

# Translation

*A Must-Have Guide*



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by the Center for Health Literacy | July 2010

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Reston, VA 20190

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# Contents

## IV Introduction

### 1 CHAPTER 1: What Is Translation?

Why translation?

*What are the CLAS standards?*

### 3 CHAPTER 2: What Is a Translator?

The difference between a translator and an interpreter

Important skills and qualities

Do you need a certified translator?

### 8 CHAPTER 3: Finding the Right Translator

Strategies to use when looking

Define your requirements

Follow leads

Read resumés

Interview applicants

Ask for references and samples

Compare cost estimates

What to do if you have inherited a translator

### 11 CHAPTER 4: Preparing for Translation

Fine-tune the original document

Aim for a well-designed format

Create a glossary

*Tips for web translation*

*Sample glossary*

Organize the project

*Health literacy*

*The process of translation*

- 20 **CHAPTER 5: Monitoring and Evaluating Translation**  
Keep the lines of communication open  
Address and resolve disputes  
Plan to evaluate  
    Independent reviews  
    Back translation  
    Field-testing
- 29 **CHAPTER 6: Common Mistakes in Translation**  
*Punctuation*
- 32 **CHAPTER 7: Evaluating Low-Cost Alternatives**  
Should you ask a friend?  
*A common mistake for an untrained translator*  
Working with an untrained translator  
*Reviewer's checklist*  
Should you use translation software?  
    When MT might help  
        *Translation aids*  
    When MT is unlikely to help  
    When MT is very risky  
        *What they say about MT*
- 40 **CHAPTER 8: Desktop Publishing**  
What is desktop publishing?  
Text expansion or shrinkage  
Pitfalls related to formatting  
*Some important distinctions*  
*Cost-saving tip*
- 43 **CHAPTER 9: What Will It Cost?**  
Getting the best for your budget  
Negotiating costs for large projects  
Keeping translation costs down

# Introduction

In the past three decades, there has been a 140 percent increase in the number of people living in the United States who speak a language other than English at home.\* Now there are approximately 55.4 million people in this category who may need help navigating our complicated health care system. In this era of health reform — with many changes coming and much uncertainty — it is more important than ever to be able to communicate in more than one written language and to produce high-quality translations that are adapted to the audiences they aim to serve.

The process of translation can be costly and can seem mysterious. In this guide, we hope to dispel some of the mystery by explaining the skills involved in translation and the translation process itself. We also take a critical look at some of the quick fixes that people use to communicate with their audiences, such as using untrained translators or machine translation. We demystify the cost of translation too, although we realize that many organizations that should be using translators — and know it — can't afford translation services. Still, it's a matter of priority, and in our increasingly diverse society, translation is becoming more of a priority than ever before.

We hope that after reading this guide you will feel more confident in taking on a translation project, finding a good translator, monitoring the process, and evaluating the results. Most of all, we hope that this book will improve your organization's communication with people whose first language is not English.

\* "Language Use in the United States: 2007," American Community Survey Reports, April 2010. U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, U.S. Census Bureau.

Mercedes Blanco, *Director, Translation Services, Center for Health Literacy*  
Héctor Gayón, *Principal, Integral Linguistic Services*  
Penny Lane, *Director, Center for Health Literacy*

*Editorial assistance:* Rebecca Kahlenberg, Bob Wanetick

*Drawings by* Susan Jerde

*Design by* Eva Anderson | Glasswing Design

*Thanks also to* Tara Susman-Peña, Joan Winchester, Paula Simpson,  
Brian Canada, Betsy Ruth, Nancy Cotter, and Paul B. Gallagher.

# 1: What Is Translation?

Translation is the conversion of written text from one language into another so that the new, translated text reflects the content of the original text and corresponding cultural perceptions and customs of the target audience.

Translation makes communication possible among people who read or write different languages and have different cultural heritages.

Translation is *not* the process of finding an equivalent word in the target language for each word in the original document. That's because there may be no equivalent words, or there may be more than one equivalent word and the translator must examine the context to choose the one that's best.

Additionally, the ways in which words are combined to create meaning vary from language to language, and translating words in the order they appear in the original text often will not make sense in another language.

## Why translation?

Translation is necessary to communicate information to those who need it, want it, or are entitled to it but do not understand the language of the original document.

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If your mission is to provide a service to everyone who qualifies for it, then all key information that people need to get the service must be translated. This may include brochures, comparison charts, application forms, and appeal information. The information and other necessary text must not only be written in your readers' dominant language but must also be adapted for clarity, with the readers' cultural context and education levels taken into account.

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## What are the CLAS standards?

The national standards on Culturally and Linguistically Appropriate Services — called CLAS standards — are guidelines and recommendations for health care organizations. They were developed by the Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Minority Health in 2000. There are 14 standards, and each addresses an element of patient care and/or organizational policy that, if implemented, would improve the delivery of health services.

The CLAS standards were provided “as a means to correct inequities that currently exist in the provision of health services and to make these services more responsive to the individual needs of all patients/consumers.”

