ACTFL OPIc

EXAMINEE HANDBOOK

ACTFL

AMERICAN COUNCIL ON THE TEACHING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES

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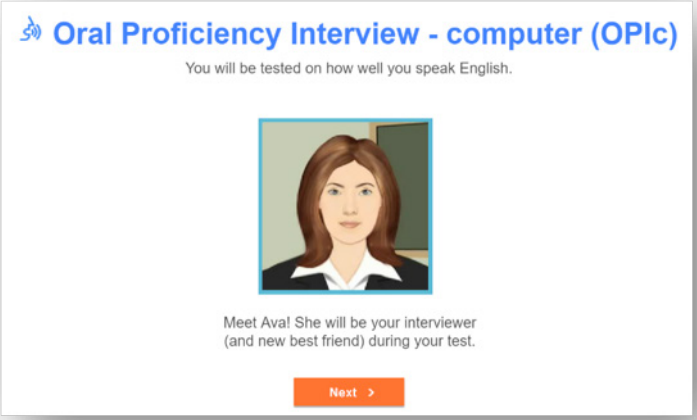
About the ACTFL OPIc Test

The Oral Proficiency Interview-computer (OPIc) assesses your language proficiency (how well you speak a language) in real-life situations. As the OPIc assesses general language proficiency, it is not designed to assess what you learned in a specific language program, class, school, or university; nor is it tied to a specific teaching method or book. Finally, the OPIc does not compare how well a person speaks the language to how well another person speaks the language and/or performs on a test. Proficiency, how well a person can use the language as defined by the description of speaking ability described in the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages' (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines, is the only factor that is assessed by the OPIc.

The OPIc is a web-based assessment delivered online that simulates the live interviews conducted during the Oral Proficiency Interviews (OPI). By completing a background inventory of topics related to your everyday life, school, work experience, and/or about current events happening in your town or city, Ava, the avatar, is able to generate interview topics. Further, examinees also complete a self-assessment survey that helps Ava determine an appropriate proficiency level at which to start the assessment.

OPIc Test Format

The goal of the OPIc is to gather a sample of your speech that is representative of your communicative skills in the target language, so a rater can then rate it according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. As mentioned above, you will also have the ability to customize the test to your own level and interests by completing a self-assessment and background survey at the beginning of the test. For more details about the levels of proficiency and their sublevels, see the *Expectations for Each Major Level* section below.



Background Survey: Selecting Topics of Conversation

The Background Survey asks you questions about your life in order to identify your interests, so you can then be asked some questions related to those interests during your OPIc Test.

Background Survey Sample Question:

What best describes your field of work?

- ◯ Business / Corporation
- ◯ Home Business
- ◯ Teacher / Educator
- ◯ No work experience

Are you currently working?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Are you currently going to school?

- ◯ Yes
- ◯ No

Where do you live?

- ◯ I live alone in a house or apartment.
- ◯ I live with non-family members in a house or apartment.
- ◯ I live with family members (spouse/children/other family members) in a house or apartment.
- ◯ I live in a school or a dormitory.
- ◯ I live in military barracks.

Additional questions about activities, hobbies, sports, and travel are included in the survey. To view the full background survey, go to the OPIc demo at the site below.

▶https://opicdemo.actfltesting.org/

Self-Assessment: Defining the Level of the OPIc

The self-assessment provides five different descriptions of how well a person can speak a language. Before you take the OPIc, you will have the opportunity to select the description that you feel describes your language abilities most accurately. The self-assessment choice you make determines which of the five OPIc test forms will be generated for you. Below are the self-assessment options and the OPIc levels you will receive depending on your selection.

Your response to this self-assessment will be used to generate an individualized test. Please read the 5 level descriptions and then choose the level description that best describes how you speak English.

