



Assessing Proficiency



What is Language Proficiency?

Language proficiency refers to functional language ability – basically, **what a speaker can do in a language**.

- Proficiency depends not on knowing *about* various aspects of a language, but rather on **the ability to use the language in real-life scenarios**.
- **Memorizing tables of verb conjugations will not necessarily increase your proficiency**, unless you are able to *use* the new verb forms to understand and communicate information.
- For example: Can you introduce yourself to someone? Can you schedule an appointment? Can you return or exchange an item that you purchased? Can you fill out a simple form or write an e-mail to a friend?

Rating Proficiency

There are different ways of measuring and describing proficiency:

- **At the Five College Center for the Study of World Languages, we talk about proficiency in terms of the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines.** ACTFL stands for the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages.
- **We focus especially on the [ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking](#).** You can find all

of the guidelines for speaking, writing, listening, and reading [on ACTFL's website](#).

ACTFL also publishes Can-Do Statements that students can use for self-assessment. For more information, see [Self-Assessment with Can-Do Statements](#) or [access the Can-Do Statements online](#).

Other scales that are based on proficiency include:

- [The Interagency Language Roundtable \(ILR\) Scale](#) used by the U.S. government.
- [The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages \(CEFR\)](#).

Depending on your career goals, you may find it helpful to become familiar with one of these scales.

What are the ACTFL Guidelines?

At the Five College Center for World Languages, we talk about oral proficiency in terms of **the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking**, developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (also see: [What is Language Proficiency?](#)). When a student does an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI), a rating is assigned based on this scale (also see: [What is an Oral Proficiency Interview?](#)).

The ACTFL Scale

With the **ACTFL scale**, we talk about **four major levels**:

- Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior.

The Novice, Intermediate, and Advanced levels are each divided into **three sublevels**:

- Low, Mid, and High.

So if you take an OPI, you might receive a rating such as “Novice Mid” or “Intermediate High.” (ACTFL actually describes a fifth level called Distinguished, but the highest possible rating for an OPI is Superior since OPIs do not test for the Distinguished level.)

What the Guidelines Mean

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines describe what a speaker can do in the language at each level. They are not based on a particular textbook, syllabus, or way of learning a language, so they do not list specific vocabulary terms or grammatical structures that students are expected to know. Rather, **they are concerned with how a speaker can use the language to communicate.** For example: Are you limited to listing words (“apple, carrot, cheese”) and using memorized phrases (“How are you?”), or can you create your own sentences (“Apples are my favorite fruit. I don’t like carrots.”)? Can you ask simple questions and handle a straightforward transaction such as scheduling an appointment? What about a more complicated situation like returning or exchanging an item you purchased?

For details about what speakers at each level can do, you can read [descriptions of the proficiency levels on ACTFL's website](#). They also have videos of English speakers at different

levels, so you can get an idea of what a Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, or Superior speaker sounds like.

Another helpful resource from ACTFL is their [Can-Do Statements for Interpersonal Communication](#). (Scroll down for can-do statements by level.) These are written in terms of simple “I can...” statements and give specific examples of what speakers can do at each level. You can use them to help you better understand the proficiency levels. You can also assess what level you think you are at now, and then think about what skills you should work on in order to move up to the next level (also see: [Self-Assessment with Can-Do Statements](#)).

You may also want to read [How Long Does It Take?](#) to learn about how long it can take to learn a language.

Self-Assessment with Can-Do Statements

At the Five College Center for World Languages, we talk about language proficiency in terms of **the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines** developed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (see also: [What is Language Proficiency?](#)). We focus especially on the [ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking](#). You can find all of the guidelines for speaking, writing, listening, and reading [on ACTFL’s website](#).

Can-Do Statements

A helpful resource from ACTFL is their [Can-Do Statements](#). These self-assessment checklists are written in terms of simple “I can...” statements and give specific examples of what language learners can do at each level:

- You will notice that the Can-Do Statements **are divided into five different modes of communication**.
- **If you are preparing for an oral evaluation, the Can-Do Statements for Interpersonal Communication (the first column) will be especially helpful.** You can [download a PDF with a detailed checklist](#) for Interpersonal Communication from the website.
- You can use the Can-Do Statements to assess what level you think you are at now. Then, look at the Can-Do Statements for the next level up and think about what skills you still need to work on to move up to that next level.

Using Checklists

You can also use checklists for setting longer-term goals, based on things like:

- **What level of proficiency will you need** in order to be successful in your study abroad program, internship, volunteer work, research project, career, or other future goals?
- **What skills will you need** to develop in order to reach that level of proficiency? See [How Long Does It Take?](#) to get an idea of how much time it will take to reach your goals.