According to the standards, health care organizations should:

1. Provide services that are respectfully delivered and compatible with the cultural beliefs and languages of those being served.
2. Recruit staff who represent the demographics of the service area.
3. Train staff in appropriate service delivery.
4. Provide language assistance services (including bilingual staff and interpreter services) during all hours of operation.
5. Provide patients with verbal and written offers of language assistance.
6. Provide competent language assistance. Do not use family members as interpreters (unless the patient requests them).
7. Provide print materials and signage in languages used by groups in the service area.
8. Develop a written strategic plan to provide culturally and linguistically appropriate services.
9. Conduct self-assessments and internal audits of the organization’s competency.
10. Collect and regularly update data on the patient’s race, ethnicity, and spoken and written languages.
11. Conduct a needs assessment in the community, and construct a demographic profile of the community.
12. Collaborate with communities to promote CLAS implementation within the community.
13. Assure that conflict resolution procedures are culturally and linguistically sensitive.
14. Notify the community about progress in implementing CLAS standards.

► Information from <http://raceandhealth.hhs.gov/assets/pdf/checked/finalreport.pdf>



## 2: What Is a Translator?

A *translator* is a person who converts the content (ideas and information) of a document written in one language (the *source*) into another language (the *target*), thereby linking two groups of people from two different cultures who read two different languages. The translator should be able to communicate ideas from one group to another in writing that is clear, accurate, and culturally relevant.

Translators do this work by reading the source document to fully understand the messages and meaning and then rewriting the document in another language in a style that is best suited to the target audience. The translator should be familiar with the subject matter of the source document, including program names, common terms and definitions, and vocabulary. He or she must understand the author's intentions, so that the translation will convey the intended messages and ideas.

A good translator has intimate insight into the nuances of both cultures — that of the author and that of the target audience. Ideally, a translator will at some point have lived among the people for whom he or she is translating and, therefore, know the language and culture well.

A translator may work alone or as part of a team, with colleagues sharing the duties of translation, proofreading, editing, and project management.

## The difference between a translator and an interpreter

A *translator* makes written communication possible by converting written text from one language to another.

An *interpreter* makes communication possible by converting speech or sign language into another language or into sign language.



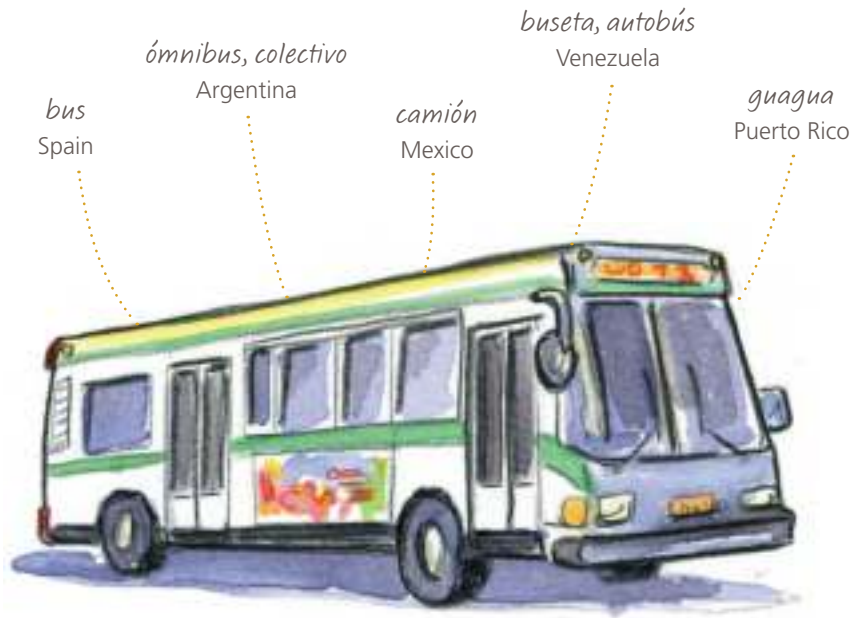
\* In this guide, the focus is on *translation* and *written materials*.

### Important skills and qualities

A translator must be an expert in the vocabulary, grammar, and construction of both the source and the target languages. Because languages evolve wherever they are used, the correct usage of a word or phrase in one country or area might be incorrect in another. A word might be offensive *here* but not *there*— or even have completely different meanings in each place. As a practical matter, therefore, it is critical for the translator you hire to share the culture of the community you serve.

Usually, the best translators translate into their mother language (their first language; their native language), because it is the language in which they were raised and the one with which they have the most intimate relationship. There are exceptions to this rule: On rare occasions you can find an extraordinary translator who is equally fluent in both the source and the target languages.

Even when the target audience speaks and reads the language into which the document will be translated, there may be local differences about how ideas are expressed. For example, Spanish speakers in different countries use different words for “bus.”



A translator must also be a skilled, fluent, and experienced writer. Most good translators have taken several writing courses or have extensive professional writing experience.

Along with excellent language and writing skills, it is important to look for these qualities:

- The ability to translate documents into “plain language,” so that people of many literacy levels — even those with limited literacy skills — can read and understand the information.

