

Interagency Language Roundtable Skill Level Descriptions for Proficiency – Reading

Preface

The following Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) Skill Level Descriptions (SLDs) describe proficiency as the functional ability to comprehend written language that reflects current usage. The SLDs characterize proficiency ranging from no communicative ability to mastery. They constitute an ordinal scale that includes six ranked base levels from 0 to 5. They illustrate, but do not exhaustively characterize, the proficiency a person may demonstrate at a given level on the scale.

Control of a base level (Levels 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5) typically implies control of the previous levels' aspects. A higher level of performance in one aspect does not justify a higher general proficiency rating. Level 5 includes the features of all levels. Still, as with all levels, Level 5 is a range and performance will vary.

There are plus levels for levels 0 through 4. Plus levels describe proficiency that substantially exceeds one base level and does not fully meet the criteria of the next base level. To merit a plus level, the demonstrated proficiency must match the plus level description and not be merely a strong performance at the base level.

The SLDs describe four aspects of language proficiency: functional ability, precision of forms and meanings, content meaningfulness, and contextual appropriateness. Functional ability refers to the communicative acts or tasks that an individual can accomplish. There are no functional abilities specific to the plus levels. Precision of forms and meanings refers to accuracy, range, and complexity. Content meaningfulness refers to the relevance and substantive coverage of topics. Contextual appropriateness refers to register, acceptability, and appropriateness of language for the intended audience.

The SLDs are presented in an official prose version. Each level description begins with a bolded main statement that summarizes the features of that level. Supporting statements follow the main statement and describe the four aspects in detail.

Level 0 (No Proficiency)

Unable to understand the written language in almost any context. Has essentially no ability to understand written material beyond occasional isolated letters, characters, or words.

Level 0+ (Memorized Proficiency)

Able to understand some memorized, isolated words and phrases with random accuracy and little regard to context. Can recognize some discrete words, memorized phrases, and some formulaic expressions. Understands some short, memorized phrases or expressions, such as numbers, names of people and places, and common signage, such as street, office, and store signs. Understanding of vocabulary is extremely limited and random. Understanding of structures is limited to memorized material. Can recognize some elements of some standard printed or electronic writing systems. Generally unable to identify the topic. Has almost no ability to understand cultural appropriateness. May be able to recognize common greetings and introductions. Cannot distinguish between formal and informal forms outside of memorized constructions. Has almost no ability to understand mood, feeling, or emotion in written texts.

Level 1 (Elementary Proficiency)

Able to understand simple written language dealing with basic information, often with great difficulty and in limited contexts. Understands general subject matter in simple written material. Can understand straightforward instructions and simple statements and questions, and explicitly stated simple messages when supported by redundancy or context. Understands connected phrases and sentences in simple texts such as notes, forms, business advertisements, and simple text messages. Has little to no ability to understand organizational devices. Understands some high frequency vocabulary. May show no understanding of major historical or cultural references. Understands some basic structures. Can read written materials using some standard printed or electronic writing systems. Understanding is limited to self, family, or immediate environment, including, but not limited to, meals, time, directions, simple transactions, or personal information. Can identify general subject matter in some simple texts. Generally understands short exchanges and statements. Demonstrates an extremely limited understanding of cultural norms and expectations and is unable to distinguish formality other than in simple phrases and expressions. Cannot easily understand mood, feeling, or emotion conveyed in linguistic features of written texts.

Level 1+ (Elementary Proficiency, Plus)

Able to understand simple written material beyond most basic needs, though inaccurately and not always appropriately. Has limited understanding of organizational devices. Understands most high frequency vocabulary. May understand some major historical or cultural references. Has inconsistent understanding of basic structures. Understands some written language about personal life, such as family, activities, and work. Understands some

main points and some details, and short exchanges and texts. Demonstrates little understanding of cultural norms and expectations in routine writing. Has limited understanding of basic social norms and etiquette. Can recognize some formal and informal forms of writing. May recognize some instances of mood, feeling, or emotion in writing.

Level 2 (Limited Working Proficiency)

Able to adequately understand straightforward written material on everyday topics, including routine work-related matters. Can understand the main ideas and some details in material written for general audiences, such as straightforward descriptions, instructions, and narrations across timeframes. In general, lacks command of the language to draw inferences. Can understand written material in everyday interactions. Can understand factual texts, including online or printed materials such as news items about frequently occurring events; routine business correspondence, email, and text messages; and clearly written descriptions and comments. Has some understanding of frequently used rhetorical devices, such as repetition and exaggeration. Readily understands high frequency vocabulary and can sometimes understand references to major historical or cultural events. Generally understands information presented in almost all basic structures. Can read written materials using standard printed or electronic writing systems. Understands written language about personal life, such as family, activities, and work, or major current events. Understands most main points and some details. Understands short texts and exchanges, but cannot sustain comprehension of long texts. May demonstrate some understanding of common cultural norms, albeit inconsistently. Can recognize formal and informal forms of writing. Understands basic social norms and etiquette, though inconsistently. May be able to recognize some mood, feeling, emotion, or position in writing.

