



Not Your Mother's Latin:

Honing Your Medical Terminology for Medical Interpreter Certification

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So, you want to get certified as a medical interpreter. You've heard that the written exams for the two national certification programs require knowledge of medical terminology. Well, unless you're already a veteran interpreter who works across multiple health care settings, chances are you will need to shore up your medical terminology.

In fact, of the two written exams, the National Board of Certification for Medical Interpreters (NBCMI) bases roughly 75% of its exam on medical terminology, while the Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters (CCHI) bases roughly 22-25% of its questions on medical terminology. Bottom line: you will need to prepare.

So, what's the best approach? We would argue for an *interactive* approach. The following reviews

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some of the resources available to help you prepare for the exam, but a resource list is not enough. You need a strategy, a plan—preferably one that doesn't involve memorizing lists until your eyes glaze over. Unless you have the self-discipline of Gandhi, that “tough it out” approach probably won't work. The reasons are simple:

- Medical terminology, divorced from context, is dull and dry.
- Adults learn by doing.

- Memorizing long lists demands intense focus.
- It's harder to remember terms that lack context.
- Practice is not only engaging, but builds skills and confidence and reinforces memory.
- Pairing an emotional stimulus to a cognitive task promotes retention (memory).

Now let's talk about a plan. ➡

What Works Best? A Two-Step Process

One of the most effective training approaches involves two steps: on-site (or online) training, followed by structured self-study. In our long observations as two veteran interpreter trainers, we feel that most interpreters do best if they can start with a live (in-person) structured program, even a short one, followed by a self-study program.

Failing that—that is, if you don't have a local program to attend and lack the funds to travel—you can try starting with online training. But be warned: some online training programs for medical terminology lack “salsa.” They require tremendous self-discipline, and they can be dull. That said, dullness can be a problem for in-person training as well. So, get recommendations before you sign up for anything and choose your training carefully.

Where do you start? First, let's look at your options for medical terminology training in the U.S.

1. Training Programs (Onsite or Online): One of the best resources to find onsite or online programs is the website of the International Medical Interpreters Association.¹ Click on the “Education” tab, then on “Education Registry.” Now you can search by state and look for medical terminology programs in your area. You can also do a search for online programs. It is important to note, however, that some of these programs are for Spanish interpreters, while others are non-language-specific. Also, the quality of these programs varies substantially.

If you are not sure which class is best for you, ask your interpreter colleagues for opinions. Ask what they think about the support material for a given program (handouts, handbooks, or textbooks). Go on the listservs of your favorite associations and post questions (e.g., ATA's Interpreters Division, your local ATA chapter, or organizations such as the National Council on Interpreting in Health

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Care²). Also consider Facebook, LinkedIn, or other social media groups for your favorite associations (you typically do not have to be an association member for such groups). Many social media platforms also offer special interest groups, such as Facebook's Interpreting and Translation Forum,³ which may require an invitation, but not an association membership. In short, try to vet the program before plunking down your money.

A second excellent local resource would be community college or university medical terminology programs for allied health professionals. Those courses are given entirely in English. They tend to be well structured and comprehensive, with good textbooks. Simply contact your local community colleges or check out their course offerings online.

2. Creating a Self-Study Program: Taking at least one class, even a short one, gives you a medical terminology foundation on which to build. Taking classes will require you to reflect and become self-aware, but you'll need to find ways to make the process fun or you won't study. To this end, you really need to find out how you learn. Are you mainly one type of learner or a mixture of any of the learning styles below? (There are a number of others.)

- **Visual:** learns best through exploring images, video demos, visual aids, symbols, charts, etc.
- **Active:** learns best by doing (e.g., role plays, skills building, practice, self-testing, developing glossaries).
- **Reflective:** learns best by reflecting, discussion, and absorbing “what works.”
- **Kinetic:** learns best with tactile reinforcement (e.g., flash cards, interactive activities with movement, or working with a live partner).
- **Auditory:** learns best by listening (e.g., to online auditory files of medical terms in both languages or recorded-practice resources, such as those listed at the end of this article).

We are all a mix of different learning styles, which is why we need a variety of teaching methods, even when we teach ourselves, to keep us engaged and learning. After all, you can't learn if you're asleep! Let's take a look at what generally works best for most interpreters.

Build Your Own Self-Study Program from the Ground Up

Hands down, what seems to work best for interpreters when implementing a plan are three important features of self-study: 1) a partner, 2) a schedule, and 3) an interactive approach.

The Study Buddy Approach: A buddy system with active participation works better than studying alone because interpreters:

- Learn more from each other than on their own.
- Stick to the schedule (“I can't let my buddy down!”).
- Correct and help each other.
- Keep each other on task.
- Pool experiences.

- Find solutions.
- Have fun!

The Schedule: We absorb and retain new information far better when learning is spaced out over regular intervals than we do cramming at the last minute. You know this already, so act on that knowledge. Besides, are you taking the certification exam for the piece of paper—or because you want to be a good medical interpreter?