Other Scales for Rating Proficiency

While the Five College Center for World Languages focuses on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines,

there are other scales that are used to rate language proficiency, such as:

- [The Interagency Language Roundtable \(ILR\) Scale](#) used by the U.S. government. You can access self-assessments based on this scale [on their website](#), located on the bottom left of the page..
 - [The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages \(CEFR\)](#). You can find a basic self-assessment grid for the CEFR [here](#).
 - Depending on your career goals, you may find it helpful to become familiar with one of these scales.
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Self-Assessment with Can-Do Statements - Video

What is an Oral Proficiency Interview?

If you are taking a course through the Five College Center for World Languages, you may have what is called an Oral Proficiency Interview (OPI) conducted by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) official testing service at the end of the course. We use two different types of oral evaluation, so some students will not have an OPI. **If you are not sure what type of oral evaluation you will have, you can ask your course organizer.**

- **Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPIs) are done by telephone and typically take about 20-30 minutes.**
- **This type of oral interview focuses on what the student can do with the language.** There will not be any grammar questions or any reading or writing. It will be conversation, possibly a role play or two.
- **An OPI is not based on a particular textbook or syllabus, so there is no way to predict exactly what questions or topics will come up.**
- **The interviewer will typically ask open-ended questions** to see how you respond and then follow up based on your responses.

Difficult Questions

You should be aware that the interviewer will ask some questions you cannot answer. This is perfectly normal and does not mean that the OPI is not going well. The interviewer needs to find both the “floor” (what you can do with the language) and the “ceiling” (what you can’t do yet). So there will be some difficult questions when the interviewer is looking for the “ceiling,” but you don’t need to worry that you are doing poorly just because you can’t answer every question.

You can find more information about Oral Proficiency Interviews [on the testing agency’s website](#).

ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines

When a student does an Oral Proficiency Interview, **a rating is assigned based on the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking.** For information about the proficiency levels, see [What are](#)

[the ACTFL Guidelines?](#) or read about them [on ACTFL's website](#).

The testing agency will issue an official certificate with your rating, and the Five College Center for the Study of World Languages staff will send you this certificate by e-mail after the end of the semester.

If you will be taking an OPI, check out our tips on how to prepare:

- [Preparing for an OPI - Level I](#)
- [Preparing for an OPI - Level II and Up](#)

You may also want to read [Say as Much as You Can](#) and other articles in [Strategies for Conversations](#) for tips on taking your language proficiency as far as it can go.

What is an Oral Proficiency Interview? - Video

Preparing for an OPI - Level I

When a student does an [Oral Proficiency Interview](#), a rating is assigned based on [the ACTFL Guidelines for Speaking](#).

At the Five College Center for World Languages, **we expect that for most languages students in Level I will perform at the Novice level**. At this level, students are expected to do only very basic things with the language using simple expressions and sentences. (NOTE: We expect that students in Cantonese for Mandarin Speakers I will perform at the Intermediate level. See [Preparing for an OPI - Level II and Up](#).)

OPI Review Activities/Topics

Here are some activities and scenarios appropriate to Level I, that you can practice in your conversation sessions and in your independent study time to get ready for your OPI:

- **Can you greet the interviewer appropriately**, ask him/her how s/he is, and respond appropriately when the interviewer asks you? Practice variations on this.
 - **Can you tell the interviewer about yourself** and respond to questions about yourself? If the interviewer asks you to tell about yourself, what all can you say? Things you may have learned and may be able to tell about or answer questions about are:
 - where do you live? where are you from? what is your nationality?
 - where do you study? what do you study? what language(s) do you speak?
 - do you have siblings/brothers or sisters? where do they live? what do they do?
 - who is in your family? what simple things can you say about each family member?
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- what you or others look like (I am short. I have black hair.)

- **Can you tell the interviewer about things you do every day?** Practice giving descriptions of typical days for you or for other people you know. For example:
 - what time do you get up? what time do you go to bed?
 - what time do you eat your meals?
 - what other things can you say you do?
- **Can you say which subjects you study and which subjects you like or do not like?** Can you say what subjects your siblings or friends study and what they like or do not like?
- **Can you respond to questions asking you to list or describe things?** Such as:
 - what is in the room?
 - what is in your bag?
 - where is Amherst? where is Northampton? (ANSWER: Massachusetts, United States)
 - indicate the size or height of something/someone - big, small, tall, short
 - indicate the color of something (The chair is red.)
- **Can you respond to yes/no questions?**
 - do you like coffee?
 - did you get up at 7 this morning?
 - do you have a pencil?
- **Can you list things when asked?** For example:
 - what foods do you like?
 - what do you like to do?
 - what would you like to buy?
- **Can you count and give someone your phone number?**
- **Can you use expressions with the interviewer that help you get another chance to understand what s/he said?** For example:
 - I don't understand.
 - Would you repeat what you said?
 - What does [insert word] mean?

