

PREPARING FOR YOUR OPI

I. REACHING ADVANCED LOW OR ADVANCED MID

A. **General description** of the Advanced level as defined in the 2012 ACTFL Speaking Guidelines:

*Speakers at the Advanced level engage in conversation in a **clearly participatory manner** in order to communicate information on autobiographical topics, **as well as topics of community, national or international interest**. The topics are handled **concretely** by means of **narration and description in the major time frames of past, present and future**. These speakers can also deal with a social situation with an **unexpected complication**. The language of Advanced-level speakers is **abundant**, the **oral paragraph** being the measure of Advanced-level discourse. Advanced-level speakers have **sufficient control of basic structures and generic vocabulary** to be understood by native speakers of the language, including those unaccustomed to non-native speech.*

For a full description of Advanced Low and Advanced Mid, please check

<http://actflproficiencyguidelines2012.org>.

If you click on the language-specific Guidelines, you can watch video snippets of the different levels and functions in your language.

A simple way to understand the difference between AL and AM: both can sustain Advanced functions, but Advanced low is the “barely there” profile (some grammatical roughness, less quality and quantity) while Advanced Mid is “solid” (rich vocabulary, native-like fluency, great ease and accuracy while describing and narrating in present, past and future times.)

B. **The challenges of Advanced-level speech**

1. **The ability to give details and connect ideas into paragraph-length, organized discourse.**

Sample Advanced description: *“The guy who comes to get my neighbor every morning has a red truck with a powerful engine and extra-large tires. Probably because it’s so old, the engine makes a dreadful noise, like thunder, and wakes up the whole neighborhood.”*

Compare with a typical Intermediate-level description: *“A guy comes to get my neighbor every morning. He has a red car. It’s very big, with big tires. It’s very old too. It makes a lot of noise.”*

The strings of short sentences that are the hallmark of Intermediate-level speech are no longer acceptable at the Advanced level.

→ **Needed:**

- practice giving details (a skill that is as much cognitive as it is linguistic)
- increased active vocabulary about concrete topics
- mastery of basic grammar, such as agreement of verbs with subjects and adjectives with nouns, verb conjugations, articles (definite vs. indefinite vs. partitive), etc.
- practice using connecting words, such as *first, then, after that, on the other hand, because, since, especially, actually, however, etc.*
- practice using complex sentence structures, with subordinate clauses (relative pronouns, conjunctions, present participles, etc.)

2. Narration/description in the past-- one of the greatest difficulties of many languages

→ Needed:

- A lot of practice manipulating past tenses, i.e. preterit, imperfect and pluperfect.
- Practice telling stories in the past. Advanced-level story tellers have the ability to place events in context, carry out foregrounding and backgrounding, and integrate descriptive details in their narratives with good control of aspect.

3. Relating/discussing current events

One of the requirements of Advanced-level proficiency is the ability to talk concretely about current events or events of public interest, such as school reforms or the latest gridlock in Washington. This can be done in fairly broad and generic terms, but you have to have something to say!

→ Needed:

- Read news articles on the Internet, listen to radio and TV news broadcasts in the target language → acquire both the information and the vocabulary.
- Pick-up the New York Times or other newspaper in English. Read the articles that interest you the most and practice talking about those events in the target language. Look up vocabulary as needed.
- As you study literature or film, practice giving detailed summaries.
- Keep a vocabulary notebook; review it and add to it often.
- Practice talking about current events with classmates, friends, etc.

4. Dealing with complications

Complications at the Advanced level can occur as an unanticipated twist to a social situation, such as requesting a refund for services that were not satisfactory, or getting your message across when you do not know specific terms or phrases. In either case, you need to use linguistic strategies and those strategies can be practiced.

→ Needed:

- 1) As you work on vocabulary, practice giving circumlocutions for some of the words you are learning or reviewing. For example, how would you describe “to subsidize” (in the target language) without using the exact word? The more practice you have at finding alternative ways of saying things, the less inclined you will be to abandon a message for lack of vocabulary.
- 2) When dealing with complex situations, use stalling devices (well, how should I say this...) and find comfort in saying things more simply. The best way to practice these strategies is to relate in the target language a situation or current event you heard about in your native language. As you do so, do not translate—reformulate! And try to keep it flowing.