	Self-Assessment Descriptions	Range of OPIc You Will Receive
1	I can name basic objects, colors, days of the week, food, clothing items, numbers, etc. I cannot always make a complete sentence or ask simple questions.	**Form 1** – Novice Low to Novice High
2	I can give some basic information about myself, work, familiar people and places, and daily routines by speaking in simple sentences. I can ask some simple questions.	**Form 2** – Novice High to Intermediate Mid
3	I can participate in simple conversations about familiar topics and routines. I can talk about things that have happened, but sometimes my forms are incorrect. I can handle a range of everyday transactions to get what I need.	**Form 3** – Intermediate Mid to Advanced Low
4	I can participate fully and confidently in all conversations about topics and activities related to home, work/school, personal and community interests. I can speak in connected discourse about things that have happened, are happening and will happen. I can explain and elaborate when asked. I can handle routine situations, even when there may be an unexpected complication.	**Form 4** – Advanced Low to Advanced Mid
5	I can engage in all informal and formal discussions on issues related to personal, general or professional interests. I can deal with these issues abstractly, support my opinion, and construct hypotheses to explore alternatives. I am able to elaborate at length and in detail on most topics with a high level of accuracy and a wide range of precise vocabulary.	**Form 5** – Advanced High to Superior

In short, your responses to the Background Survey and to the self-assessment will ensure that the test you receive targets the appropriate level of speaking ability.

Types of OPIc Test Questions and Requests

Depending on your responses on the self-assessment, your conversation partner, Ava, will ask you between 9 and 16 questions across a variety of the topics you chose in the background survey in addition to some general questions.

For each of the major levels of proficiency, there are specific types of communication tasks that you must demonstrate you can perform:

NOVICE LEVEL

Types of Questions and/ Requests	Example of Novice-Level Questions or Requests
Lists	What colors are in the room?
Phrases	What do you like to do in your free time?

INTERMEDIATE LEVEL

Types of Questions and Requests	Example of Intermediate-Level Questions and or Requests
Simple description of a person, place or thing.	Describe your best friend. What does he or she look like?
Simple description of an activity or event.	Tell me what you do after school every day.
Ask questions to get something you want or need.	You would like to get a hotel room this weekend. Ask three or four questions to find out what is available.

ADVANCED LEVEL

Types of Questions or Requests	Example of Advanced-Level Questions or Requests
Detailed descriptions of people, places, and things from your present and your past	You said you travel for business. Tell me about the last place you went on a business trip. Where did you go on the last trip you took? Tell me your impressions of what you saw on your last trip.

Detailed stories about something that has happened, is happening or will happen	You said you like to ski. Tell me the story of how you learned to ski. How old were you? Where did you learn how to ski? Tell me the whole story of how you learned to ski from beginning to end in as much detail as you can.
Handle a complication that arises in a transaction	You are travelling with your friend. You have a pre-paid hotel reservation for a room with twin beds. When you arrive, the room the hotel gives you has only a single bed in it. Go to the receptionist, explain the problem and convince them to give you they type of room your reserved.
Report on a Current Event	Weather-related events are always in the news. Tell me about a recent weather event that you were following in the news.

SUPERIOR LEVEL

Types of Questions and Requests	Example of Superior-Level Questions and or Requests
State and Support an Opinion	Air travel has changed dramatically in the last 20 years. Speak about the most significant changes that have been made and comment on why you believe these new procedures are effective or not. Be sure to provide arguments to support your point of view.
Hypothesize about possible condition and outcomes	What are some air travel changes that could be adopted by airlines and airports to improve the travel experience? Suggest some changes and describe what impact these changes would have on the traveler if they were adopted.
Discuss topics in general, abstract terms	Access to health care is an important issue in most countries. Pick one country and describe its health care system and benefits to the general public in comparison to the health care system of another country.

Sample Questions

Below are some sample questions that you can use to practice for the OPIc. There is a note next to each sample indicating what an appropriate response should contain at the targeted level:

NOVICE:

What things are outside your house? Trees, cars . . . name all the things you see outside your house.

[If you are a Novice-level speaker you should be able to provide words, lists, and phrases.]

INTERMEDIATE:

Tell me about the different rooms in your home. Do you have a favorite room? What does it look like?

[If you are an Intermediate level speaker, you should be able to talk about your favorite room using sentences and enough details for the listener to know what the room looks like.]