“Plain language writing” is the proper and correct usage of the language in a style that most readers can understand. Plain language writing employs simple sentence structure and avoids slang, colloquialisms, and overly sophisticated vocabulary. It uses common words that most readers — even those with limited literacy skills — know.

Plain language skills allow the translator to adapt the original information in a way that respects the culture and educational levels of the readers while making sure the meaning of the translation stays true to the source document. To do this properly, the translator should have experience in writing for different levels of literacy and be attuned to new immigrants and others with low to medium levels of reading proficiency.<sup>1</sup>

- A willingness to ask questions and discuss translation issues in order to clarify anything about the source document or the project itself that may be unclear.
- A willingness to speak candidly and accept honest feedback from you, the client. Open and honest communication with the translator may help resolve the occasional disagreements that may arise about translation issues.

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<sup>1</sup> It is also helpful if translators have professional experience in a nonlinguistic field. For example, some of the best translators of medical documents are people who were in the health care field, and some of the best translators of technical documents were formerly engineers. See [translationjournal.blogspot.com/2005/06/how-to-predict-translation-performance.html](http://translationjournal.blogspot.com/2005/06/how-to-predict-translation-performance.html).

## Do you need a certified translator?

Doctors are certified by medical boards, and attorneys are certified by bar associations, but professional certification is still a matter of choice for translators. There is no single body whose certification is sought by all. It is not necessary for a translator to be certified — or even to have a degree in translation — before he or she can become established in the business of translation, though it may be preferable for your peace of mind.<sup>2</sup> Many colleges and universities offer translation degrees, but it is possible to find an expert translator who doesn't have a degree.

Certain problems may prevent universal certification from ever coming to pass. For example, no universal standard for translation exists, because it is more of an art than a science.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, it may be impossible for any one organization to provide certification for *all* languages. Those organizations that currently certify translators do so mostly in Western European languages and in just a smattering of Eastern European, Asian, and Middle Eastern languages. You can visit the American Translators Association (ATA) website for a list of languages they certify.

- \* Rather than relying on certification to measure a translator's skill, seek out a translator who comes highly recommended by a professional colleague who is experienced in hiring translators and committed to quality translation.

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2 Translators may be certified by either the American Translators Association or The Translators and Interpreters Guild. However, no certification is required to perform translation, and a translator may well be competent but not be certified. See [www.bls.gov/oco/ocos175.htm](http://www.bls.gov/oco/ocos175.htm).

3 ISO, the International Organization for Standardization, has issued a set of quality standards (ISO 9000-2001), but these standards are not concerned directly with the translation itself. Rather, these standards address the quality assurance procedures and documentation of the translation service provider.

## 3: Finding the Right Translator

Finding the right translator can be tricky and time-consuming, because there is no comprehensive resource for or universally recognized way of determining a translator's competence. Still, the time you invest in searching for the best person will pay off in the long run, because you will get higher-quality translations.

### Strategies to use when looking

#### Define your requirements

- Write a detailed job description.
- Describe the project specifications, deliverables, expectations, deadlines, and target audience.

#### Follow leads

- Request referrals from colleagues and clients.
- Search online, including beyond your geographic location. (A good place to start is at [translationjournal.net/journal/links.htm](http://translationjournal.net/journal/links.htm).)
- Search translation-related forums, such as ProZ, Translators Café, and Translators Base.



## Read resumés

- Does the applicant appear to have excellent writing, adaptation, and oral communication skills?
- Is the applicant an experienced translator?
- Has the applicant done translation for your target audience?
- Does the applicant have a college degree or professional certification in translation?

## Interview applicants

- Ask the applicant to describe his or her approach to work, translation, project management, and troubleshooting.
- Discuss how you would monitor and evaluate the translation process.
- Gauge the applicant's willingness to discuss problems, ask questions, and accept feedback or criticism.

## Ask for references and samples

- Always check references and review samples of a translator's work.

## Compare cost estimates

- Cost matters, but the bigger picture matters more. It is *cost-efficient* to hire an experienced translator who manages projects well and produces high-quality translation — but *costly* to hire a translator whose principal qualification is that he or she charges less per word or per document than other applicants do.

## What to do if you have inherited a translator

If you have inherited a translator (for example, from someone who held your job previously or from elsewhere within your organization), be sure to talk up front with him or her about your requirements and expectations.

Communication between you and the translator is critical to the success of the project. Before you begin a translation project:

- Get acquainted with the translator, and describe the details of the project to him or her. Encourage questions, and schedule regular meetings or calls to discuss the progress of the work and to get feedback. (See Chapter 5 for tips on ensuring that your translator does a good job.)
- Ask for a sample of a previously completed translation, so that you can conduct a quality review using *your* standards. This process may give you a sense of the person's openness to feedback.
- Provide the translator with written guidelines about the project and the target audience, a glossary of your preferred terminology (which reflects your preference for the regional variations of the target language), reference materials that show the style or styles you prefer, and any other relevant documentation.
- State clearly any actions that would result in your firing the translator, such as the translator's failing to meet deadlines or submitting substandard work.