Level 2+ (Limited Working Proficiency, Plus)

Able to understand written language in many informal and everyday contexts; however, understanding is not always complete in some formal and professional contexts. May understand some instances of common rhetorical devices such as simile and metaphor. Readily understands high frequency vocabulary and shows some inconsistency in mid frequency vocabulary. May understand some widely used idiomatic language and cultural references, though not fully. Understands frequently used structures consistently and some complex structures with difficulty. Understands written language about personal life, major current events, and some matters of general interest. Understands main points and some key details. Understands extended texts, but not consistently. May understand cultural norms and expectations in routine and some professional texts. Sometimes understands formal and informal registers. Has some understanding of the social conventions of writing. Shows some understanding of mood, feeling, emotion, or position in writing, but inconsistently.

Level 3 (General Professional Proficiency)

Able to understand formal and informal written language with accuracy on general social and professional topics and tasks. Can understand argumentation expressed through supported opinion, conjecture, and hypothesis. Can draw inferences from text. Can get the gist of more sophisticated texts, but may be unable to detect or understand subtlety or nuance. Can read material that includes a variety of language patterns, developed ideas, and overarching messages, such as conventional commentaries, editorials, and some technical material. Understands some common rhetorical devices such as simile and metaphor. Readily understands a broad range of vocabulary, including mid frequency terms and technical vocabulary in professional specialty. Understands widely used idiomatic expressions and cultural references. Understands a variety of structures accurately, but occasional misunderstandings occur in complex structures. Can read written materials using various printed or electronic writing systems. Can understand written language about one's own fields of competence and matters of general interest. Understands main points and many key details, including some implicit meanings. Understands extended writing consistently. Understands common cultural norms and expectations in professional texts, though has difficulty with texts that are dependent on cultural knowledge. Usually understands formal and informal forms of writing. Generally understands mood, feeling, emotion, or position. Can detect some emotional overtones, such as the use of irony, sarcasm, or humor.

Level 3+ (General Professional Proficiency, Plus)

Able to understand a number of prose styles with accuracy, including some culturally appropriate writing tailored to some audiences on a range of topics. Can understand some rhetorical devices for targeted effect or emphasis. Lexicon is broad. Understands, with occasional inaccuracies, some low frequency words and phrases. Understands some cultural references across different contexts. Understands some texts that include some complex structures, though misunderstandings occur. Can understand many professional topics, and to some degree concepts relating to social, cultural, and theoretical topics. Understands the relationships between ideas, including some implicit meanings. Understands some cultural norms and expectations in a variety of texts. May understand language that is tailored to an audience. Sometimes understands the subtleties and nuances of mood, feeling, emotion, or stance.

Level 4 (Advanced Professional Proficiency)

Able to understand with considerable precision writing using culturally appropriate language tailored to a variety of audiences on a wide range of topics. Understands language tailored to different audiences. Understands implications of texts as they are positioned in the broader cultural, political, or social contexts of the intended audience. Can readily follow turns of thought. Comprehends many forms and styles of written language. Texts may include literature, editorials, satire, or commentaries. Can understand many rhetorical devices used for

effect or emphasis. Has an extensive understanding of vocabulary, including many low frequency words and phrases and many cultural references. Understands many complex structures, including complex embedding. Sporadically misunderstands. Can read written materials using many printed or electronic writing systems. Can understand many social, cultural, and theoretical topics, including those which do not bear directly on a professional specialty. Understands the relationships between ideas to arrive at a broader view or new perspective, including many meanings. Understands many cultural norms and expectations in texts that are dependent on cultural knowledge. Usually understands the effect of tailored writing or register shifts. Usually understands the subtleties and nuances of mood, feeling, emotion, or stance, including emotional overtones, such as the use of irony, sarcasm, or humor.

Level 4+ (Advanced Professional Proficiency, Plus)

Able to understand precise written language that uses diverse linguistic resources to present articulate, tailored, and nuanced language in most contexts, with only rare mistakes.

Understands most rhetorical devices. Understands most nuanced, low frequency vocabulary, idioms, colloquialisms, and cultural references across different contexts. Understands most complex structures accurately, though a few misunderstandings may occur. Can understand most topics and their implications to some extent. Understands most cultural norms and expectations in a variety of contexts. Understands a variety of registers tailored to different audiences, shifts between them, and some implications. Usually understands how mood, feeling, emotion, or stance are used for effect, such as to evoke an emotional response, or add emphasis, certainty, uncertainty, or authority.

Level 5 (Functionally Native Proficiency)

Able to understand clear and precise writing that uses diverse linguistic resources to produce articulate, nuanced, and engaging language in almost any context. Can understand almost any official, semi-official, and non-professional text tailored to a specific audience, purpose, task, or setting. Understands atypical texts with diverse concepts or perspectives woven together.

Demonstrates a mastery of the language. Understands almost all genres of written language and rhetorical devices. Understands almost all nuanced and low frequency vocabulary, as well as idioms, colloquialisms, and cultural references. Understands almost all structures of the language at all levels. Can understand in detail the implications of almost any topic. Understands almost all cultural norms and expectations in texts. Understands tailored writing, register shifts, and their implications. Understands how mood, feeling, emotion, or stance are used for effect, such as to evoke an emotional response, or add emphasis, certainty, uncertainty, or authority.