OR:

What is your normal routine at home? What kinds of things do you do at home during the week and on the weekends?

Note: [This is also an Intermediate-level question. For this question, if you are an Intermediate-level speaker, you should be able to speak in sentences about your daily habits and the things you usually do when you are at home— during the week and on the weekends.]

ADVANCED:

I'd like you to tell me your favorite memory about a good friend. It can be a story that involves you and your friend together, or a story that you know about your friend. Talk about this memory in as much detail as you can.

Note: [This is an Advanced-level question. When you respond to it, you are expected to be able to produce a paragraph-length response. This means that the sentences you produce must be organized and connected to each other with a beginning, middle and end. At this level, you are also expected to put your answer in the correct time frame.

For this prompt, your response should be in the past time, and the listener should be able to understand when the action or event happened in addition to what happened with your friend. Advanced-level speakers do not need sympathetic listeners who have to fill in the gaps of the narrative or description in order to understand the speaker's idea. If you are at the Advanced level, you should be able to do all of these things in your response.]

SUPERIOR:

In the past, people maintained friendships through letters, phone calls, and time spent together. Today, friendships are increasingly maintained through social media, texting, instant messaging, etc. In fact, there are some friends who rarely, if ever, see each other in person, and only communicate using digital resources. What are your thoughts regarding this type of friendship? Is it possible to truly have a close relationship if friends do not participate in traditional activities like sharing a meal, watching a movie, or meeting for coffee? In your opinion, are solely digital friendships real friendships?

Note: [At the Superior level, you will be expected to produce extended discourse, which means that your responses will need to be multiple paragraphs in length. The paragraphs you produce must be well-organized and connected. They also need to be easy to understand for all English-language listeners. In addition to the length of your responses, you need to be able to deal with higher-level topics that may require you to express your opinion or deal with subject matter hypothetically or abstractly.

To respond to the example above at the Superior level, you should talk about digital friendships, social media, and changes in society. Your focus on the topic should be on a large scale (how it affects people, communities, countries, the world, etc.) and not your life and personal experiences (that would most likely be an Advanced-level response). Your response should have few if any errors. If you have a pattern of errors (missing propositions, etc.), and it distracts the listener from your message, you could break down from the Superior to Advanced.]

Instructions/Tips for Responding to Questions/Requests

When the test begins, you will hear Ava ask you the first question. You will have 5 seconds to click on "Repeat" to hear the question again, if you need to. You will only be able to re-hear a prompt once. Depending on the level of the prompt, you will be given between 30 seconds (for Novice prompts) and two minutes (Advanced and Superior) to provide your answer. You will not be able to re-record any response. Given these parameters, here are some test-taking tips to help you provide your best responses:

1. Listen carefully to the request. Identify the appropriate type of response needed to answer that question/request: a simple description, a story about something that happened in the past, a series of questions, etc.
2. Make sure to provide a response to the question that is being asked. Using memorized responses that do not answer the question that is being asked can count against you.
3. Give as detailed and as long a response as you can. Short answers can work against you because they do not show the breadth and depth of your speaking ability.
4. If you are requested to ask questions, make sure to formulate your questions appropriately for the target language.
5. If you are asked to relay an experience that took place in the past, make sure to tell the story using appropriate past time forms and structures. If you are asked to speak about a future plan, you should also make sure to use the appropriate forms and structures for that time frame too.

6. If you are asked to state and support your opinion, make sure to provide the reasons or information that support your point of view.
7. If you are asked to speculate about some possible conditions and/or outcomes, make sure to use the appropriate hypothetical structures for that language.
8. Speak in the target language and avoid using words from your native language.

How Are Responses to the OPIc Rated

Certified ACTFL OPIc Raters review and rate OPIc test responses according to the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines for Speaking – 2012. The OPIc Rater does not compare your performance to anyone else's performance. Instead, the OPIc Rater listens to your sample and finds the best match between your speech and the descriptions of the levels in the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines. In order to receive a rating, you must meet all of the requirements of that level (noted in the guidelines), and you must speak at that level throughout the test. To determine your rating, the rater uses all the information gained from reviewing your speech samples and then chooses the best sublevel to match what you can do in the language.