## 4: Preparing for Translation

Taking the time to prepare for translation will make the process easier and is more likely to result in effective communication with your target audience. Do not rush the translation process; you have worked hard to create a good-quality, polished document that represents you and your organization well, and you want your translation team to have enough time to do the same.

Here are some guidelines that will help you get documents ready for translation:

### Fine-tune the original document

When an idea is clearly expressed in one language, it can usually be expressed clearly in another language and adapted for other cultures without changing the meaning. But if the source document is poorly written, badly organized, incomplete, or incorrect, the translation is likely to have those flaws too. It is hard for a translator to communicate messages accurately in another language when the original document is not clearly written or formatted.

Make sure the English original is appropriate for the target audience. It should have been read, discussed, and edited by you and your colleagues before being designated “ready for translation.” Therefore, if you or your colleagues did not create the source document, *always* review, revise, and rewrite it, if necessary, *before* delivering it for translation. Make sure that the original document:

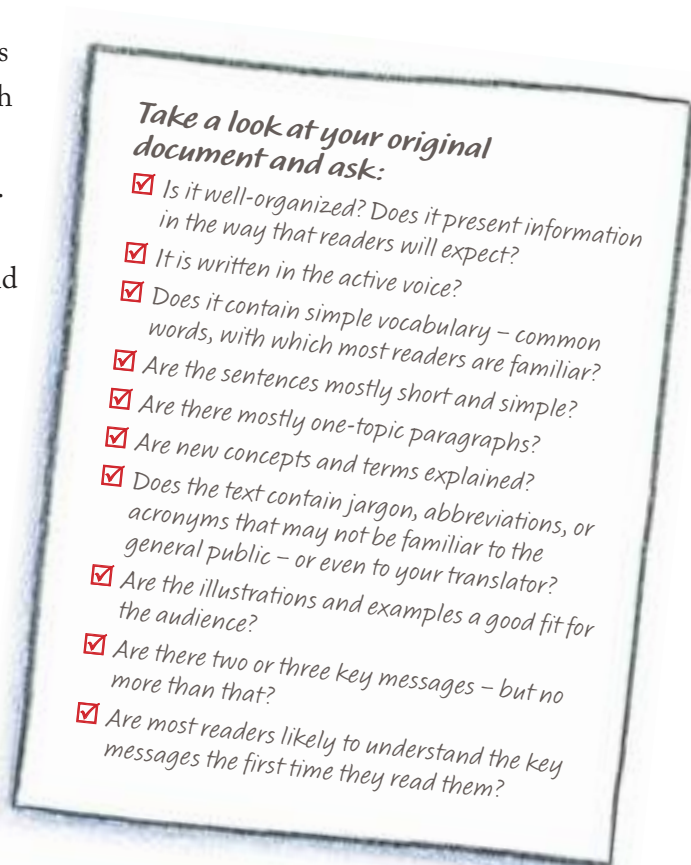
- is well-organized, streamlined, direct, and clear;
- contains everything you want to convey, without overwhelming the reader or including unnecessary information;

- has a vocabulary that is familiar to most readers, even those with limited literacy skills;
- is free of jargon, slang, and colloquialisms, and of course, errors; and
- has a friendly writing style that is neither condescending nor offensive in any way to the target audience.

## Aim for a well-designed format

A well-designed document offers a visual invitation to readers, with the design itself becoming an important element of readability. Formatting (or design) can pull readers into the material and send the message that the document is both important and reader-friendly. The visual invitation should be present in the translation just as in the source document.

One thing that could compromise your translated document's design is the fact that different languages require different amounts of space to express the same idea.



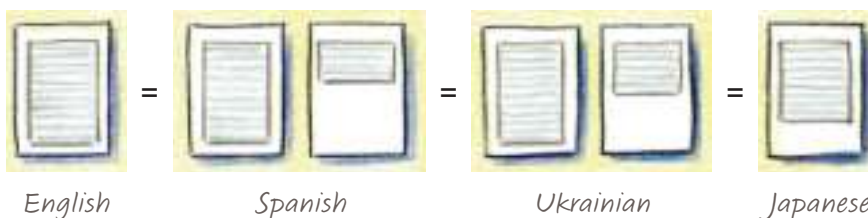
Some languages are wordier than English, while others use fewer words. Some languages (Chinese, for example) employ ideograms instead of letters and thus use significantly less space than English.



The white cat  
白色的貓

An *ideogram* is a picture or symbol used to represent an idea or a thing but not a particular word. These Chinese ideograms take up less space than the equivalent words in English, using the same character size. The difference may not be noticeable in a single sentence, but in a paragraph or a page it will be both noticeable and significant.

- \* It is a good idea to plan for text to either expand or be reduced, so that you don't end up with a crowded, cluttered document (because the translated text is much longer than the original) or one with too much white space (because the translated text is much shorter than the original).