This is a general list. **What you can do may vary depending on the material covered in your course.** Because an OPI follows a conversational format and is not based on a particular textbook or syllabus, **there is no way to predict exactly what questions or topics will come up.**

The interviewer will typically ask open-ended questions to see how you respond and then use your responses as the basis for asking follow-up questions. Keep working on the types of basic skills listed above. These are the same skills you need to use the language in everyday life.

Difficult Questions

You should be aware that the interviewer will ask some questions you cannot answer. This is perfectly normal and does not mean that the OPI is not going well. The interviewer needs to find both the “floor” (what you can do with the language) and the “ceiling” (what you can’t do yet). So there will be some difficult questions when the interviewer is looking for the “ceiling,” but you don’t need to worry that you are doing poorly just because you can’t answer every question.

More Information

If you would like more information about what is expected at the Novice level, **you can read descriptions of Novice speakers and see videos of Novice speakers in English [on the ACTFL website](#).**

Another helpful resource from ACTFL is their [Can-Do Statements for Interpersonal Communication](#). These are written in terms of simple “I can...” statements and give specific examples of what speakers can do at each level. You can use them to help you better understand the proficiency levels. You can also assess what level you think you are at now, and then think about what skills you should work on in order to move up to the next level.

You may also want to read the articles under [Strategies for Conversations](#).

Key points:

- Expect conversation and possibly a role play or two. Practice basic conversational skills in your conversation sessions.
- Make sure you can greet the interviewer appropriately (practice formal language if appropriate).
- Practice saying that you don’t understand or asking the interviewer to repeat.
- Say as much as you can to demonstrate more of what you know.
- Don’t panic if you can’t answer every question fully! Hard questions don’t mean you’re not doing well; it’s just part of how an OPI works.

Preparing for an OPI - Level I - Video

Preparing for an OPI - Level II and Up

Because an OPI (see: [What is an Oral Proficiency Interview?](#)) follows a conversational format and is not based on a particular textbook or syllabus, **there is no way to predict exactly what questions or topics will come up:**

- **The interviewer will typically ask open-ended questions** to see how you respond and then follow up based on your responses.
- When you respond to the interviewer, **you are giving that interviewer clues about what**

you are able to talk about, so use the opportunity to talk about what you know.

- **Say as much as you can**, based on what you know. Longer responses usually demonstrate more of what you know.

Practice conversation and role plays in your conversation sessions. These might be simple interactions or more complicated ones, depending on your level.

- **Push yourself to say as much as you can** about whatever topic you are discussing.
- You can also practice this on your own in between conversation sessions, speaking out loud and playing both parts in the conversation.

ACTFL Ratings

When a student does an Oral Proficiency Interview, **a rating is assigned based on [the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking](#)**. You can look at ACTFL's [Can-Do Statements for Interpersonal Communication](#) to get some ideas of topics and situations to practice at different levels.

If you have taken an OPI in the past (perhaps at the end of the previous semester):

- Check the rating you received and then **look at the Can-Do Statements for the next level up**.
- **Think about what skills you still need to work on** to move up to that next level.
- If you haven't taken an OPI yet, you can **use the Can-Do Statements to estimate your level and identify strengths and weaknesses**.

More Information

For more information about the proficiency levels, see [What are the ACTFL Guidelines?](#), or you can read descriptions of the proficiency levels on ACTFL's website. ACTFL also has [videos of English speakers at different levels](#), so you can get an idea of what a Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, or Superior speaker sounds like.

NOTE OF ENCOURAGEMENT: When you take an OPI, **you should be aware that the interviewer will ask some questions you cannot answer**. This is perfectly normal and does not mean that the OPI is not going well. The interviewer needs to find both the "floor" (what you can do with the language) and the "ceiling" (what you can't do yet). So there will be some difficult questions when the interviewer is looking for the "ceiling," but you don't need to worry that you are doing poorly just because you can't answer every question.

You may also want to read the articles under [Strategies for Conversations](#).

Key points:

- Expect conversation and possibly a role play or two. Practice conversation and role plays in your conversation sessions.
 - Say as much as you can to demonstrate more of what you know.
 - Don't panic if you can't answer every question fully! Hard questions don't mean you're not doing well; it's just part of how an OPI works.
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Preparing for an OPI - Level II and Up - Video
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