ACTFL Certified OPIc Raters are highly specialized language professionals who have completed a rigorous training process. ACTFL only certifies raters who are able to consistently rate samples with a high degree of reliability. Your rating is important to us, and we work very hard to provide the best test experience, raters, and ratings possible for you.

Frequently Asked Questions About the OPIc Test

Who takes the OPIc test?

The OPIc is an assessment of speaking skills in a target language that is used by individuals, companies, and organizations around the world. From students in Canada, to the New York City Department of Education in the United States, to employees at Samsung in Korea, the OPIc has become the test people trust when they want to learn what they can do in a language.

Why do candidates take the OPIc?

Many people take the OPIc every year. The people who take the OPIc usually fall into one of two categories: individual test takers and people who have been directed to take the OPIc by a company, academic institution, etc. Individuals who take the OPIc do so to have credentials that prove their language proficiency levels, so they can work as bilingual employees, translators, interpreters, tutors, etc. Companies, universities, schools, hospitals, and other types of organizations often require current and potential employees to take the OPIc to ensure that they can speak the language at a level that will allow them to do their work. In both cases, knowing exactly what a person can do in a language and being able to prove it provides individuals and potential employees with life and career opportunities. It also provides companies, universities and other organizations with proof that they have employees that can use the language well-enough to do their jobs successfully.

How is the OPIc test administered?

The OPIc is delivered via the Internet in a proctored setting. Proctoring may be live or remote. If you are taking a remotely proctored test, you will need the minimum technical requirements:

1. Windows or Mac-based desktop computer or laptop with the following minimum specifications:
   - Processor: Intel Pentium 4 processor or higher
   - Memory: 1G RAM or more
   - Audio: PC with Sound card – capable of playing sound
   - Resolution: 1024×768 or higher
   - OS: Windows XP (SP2) and higher
   - Browser: Internet Explorer 6 and higher or Firefox 3.0 and higher
   - Add-on: Flash Player 10 and higher
   - JavaScript must be enabled on the browser
   - Browser must be set to allow pop-ups from the test site
2. Headset or Speaker
   - Good quality digital USB headset is recommended
   - Units with noise cancellation is required for noisy environments
   - Recommended headset models
     - Plantronics Audio 370, 360 or 350
     - Logitech ClearChat Pro USB

3. Network – Broadband Internet connection (Cable, DSL, or T1)
   - 768 kbps minimum port speed
   - Approx. 200 kbps sustainable free bandwidth required per test candidate
   - Minimum bandwidth should be more than 100 kbps

The OPIc includes detailed test instructions on how to listen to the questions and record your answers. A sample question is provided before the OPIc begins to allow you to become accustomed to responding to OPIc-formatted items. You will also have the chance to re-review the instructions and sample question before you begin the OPIc.

Preparing to Take the OPIc Test

The OPIc assesses what you can do in a language (i.e. language proficiency). The best way for you to prepare is to practice listening to and speaking the language in real-world situations. Try your best to find situations in which you have to use the language to communicate. For instance, you can try going to a restaurant where the target language is spoken to talk to the waiter or waitress while ordering your food.

Finding other people who speak the language, and meeting them for coffee or tea is another good way to improve your skills. When you get together, make a rule about only using the target language when you talk to each other. Practice telling them stories about things you do regularly at home, school, or work. Tell them stories about things that happened to you in the past or your plans for the future. Getting into discussions that require you to express your opinion about anything, from the news to sports or entertainment, will also help you improve what you can do in the language.

Working to build your skills, so you can communicate in the language as someone would do in the real world, is the best way to get ready to take the OPIc.

Another step you can take to prepare for the OPIc is to go to http://opicdemo.actfltesting.org/ to try a demonstration question, so you can get an idea of what taking the OPIc is like.

To be successful on the OPIc, it is also important to understand what a speaker can do at each level of proficiency so that you can understand what is expected from you when you respond to the prompts. Below are descriptions of the four major levels of the OPIc: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, and Superior.