As a rule of thumb, Romance languages (Spanish, Portuguese, French, etc.) use approximately thirty percent more space in each line of text than English does. Russian and other Cyrillic-alphabet languages use up to forty-five percent more space. By contrast, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese take up about twenty percent less space. A tightly formatted one-page English original will mean one and one-third pages in Spanish, one and three-eighths pages in Ukrainian, and four-fifths of a page in Japanese.

## Create a glossary

If you know that many documents will be translated over time for the same project, consider developing a glossary of terms to guide your translator and save time on revisions. A *glossary* is a list of words, phrases, or proper nouns in English together with the way you want those words, phrases, or proper nouns to be translated. If you have to change translators unexpectedly, a glossary will help reduce the amount of time devoted to getting a new translator up to speed.

In translation, just as in writing, there are choices to be made about which words to use and how to express certain concepts. A translator uses his or her knowledge, judgment, experience, and instincts to make certain decisions.

### Tips for web translation

- If you plan to translate a website, ask the webmaster to send the web pages that you choose directly to the translator. Then your translator will know exactly what you want done.
- Do not ask the translator to download pages from a live website. Websites often have many layers and branch out to other documents and even external sites. Your translator will not know when to stop; only you can know that!
- Your website may include links to downloadable documents. These documents should, of course, be translated too.

Thus a glossary can be a very useful tool to help you and your translator keep terminology consistent across all of the translated documents — and consistency is another important element of readability. Why? Because readers may be confused when concepts are expressed differently within a single document or in different documents that represent the same agency or program.

## Sample glossary

English Term	Preferred Spanish Translation	Avoid These Translations	Comments
applicant	persona que solicita los beneficios	cliente	The term <i>applicant</i> should be avoided. For example, instead of “Medicaid applicant,” use “person who applied for Medicaid.”
application	solicitud	aplicación	Do not use <i>aplicación</i> , which has a different meaning in Spanish.
application form	solicitud	aplicación	Omit the word <i>form</i> in the translation.
apply (for benefits)	solicitar beneficios; llenar la solicitud	aplicar	Beware of words with similar spellings but different meanings.
apply online	llene la solicitud en línea	solicite por Internet	The commonly used term is <i>en línea</i> .
assets	bienes	activos	<i>Activos</i> is an accounting term.
assist (someone can assist you)	ayudar (alguien le puede ayudar)	asistir	<i>Asistir</i> is commonly used to mean “to attend.”

## Organize the project

Here are some important project-management guidelines:

- Before giving the source document to your translator or translation team, review it carefully so that you can discuss background information about the document, including what type of document it is and why, where, and how it will be used.
- Point out the key action messages in the document. You can underline them in the source document or list them separately. This is especially important when the original is not a good model for the translation because it's written at too high a reading level, has too much content, is poorly organized, or has other problems that may result in difficulty during translation. The adapted translation will end up being clearer than the original!
- Set clear expectations. Discuss the style of writing that you expect. Establish procedures for correcting errors. Tell the translator who will review the translation. Will you be the reviewer? Will you field-test the translation, asking for feedback from members of the target audience? How will disagreements between the translator and the reviewers be resolved? Discuss aspects of the business relationship that are critical for you, such as the importance of meeting deadlines and your expectation that all translations be delivered free of errors.

Communicating your expectations clearly and in writing from the outset can help alleviate confusion and provide a point of reference in case of problems or misunderstandings later in the translation process. This communication will help you and your translator understand each other's

needs and requirements better and will result in better translations that are delivered on time.

- Share with the translator as much as you know about the target audience, including:
  - the presumed reading level, so that the translation is relevant to as many readers as possible;
  - the principal country or countries of origin, so that the use of vocabulary and examples are culturally appropriate;
  - the average amount of time most of the audience has been living in the U.S. (as a means of conveying how familiar they might be with our health care system); and
  - any other additional information that helps to paint a more specific picture of the target audience, such as age or gender.
- Ask your translator to review the illustrations and other materials (such as video clips or references to books and

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Language usage may be different in the country of origin and in a community founded by emigrants now residing elsewhere. For example, the Chinese spoken in Taiwan and Hong Kong is quite different from that spoken in mainland China. In Taiwan and Hong Kong, the language has evolved to suit the practical expressive needs and reflect the new experiences of the local Chinese community. It may also have evolved because of proximity to other language groups.

Even within mainland China, the language has evolved into at least ten officially recognized versions of the original. In fact, people who speak two of the most common versions of Chinese—Cantonese and Mandarin—have difficulty understanding each other! To further complicate things, all Chinese languages can be written in two different sets of ideograms: Traditional, used mainly in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, and Simplified, officially used in mainland China.

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films) that support the text to ensure that they are culturally appropriate and communicate the intended message. (You'll want to confirm the translator's opinions during field-testing.)

- Create a timeline for deliverables, logistics, reviews, specifications, field-testing, and subsequent revisions as necessary. Make it clear that if something unexpected threatens the timeline, the translator has a responsibility to communicate that as quickly as possible.

## Health literacy

Almost half of the American public has difficulty understanding and using information written beyond an eighth-grade reading level. This includes many clients of health and social services.