II. REACHING ADVANCED HIGH OR SUPERIOR

A. General description of the Superior level as defined in the 2012 ACTFL Speaking Guidelines:

*Speakers at the Superior level are able to communicate with **accuracy and fluency** in order to participate **fully and effectively** in conversations on a variety of topics **in formal and informal settings** from both **concrete and abstract** perspectives. They discuss their interests and special fields of competence, explain **complex matters** in detail, and provide **lengthy and coherent narrations**, all with ease, fluency, and accuracy. They **present their opinions** on a number of issues of interest to them, such as social and political issues, and provide **structured argument to support these opinions**. They are able to **construct and develop hypotheses** to explore alternative possibilities. When appropriate, these speakers use **extended discourse** without unnaturally lengthy hesitation to make their point, even when engaged in abstract elaborations. Such discourse, while coherent, may still be influenced by language patterns other than those of the target language. Superior speakers employ **a variety of interactive and discourse strategies**, such as turn-taking and separating main ideas from supporting information through the use of syntactic, lexical, and phonetic devices. Speakers at the Superior level demonstrate **no pattern of error** in the use of basic structures, although they may make sporadic errors, particularly in low-frequency structures and in complex high-frequency structures. Such errors, if they do occur, do not distract the native interlocutor or interfere with communication.*

B. Main differences between Superior and Advanced High

While Superior speakers have full control of all Superior functions, Advanced High speakers exhibit patterns of breakdown, as highlighted below.

*Advanced-High speakers handle the tasks pertaining to the Superior level **but cannot sustain performance at that level across a variety of topics**. They may provide a structured argument to support their opinions, and they may construct hypotheses, but **patterns of error appear**. They **can discuss some topics abstractly**, especially those relating to their particular interests and special fields of expertise, but in general, they are **more comfortable discussing a variety of topics concretely**. Advanced-High speakers may demonstrate a **well-developed ability to compensate** for an imperfect grasp of some forms or for limitations in vocabulary, [and they] often show **great fluency and ease of speech**. **However**, when called on to perform the complex tasks associated with the Superior level **over a variety of topics**, their **language will at times break down or prove inadequate**, or they may **avoid the task** altogether, for example, by resorting to simplification through the use of description or narration in place of argument or hypothesis.*

C. The challenges of reaching Advanced High and Superior

1. Dealing with abstractions

“The distinction between concrete and abstract refers not to the kinds of topics treated, but rather to the manner in which the speaker formulates, presents and elaborates on them. References to a speaker’s own experience and knowledge, are basically concrete: anecdotes, descriptions and explanations are the straightforward verbal representation of the concrete world of people, things, places and events. On the other hand, consideration of the same concrete world may lead to the more comprehensive and far-reaching (i.e abstract) discussion of “issues” or “problems” which, by definition, invite the consideration of the factual from a number

of viewpoints. The abstract approach involves debate; it creates a polemic in which competing notions are entertained and championed; and, in so doing, it involves the use of language with suitably abstract formulations. For example, the question: *How has industry affected this area?* might elicit a straightforward, concrete response such as *It has polluted our river and caused several fish kills. We can't swim there any longer and we can't even fish there the way we used to*, from an Advanced speaker. However, a Superior speaker would conceive a response in more abstract terms, even if there is reference to concrete matters, for example: *The waste dumped upstream has certainly polluted the area, and this is a definite cause for concern, even alarm. Now, we recognize that without those factories there would be less pollution, but there would be a great number of people out of work as well. You couldn't expect employees, for example, to stand up against their own companies in support of the environment, because they would risk losing their jobs. Just the same, if these employees could be guaranteed that there would be no negative repercussions for speaking their minds, I'm sure that they would call for greater controls regarding disposal of waste products...*" (Explanatory Notes to 1999 OPI Tester Training Manual, pp. 91-92)

→ **Needed:**

- Extensive reading of texts that contain abstractions (op-ed pieces, literary texts, etc.)
- Significant increase in vocabulary and structural accuracy
- Practice developing arguments (see below) about a variety of topics with extended discourse.