Expectations for Each Major Level

Novice A Novice-level speaker is able to produce words and some phrases. Some of these words and phrases may be memorized. This is a natural process that happens when people first start studying a language and is perfectly acceptable at this level. It should not be confused with using Rehearsed Material (see below for more details). In fact, it is the way new students of a language build their vocabulary, a sense of sentence structure, and, ultimately, the ability to express themselves (Intermediate). A Novice-level speaker may be able to provide lists, like the names of the days of the week, colors, naming family members, objects, etc. At this level, the speaker is not able to produce sentences yet.

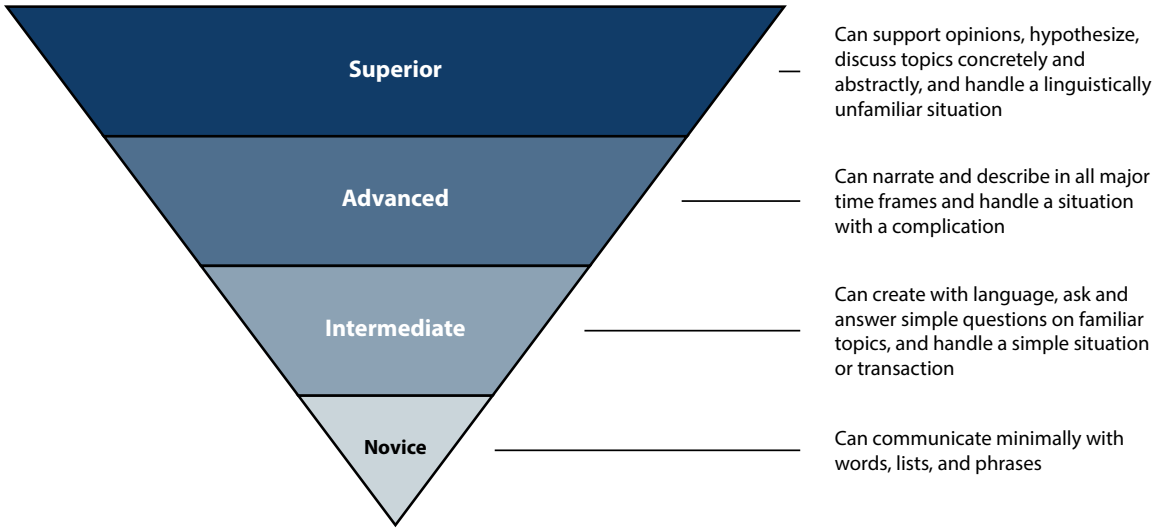
Intermediate An Intermediate-level speaker is able to speak at the sentence level. The sentences this type of speaker generates, allow her or him to express ideas and engage with other speakers of the language socially. Intermediate-level speakers can tell people what they want to order at a restaurant, what they regularly do at work, what they need to do to arrange to rent a car, etc. They can tell people what they are thinking, and they can formulate questions to find out information. On the other hand, an Intermediate-level speaker is not able to organize and connect those sentences to form paragraphs, nor is this type of speaker able to control the language enough for a listener to be able to understand whether an action or event happened in the past, present, or future.

Advanced An Advanced-level speaker is a story-teller. At this level, the language production is paragraph-length. That means a speaker's responses are organized, with a beginning, middle, and end. It also means that there is a connection not only between ideas, but, also between the sentences of a response. Advanced-level speakers use paragraphs to tell listeners stories that happened in the past, actions that take place in their daily lives, and events that are going to happen in the future. When someone listens to an Advanced-level speaker, there is no confusion about what happened or when it happened. Like Intermediate-level speakers, Advanced-level speakers can handle social transactions, like, for instance, renting a car. They can, however, handle these transactions at a high level, using the language to address complications that might arise during the transaction (i.e. a car not being available or a reservation being lost). This ability allows them to find solutions to resolve the transaction successfully. In addition, Advanced-level speakers can begin talking about things that they did not personally experience; but they cannot talk about these things for an extended period of time without returning to topics that are part of their lives and their own experiences.