*Health literacy* is the ability to use spoken and written language to understand and act on health information. Materials written in plain language (using common words that are familiar to most adults) can improve health literacy and thus educate consumers, increase the likelihood of positive health outcomes, and save on costs.

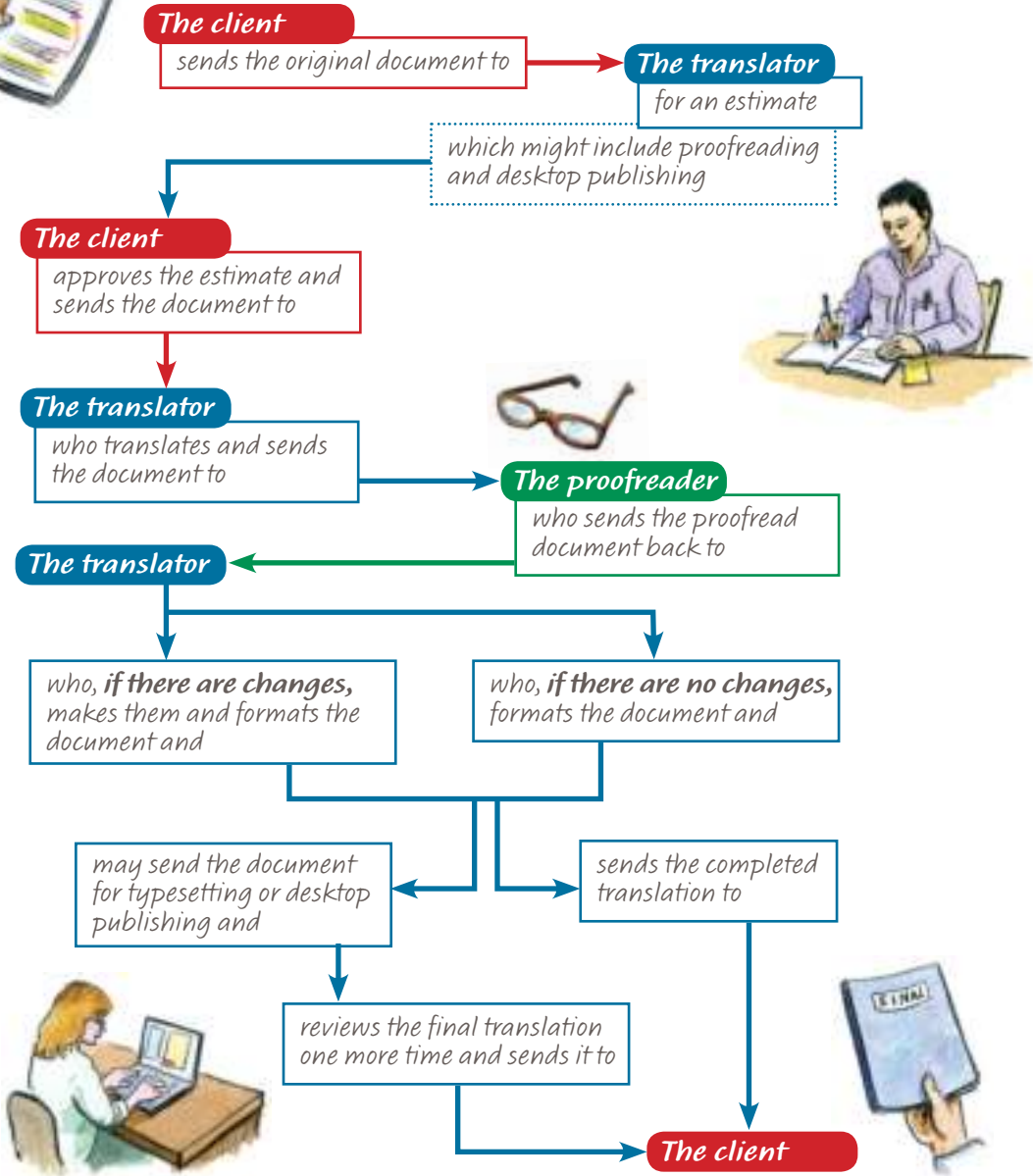


Drawings and other graphics can improve the readability of text if they support and enhance the text in some way. This drawing is a perfect illustration for text about a mother and child visiting a hospital.





## The process of translation



## 5: Monitoring and Evaluating Translation

Once you choose a translator, it might be tempting to sit back and let him or her do the work without much communication from you, because, after all, you may not understand all the languages involved. Yet even if you are very careful in choosing a translator or translation team, it is critical that you monitor the process and evaluate the results — just as you monitor and evaluate the work of other contractors. Doing so will almost certainly result in better, higher quality translations. Here are some tips to help you maintain control of the process:

### Keep the lines of communication open

Encourage your translator to ask questions, and encourage dialogue throughout the project, so that problem solving takes place on an ongoing basis and nothing is left unresolved.