The Interactive Approach: By working with flashcards with your study partner, competing and testing each other, comparing glossaries, doing timed practice tests, and so forth, you will find yourself *enjoying* terminology instead of developing a migraine. You’ll be excited, motivated, and challenged, and develop a collegial relationship with your study partner. As a result, you’ll learn more. Here are some examples of how to work with a partner using an interactive approach:

- Create different activities based on good terminology textbooks and resources to eliminate boredom (see the next few tips).
- Develop exercises that require your active input, such as filling in tables, crosswords, “fill-in-the-blank” activities, etc.
- Focus on activities for Latin and Greek roots, prefixes, and suffixes that work like puzzles where you piece together the medical meaning from roots and affixes. This could be the single most valuable exercise because it helps you understand medical terms with which you are unfamiliar. Remember, medical terminology in English is 75% derived from Latin and Greek roots and affixes.
- Create specialization-specific glossaries (e.g., for pediatrics or internal medicine) by yourself and then compare glossaries with your

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partner. What terms does your partner have that you don’t? Educate each other.

- Test each other with flashcards that you make based on your weakest areas.
- Do role-playing exercises with each other using progressively more challenging situations. (See the resources listed in the following sections.)
- Hold a medical abbreviations contest to see which of you can correctly spell out a list of medical abbreviations first.

These are only a few examples. The point is to build a self-study program that works for you.

What Do You Need to Learn?

Based on a needs assessment and the content of the CCHI and NBCMI national certification exams, at a minimum you will need to focus on:

- Latin and Greek roots, prefixes, and suffixes.
- Body parts and body systems (basic anatomy and physiology).
- Medical specialties and terms related to those specialties.
- Diseases and disorders.
- Symptoms.
- Tests and procedures.
- Medical abbreviations.

Figure 1: Sample Glossary

English	Spanish	Comments
Admitting Office	<i>Oficina de Admisión, Mesón de Recepción/admission</i>	
Axilla, armpit	<i>axila sobaco</i>	<i>Axila</i> is higher register than <i>sobaco</i> .
Beep	<i>sonido electrónico intermitente</i>	
Bending	<i>inclinarse, agacharse, doblar</i>	
Blood relative	<i>pariente consanguíneo un familiar de sangre</i>	Higher register Lower register
Bradycardia	<i>braicardia</i>	Slower than normal heart rate.
Collection agency	<i>agencia recaudadora, agencia de cobranza</i>	
Crutches	<i>muletas</i>	
Dressings	<i>vendaje, apósito, gasa, cura, curación</i>	Dressing vs. Band-Aid—varies by country/region and size. Try searches to verify translation

In addition, look closely at the preparation material and guidance offered by the two national certification programs.⁴

Create Your Own Study Glossaries

One of the best ways to self-test and develop knowledge that will help you long after the certification exam is to create your own glossaries. For example, CCHI offers free multilingual mini-glossaries you can download from its website.⁵

Whether you create glossaries in Word, Excel, or a database, you will want to have at least three columns: one for the English term, one for your other working language, and a column for comments (e.g., about the register, usage, regional variations, synonyms, etc.). You might also consider adding a fourth column to write in the definition of the word, so that you not only know the linguistic equivalent in your non-English language but the medical meaning of the term. Finally, whatever file format you use, set up your table so that you can re-sort your glossary alphabetically whenever you add new terms. (See Figure 1 on page 17 for an example.)

A Parting Word

As you build your knowledge of medical terminology, you will eventually say to yourself, “Yes, I can do this!” You will feel engaged, positive, and enthusiastic. This confidence can help you perform more smoothly on oral certification exams as well. Bottom line: there is no escaping the fact that if you want to get certified, you will probably have to study medical terminology. However, with the right plan, strategies, and resources, study can be fun.

Good luck! ■

Notes

1. International Medical Interpreters Association, www.imiaweb.org.

Select Resources for Self-Study

There are some great resources out there. Here are just a few of the better known ones you can check out. All but the first and last are packed with role-playing exercises.

Medical Terminology Textbooks for Health and Allied Health Professionals

You can purchase these at your local college bookstore or search online. They won't have role-playing exercises (and are not designed for interpreters), but have many wonderful self-study exercises. Perhaps the easiest way to find them is to go to your favorite online bookseller and do a search for “medical terminology” in quotation marks. Then choose the one you find most appealing.

The Interpreter's Rx

www.acebo.com

The Interpreter's Rx teaches Spanish↔English interpreting in a medical context. It includes training in sight translation, consecutive interpreting, and simultaneous interpreting. You will have access to a 262-page book and a set of three audio CDs.

Medical Interpretools and Medical Essentials Self-Study Courses

www.nci.arizona.edu/essentials_med

Offered in Spanish>English, with CDs, by the National Center for Interpretation, University of Arizona.

The Art of Medical Interpretation

<http://bit.ly/cccs-culture>

A 60-hour course in English offered by Cross Cultural Communication Systems, Inc.

Health Care Interpreting Practice Dialogues Series

<http://bit.ly/practice-dialogues>

Offered in several languages by International Language Services.

Medical Terminology for Interpreters

<http://bit.ly/terminology-medical>

A handbook for self-study and for use in workshops.

2. National Council on Interpreting in Health Care, www.ncihc.org/member-benefits.
3. The LinkedIn group “Professional Interpreters, All Languages” has 8,400 members, but more importantly, it has a lot of discussions where working interpreters post questions and get advice from fellow members. Just go to <http://bit.ly/LinkedIn-interpreters>.
4. CCHI preparation materials, <http://bit.ly/CCHI-certification>; NBCMI materials, <http://bit.ly/NBCMI-certification>.
5. Certification Commission for Healthcare Interpreters Multilingual Glossaries, <http://bit.ly/CCHI-glossaries>.