s system will be exactly alike.
5. Note the degrees of importance of the symbols you use through underlining. For example:



Figure 5

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| Country ↗ | a country's development |
| ↗ duties | an increase in duties |
| science ↗ | scientific progress |
| patient ↗ | the patient's recovery |
| ↗ salaries | a rise in salaries |
| ↗ living standard | an improvement in the standard of living |
| ↗ prices | Inflated prices |

↗ increase

↗ sharp increase, jump (for instance in prices)

↗ dramatic rise, skyrocket

↗ faltering, unsteady rise

Write Down the Most Important Items

1. Title of the speech (if any).
2. Ideas and concepts, rather than words.
3. Link words.
4. Modal words and verb tenses.
5. Who the speaker is, proper names, numbers, dates, and lists.
6. Terms and words about which you are unsure (and that you might be able to decode from further context).
7. The last sentence (punch line).

Figure 6

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>People:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☺ (Pleased, happy) ☹ (Annoyed, unhappy) ☹☹ (Very unhappy, disgusted) <p>Mathematics:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> + (addition to) - (less) % (percentage) < (less than) > (greater than) = (equal to) <p>Geography:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> N (North) S (South) E (East) W (West) <p>Currencies:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> \$ (dollars) £ (pounds) Rs (rupees) € (euros) <p>Keyboard:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> @ (at) # (number) & (and) % (percent) © (copyright) ® (trademark) | <p>Country codes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> D (Germany) UK (United Kingdom) F (France) PL (Poland) DA (Denmark) CH (China) CAN (Canada) <p>Currency codes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> SFR (Swiss franc) USD (U.S. dollar) DEM (German mark) AUD (Australian dollar) GBP (pound sterling) JPY (yen) CZK (Czech koruna) <p>Text message shorthand:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> RU (are you) OK 2 (to) U (you) 4ever (forever) B/C (because) b4 (before) <p>Chemical symbols:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> CO (carbon monoxide) H₂O (water) Na (sodium) Fe (iron) CO₂ (carbon dioxide) |
|--|---|

Use Effective Note Taking Techniques

1. Practice on written text first, getting your mind used to noting the S-V-O structure.

2. Make a deliberate effort to locate parts of the speech that you will be able to recall fairly easily using minimal notes.

3. Review your notes and decide

For More Information



Publications

Gillies, Andrew. *Note-taking in Consecutive Interpreting* (Krakow: Tertium, 2005). (This is the English translation of Jean Francois Rozan's *La prise de notes en interprétation consécutive*.)

Jones, Roderick. *Conference Interpreting Explained* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2002).

Rozan, Jean Francois. *La prise de notes en interprétation consécutive* (Geneva: Georg, 1956).

Links

International Association of Conference Interpreters
www.aiic.net

Interpreter Training Resources
<http://interpreters.free.fr/consecnotes/notes.htm>

Memory Training in Interpreting
<http://accurapid.com/journal/25interpret.htm>

St. Jerome Publishing
www.stjerome.co.uk

which parts you could have omitted to still get the same result.

4. Listen to a recorded speech or have someone read a story aloud and take notes, and then try to put the notes aside and see how much you can recall just from your memory. This is a difficult task, but it illustrates how much writing actually interferes with listening.

5. Listen to a different recorded speech and take more notes, making sure to use the correct S-V-O structure, symbols (if applicable), and link words.

I hope that the information provided here will give you a better idea of the note taking process, and that you can use it to organize a system that works best for you.

Notes

1. Rozan, Jean Francois. *La prise de notes en interprétation consécutive* (Geneva: Georg, 1956), 32.
2. Gillies, Andrew. *Note-taking in Consecutive Interpreting* (Krakow: Tertium, 2005), 29.

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