### Address and resolve disputes

Disagreements about word choices or terminology can arise between you and your translator during the translation process. It is important for you to plan how to troubleshoot issues and resolve disputes.

It is not unusual for readers who read the target language and are asked to critique a translation to disagree with the style or wording that the translator has chosen. If you handed a document that was translated into English (with no mistakes in grammar, spelling, or punctuation and no omissions) to ten people and asked each person to critique it, all of them would likely have suggestions that they think would make it better.

Be cautious about making changes that reviewers suggest. The reviewer might simply prefer one word over another, when both are correct, or prefer a colloquialism that the translator knows would compromise the writing style of the translation. For one reason or another (including a lack of formal training in vocabulary and grammar), the reviewer may not know the writing rules that govern standard text. Listen to what your translator has to say about reviewers' suggestions, and don't authorize changes unless they will improve the document.

- \* Most of the time, your translator should make the final decision when there is a translation dispute, because of his or her expertise. Choose your translator carefully, and then learn to trust your translator's judgment and skills.

## Plan to evaluate

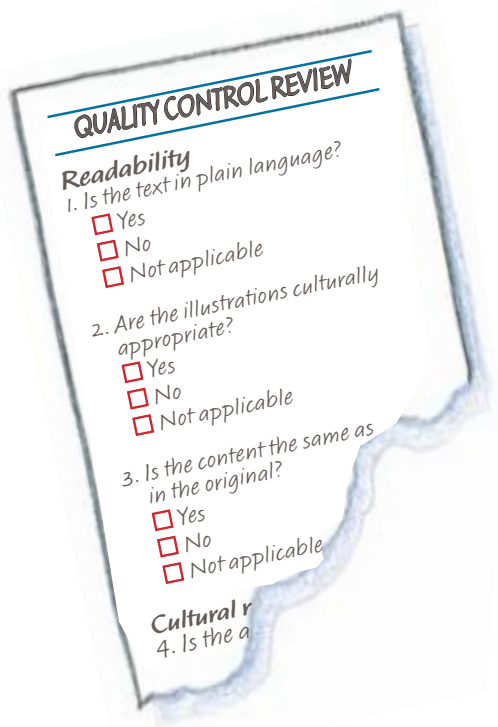
Evaluating translations poses several potential challenges, particularly if you do not understand the language into which the document is being translated and, therefore, do not understand the actual translation.

*Regardless of whether you know the target language, you can conduct a “soft review” of the document. A soft review is a visual scan of the translation to identify any errors or inconsistencies in formatting, numbers, proper nouns, or program titles. For example, are the phone numbers and dates all accurate and presented in the same format as in the original?*

Next, confirm that the graphics and illustrations that are presented with the text are culturally relevant. Graphics and illustrations should speak to the original content rather than introduce new content.

*If you know the language into which the document or website is being translated, read the translation by itself, without comparing it with the original. If there are words, phrases, or sentences that you don’t understand, it is likely your readers won’t understand them either.*

Next, compare the translated document or website with the original to see if all of the content in the original is included in the translation. Make sure that the translation



accurately represents the meaning of the original document and that the content is in the same order.

*If the translator is new* and you don't know how to read the target language, ask the translator to use a checklist (such as the one on page 22). It is an effective way for the translator to focus on your requirements while also rechecking his or her own work. Also, ask someone else to read the translation — ideally, a member of the target audience *and* another translator.

Finally, consolidate everyone's comments and corrections, and discuss them with the translator.

There are additional, more-formal ways to evaluate a translation. They include the following:

### **Independent reviews**

There are times when it may be prudent to have an independent translator review one or more translated documents — to reaffirm (or, in some cases, to lessen) your confidence in your translator's capabilities. To conduct an independent review, send a sample of the translator's work to another respected translator and ask him or her to assess the translation according to *your* criteria, using *your* checklist. Make sure the reviewer understands that he or she is not expected to suggest edits unless the writing style is inconsistent, there are errors, or there is a preferable choice of words.

Independent reviews are especially appropriate in the following situations:

- The translator is new, and you don't read the target language. Ask an independent translator to review one or two of the translator's documents to make sure you're getting the quality of translation that you expect.

- More than one translator is working on multiple documents for the same project. It is important that the tone, reading level, and definitions are consistent across program materials. If the writing is inconsistent, readers may be confused. (It is never advisable to have more than one translator working on the same project, as each one may have his or her own distinctive style, but sometimes it is unavoidable.)
- \* It's best to be upfront and honest by telling your translator in advance that his or her work will be seen, evaluated, and proofread by an independent reviewer.

### Back translation

You may have heard of or used back translation as a method of checking the quality and accuracy of translations. A *back translation* is text that has been translated back to the original language by a second translator (not the one who did the original translation).

Back translation is expensive, time-consuming, and, most importantly, not a reliable method for checking the quality of translation. That's because most documents can be translated in several ways and still be correct; likewise, a back translation to the original language can also have many correct versions.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See the article "Same Questions — Different Continent," by Scott Crystal, at [www.translationdirectory.com/article1150.htm](http://www.translationdirectory.com/article1150.htm).