Superior A Superior-level speaker is able to produce responses that are multiple paragraphs in length. These paragraphs are organized with a beginning, middle, and end, to express opinions and deal with topics that are no longer part of the speaker's every-day experiences. Rather, a Superior-level speaker deals with topics on a societal and sometimes a global level (i.e. he or she talks about how issues affect society and countries). Superior-level speakers are not only able to accomplish all of the tasks of the other levels (i.e. they can tell stories and control time in their responses, etc.), but they are also able to talk about ideas at a higher level than speakers at any other level. Superior-level speakers understand what level of language they are supposed to use in each situation, and they can speak it at whatever level is necessary to communicate their ideas successfully.

Below is a visual representation of the ACTFL scale with concise information about the four major levels tested by the OPIc. As you can see, the ACTFL scale covers a full range of proficiency from Novice to Superior.

Figure 1:



For more information, check the Can-Do-Statements: Performance Indicators for Language Learners.

Sublevels

In addition to the major levels of the ACTFL scale, you may also be awarded a sublevel. Sublevels provide a more specific description of your language abilities. The three sublevels are: high, mid, and low. These sublevels differ in terms of the amount of language you can produce at each major level as well and also address the quality of your responses.

The "High" Sublevel

Speakers at the "High" sublevel communicate with ease and confidence when performing the functions of their respective level. They are capable of functioning most of the time at the next higher major level and may spontaneously raise the exchange to that level, but they are unable to sustain language at the next higher level without intermittent lapses or evidence of difficulty.

For example, a Novice High speaker would be able to produce some sentences at the Intermediate level, but he or she would not be able to maintain that level of production and would eventually return to the Novice level (words and phrases).

The "Mid" Sublevel

There are many kinds of speakers that match the description of the "Mid" sublevel, depending on the amount of speech produced, the quality of the speech (how well the speaker communicates), and/or the degree to which he or she controls language features from the next higher major level.

For example, an ***Intermediate Mid*** speaker would be able to express his or her own ideas by creating sentence-level responses consistently throughout the test. Additionally, a speaker at this level would also be able to ask questions and provide information to handle a social transaction (finding out information about a business, buying/selling something, dealing with travel situations, etc.).

The "Low" Sublevel

Speakers at the "Low" sublevel work hard to hold on to the major level of proficiency for which they have qualified. They meet the minimal requirements for the level and do not have the ability to perform the tasks of the next higher level.

For instance, an ***Advanced-Low*** speaker would be able to just hold onto the Advanced level by producing short paragraphs. He or she would be able to narrate and describe in the past, present, and future, but the listener would have to make an effort to understand when the story happened. Additionally, an Advanced-low speaker would struggle to handle social interactions with complications (e.g. lost reservations, a borrowed item that got broken, etc.).

For more information about the ACTFL Guidelines, please go to https://www.actfl.org/publications/guidelines-and-manuals/actfl-proficiency-guidelines-2012.

Policies & Guidelines for the Use of the OPIc Test

Confidentiality

During the OPIc, your responses will be recorded. This recording shall remain the sole property of ACTFL and LTI. It will not be given to you or anyone else under any circumstances. Only your final rating will be released.

Rehearsed Material

The OPIc is a test of your ability to express yourself in a language. Certified ACTFL OPIc Raters will evaluate what you can do in the language when you are speaking. In order to do this effectively, your responses must be real. While you should make every effort to improve your abilities in listening, to understand the language, and speaking, to be understood, you should not try to memorize responses prior to taking the OPIc. If you prepare a response or use responses from online sources or books, you will not get an accurate rating. Proficiency is characterized by spontaneous language use. ACTFL OPIc Raters are experienced in identifying rehearsed responses, so, if you use them, you may not receive a rating for your test.

It sounds simple, but practicing your listening and speaking skills as much as you can in the language is the best thing for you to do to be successful on the OPIc assessment. We wish you success in improving your language skills, and we hope that you have a good experience taking the OPIc.

Further questions? Contact us

If you have any additional questions, please contact:

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