



12 May 2021

---

## Administrative instruction

### Language proficiency and language allowance

The Under-Secretary-General for Management Strategy, Policy and Compliance, pursuant to section 4.2 of Secretary-General's bulletin [ST/SGB/2009/4](#) and for the purpose of implementing staff rule 3.8 on language allowance, promulgates the following:

#### Section 1

##### General principles

Staff members are strongly encouraged to become proficient in two or more official languages of the United Nations in order to achieve and maintain linguistic balance in the Organization. Language proficiency for the purposes of the present instruction shall be established in accordance with the conditions set out in sections 2 and 3 below. Once staff members have established such proficiency, they may receive a language allowance, under conditions set out in section 4 below.

#### Section 2

##### Language proficiency

2.1 For the purposes of the present instruction, adequate and demonstrated knowledge in one of the official languages of the United Nations shall be established by means of a language proficiency certificate awarded by the United Nations upon the staff member's successfully passing the United Nations language proficiency examination in that language.

2.2 The language proficiency examination requirement shall be waived, however, in the following cases:

(a) Staff members whose mother tongue<sup>1</sup> is one of the official languages of the United Nations need not take the examination in that language. However, to demonstrate adequate knowledge in an additional official language, which may include the language in which they are required to be proficient by the terms of their appointment, they will be required to pass the examination in that additional language;

---

<sup>1</sup> The determination of a staff member's mother tongue is officially recorded in the personal history profile used for initial onboarding with the Organization. Staff members are not permitted to change the officially recognized mother tongue after onboarding. Only one language can be officially recognized as the mother tongue of each staff member.



(b) Staff members whose mother tongue is not one of the official languages of the United Nations need not take the examination in the language in which they are required to be proficient by the terms of their appointment. However, to demonstrate adequate knowledge in an additional official language, they will be required to pass the examination in that additional language;

(c) Staff members whose mother tongue is not one of the official languages of the United Nations and who are required to be proficient in more than one official language by the terms of their appointment need not take the examination in one of the required languages. However, to demonstrate adequate knowledge in an additional official language, which may include the other language in which they are required to be proficient by the terms of their appointment, they will be required to pass the examination in that additional language.

2.3 The level of language proficiency assessed through the United Nations language proficiency examination is defined by one overall descriptor and four specific descriptors for the following communication activities, as described in the annex: reading; listening; spoken production and interaction; and written production and interaction.

### **Section 3** **Conditions governing language proficiency examinations**

#### *Eligibility to take the language proficiency examination*

3.1 The language proficiency examination is open to staff members after they have completed the highest regular level of United Nations language courses at Headquarters or the equivalent level in other language programmes of the United Nations. The language proficiency examination may also be taken by staff members who have not attended or completed a United Nations language course but can document that they possess an equivalent knowledge of the language in which they wish to be tested. Such equivalent knowledge may be demonstrated by a certificate of completion of language study for at least two years outside the United Nations; proof that the language was the language of instruction at school for at least two years; or proof of the use of the language on a regular basis for work.

3.2 Staff members serving on a temporary or a fixed-term appointment expiring prior to the date of the language proficiency examination for which they are applying may take the examination only with authorization from their local human resources or executive office.

3.3 The office responsible for administering the language proficiency examination at each duty station shall ensure that the eligibility requirements above are met.

#### *Applications*

3.4 Candidates for the language proficiency examination who meet the eligibility conditions set out in the present section shall complete the appropriate application to enrol for one examination session by the end of the registration period, and submit it with all required documentation in accordance with the instructions provided in the examination announcement.

#### *Requirements for passing the language proficiency examination*

3.5 The language proficiency examination shall consist of sections aimed at testing the communication activities described in section 2.3 (reading; listening; spoken production and interaction; and written production and interaction). All sections shall be taken at the same examination session.

3.6 The assessment criteria and minimum passing grade for the examination will be detailed in the examination announcement.

*Time and attendance*

3.7 Staff members who are admitted for language proficiency examinations shall be released by their respective offices for the time necessary to sit the examinations. The time taken shall not be charged to annual leave.

**Section 4**  
**Language allowance**

4.1 Staff members in the General Service, Security Service or Trades and Crafts category, or in the Field Service category up to and including level FS-5, holding a fixed-term or a continuing appointment, shall be paid a language allowance in accordance with staff rule 3.8 after they have established proficiency in at least two official United Nations languages in accordance with section 2 of the present instruction.

4.2 The language allowance shall be paid to staff members who have met the conditions of section 4.1 of the present instruction as at the first of the month following the month in which they successfully passed the language proficiency examination.

**Section 5**  
**Final provisions**

5.1 The present administrative instruction shall enter into force on the date of issuance.

5.2 Administrative instruction [ST/AI/2016/9](#) of 20 December 2016 is hereby abolished.

(Signed) Catherine **Pollard**  
Under-Secretary-General for Management Strategy,  
Policy and Compliance

## Annex

### Language proficiency descriptors

#### Overall descriptor

1. Candidates who attain the United Nations language proficiency level by passing the corresponding proficiency examination in that language are able to do the following:

(a) Use the language efficiently, with a high degree of fluency and accuracy, in a variety of contexts and situations, when dealing with a wide variety of general matters in the personal, public and professional domains, throughout the Organization;

(b) Show good command of a range of linguistic and pragmatic competencies and of social language conventions to meet most communication needs;

(c) Respond autonomously and sufficiently to most required actions;

(d) Use reference resources to confirm and refine interpretation and to improve communication.

#### Reading

2. When reading, candidates who demonstrate a proficiency level are able to do the following:

(a) Understand most written texts of different genres and of different lengths, identifying essential information, including the most relevant details, and the tone and the viewpoints expressed – both implicit and explicit;

(b) Understand most commonly used idiomatic and figurative language and explicit sociocultural references.

#### Listening

3. When listening, candidates who demonstrate a proficiency level are able to do the following:

(a) Understand the general meaning, identify essential information, including the most relevant details expressed in oral texts delivered clearly at an average to fast rate, in standard varieties, and in moderately demanding contexts or noisy backgrounds;

(b) Understand the attitudes and viewpoints expressed, both implicit and explicit, in these types of oral texts.

Notwithstanding the above, they may occasionally require repetition of a word or a phrase.

#### Spoken production and interaction

4. When speaking and interacting orally, candidates who demonstrate a proficiency level are able to do the following:

(a) Take part naturally in a variety of interactions, arguing opinions and showing the ability to respond to different viewpoints;

(b) Produce clear and well-structured spoken texts of different lengths with appropriate detail;

(c) Relay and efficiently summarize the main information contained in oral or written communications.

**Written production and interaction**

5. When writing and interacting in writing, candidates who demonstrate a proficiency level are able to do the following:

(a) Write clear and well-organized texts in different genres;

(b) Respond showing the ability to competently use the appropriate register and style for the communicative situation;

(c) Relay and efficiently summarize the main information contained in an oral or written communication.

---