2. Supporting an opinion

"This covers not just expressing an opinion (e.g., *Americans need to learn more about other countries...*), but also supporting that opinion with substance and detail (e.g.,...*because they run the risk of becoming too insular, of misunderstanding other cultures and, worst of all, of misreading other people's intents and insights. Without a global perspective, they may well lose their ability as a nation to dialogue meaningfully with others.*) An opinion can be stated and explained at the Advanced level. At the Superior level, however, it is supported with broader and more sophisticated evidence that may well include personal references in anecdotal form, but always with the purpose of providing evidence to strengthen the point of view. Superior speakers are able to consider opposing sides of an issue, and respond to counter-arguments by introducing additional evidence or examples, pointing out flawed logic and unacceptable premises, and using reasoned argument." (Explanatory Notes p. 95)

→ **Needed: a structured approach to developing a reasoned argument.**

If you don't know where to start, consider this 5-step approach, appropriate for most western languages and cultures:

- (1) Define the issue (for example, mandatory healthcare insurance) and what it means to you.
- (2) Consider one side of the issue. Use examples from current events, history, literature, personal experience, etc, to support the argument.
- (3) Consider the other side(s) of the issue, with substance and detail.
- (4) Give your own opinion, explaining why you tend to agree with some pros or cons.
- (5) Conclude abstractly.

3. Making hypotheses

“The hypothetical is a proposal of the “what if” and “under what circumstances” rather than a statement of the “what is” of everyday reality. It involves supposition, conjecture and the consideration of competing possibilities. Properly speaking, the hypothetical rarely, if ever, exists in isolation. Rather, it springs naturally from the consideration of a topic already contextualized and anchored in supported opinion. A clichéd “what if” question about winning the lottery invites only an outcome statement as a response (*I would buy a house*) and forces attention on the form rather than the substance of the conjecture. On the other hand, a discussion on the morality of the lottery, for example, might lead a Superior speaker to continue the argument with a conjecture such as: *You know, I really don’t believe I’d like to win a million dollars. Imagine what that might do to my lifestyle and relationships! I’m sure that my family would not agree on how to spend the money, which would create some friction, and my friends wouldn’t know how to react. I can’t see how things could ever be the same. And then, there is work—would I want to keep my current job?...*” (*Explanatory Notes* p. 95)

→ **Needed**

- Practice manipulating the structures associated with hypothesis (if clauses, etc.)
- Practice thinking of alternatives, what could be or what could have been.
- Practice including hypothesis as part of or as a follow-up to every argument.

4. Extended discourse.

“This term implies the extensive treatment of a topic. Superior speakers are not limited to a few simple remarks as commentary. [...] They sustain an idea and develop it through complex utterances that are linked syntactically and thematically. They can take short linguistic detours for elaboration and illustration without losing the thrust of the idea and its development. Extended discourse is a communicative building process in both form and meaning. It requires control of discourse structure, cohesiveness, and linguistic facility in the functions of the Superior level.” (*Explanatory notes* p. 93)

→ **Needed:**

- Things to say → interest in current events and issues associated with those events; extensive reading. Some studies suggest that reading aloud Superior-level texts at fluent speed can help with the development of extended discourse.
- Mapping out what can be said about various topics: make charts of pros and cons, or causes and effects, whatever the topic requires. Organize ideas.
- Practice using complex language structures.

5. Accuracy

“Accuracy is revealed in patterns of strengths and weaknesses. A pattern of weakness or error becomes evident when, for example, a speaker consistently misproduces or omits the feature in question. For their part, Superior speakers control the fundamentals of grammar in such a way that there exists no pattern of errors in basic structures, as these are defined for the target language. (ex: number and gender agreement, basic word orders.) This allows the listener to attend primarily to the speaker’s content, and only when some non-native characteristic or significant error occurs is the listener’s attention drawn to the form of the utterance. [*Explanatory Notes, p. 96*]

→ **Needed:**

- Systematic monitoring of patterns of errors;
- Work on structures, vocabulary or pronunciation features that are causing those patterns of errors.

CONCLUSION:

The best way to prepare for your OPI is to

- increase your exposure to authentic input (reading, listening, viewing);
- speak as much as you can, with classmates, friends, native speakers;
- practice having some of those conversations over the phone, since your official OPI will be a telephonic interview;
- focus on the functions you are targeting for full control, such as narration in the past, or supported opinion;
- expand the range of topics you can talk about;
- force yourself to elaborate.

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