If a poor translation is back-translated by an *excellent* translator, the back translation will be well written, even though the source document was poorly written. Conversely, a well-written translation back-translated by a mediocre translator will result in a *mediocre* back translation.

Remember that words and phrases don't always translate neatly— or literally— from one language to another. Often, the best translation respects the content of the original but does not duplicate the number of words and phrasing in the original.

In summary, you can compare a source document to the back translation and possibly confirm that the information in the translation is correct and complete, but it is impossible to check the *quality* of a translation in this way. The final document will never read as smoothly as a translation that has been adapted for readability.

\* There are, however, certain limited instances when back translations may be useful— for example, with legal or technical documents. In these cases, you should ask the translator for a verbatim translation. Back translation may be used to check the accuracy of birth certificates, legal contracts, informed consents, clinical protocols, and information on medical devices.

## Field-testing

A combination of internal soft reviews and independent external reviews will most likely allow you to evaluate the accuracy and clarity of the writing and the degree to which the document conveys all of the necessary information. However, field-testing is the most effective method of evaluating the quality of a translation. *Field-testing* is small-scale testing of the translated document's readability and the reader's comprehension of the document, conducted with a sample of test participants who have the same demographic profile (literacy level, gender, age, and so forth) as the target audience and who are in a location similar to the targeted document-distribution area.

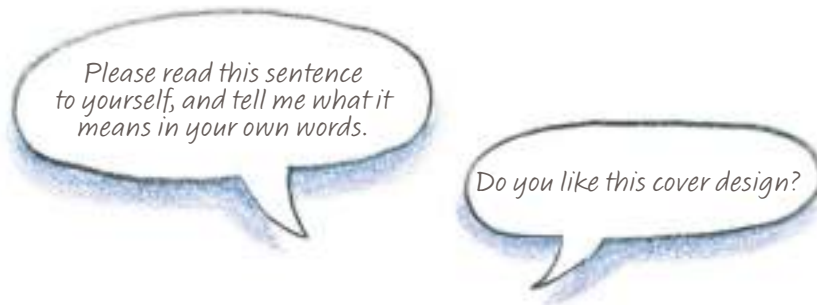
Field-testing is important because writers, graphic designers, and even clients themselves often find it difficult to step away from their workplace culture to understand an audience's perspective. They simply can't see their products from the reader's point of view. Field-testing allows them to learn how people in the target audience read, use, and understand their materials.



Field-testing provides information about the translation, such as whether test participants can find the key messages and whether it is easy to read and understand. Field-testing can guide the translators, writers, and graphic designers in making revisions that will improve the readability and comprehensibility of the translations.



Field-testing can uncover the ways in which participants interpret the messages in the translated materials — especially the key action messages — and can help answer these general questions: Are the messages being understood, and is anything confusing in the translated materials? Very often, watching a test participant struggle as he or she reads the test materials tells the interviewer that the writers (or graphic designers) need better ways to convey the information.



The best way to assess the readability of a document or website is to conduct one-on-one interviews in the field. When an interviewer sits down with a test participant one-on-one, without anyone else in the room, it is more likely that the participant will feel comfortable and be honest in responding to questions. The intimate setting enables the interviewer to watch the participant and see if her body language and facial expressions are consistent with her verbal responses. (Sometimes participants are reluctant to express their frustration or confusion when they see a test document for fear of disappointing the researcher!) The interviewer asks mostly open-ended questions, allowing test participants to explain their reactions to the material with minimal prompting.

Ask a local community-based organization that serves your target population to help find test participants. Because they are familiar to (and trusted by) the target population, they can recruit people in the community that fit the desired demographic profile and can perhaps even provide space where a researcher can conduct the interviews. Expect to compensate both the organization and the test participants for their time.

To find qualified people who are able to conduct the interviews and analyze the results, look for an experienced interviewer who:

- will put participants at ease and encourage them to speak openly;
- is an excellent observer of body language and facial expressions;
- will listen attentively in a nonjudgmental way;
- will take careful notes and capture participants' comments; and
- is capable of analyzing the data and identifying the most important elements that might improve the document.

The interviewer can judge the value of the participant's responses based on his or her observations, the intensity of the person's responses, and how consistent the responses are across all test participants. The interviewer may recommend revisions, but ultimately you or others on your team must decide whether or not to implement them, taking into consideration the users' preferences and practical considerations such as print budgets, timelines, and legal requirements.

Be sure to share your field-test results with your translator, so that everybody involved can learn more about what's best for the target audience.

## 6: Common Mistakes in Translation

If you know the most common mistakes in the translation process, you can take steps to avoid them. Here they are:

- The translator *leaves out some of the text* that appeared in the source document, such as a paragraph, a sentence, a phrase, or an item in a list that does not require translation, such as a telephone number. All content in the source document should appear in the translated document, either as translated text or (as in the case of title, numbers, and illustrations) duplicated exactly from the original. The translator should find these mistakes in his or her review. If not, you or a member of your team may catch them in your review.
- The translator *misinterprets the meaning of the text*, and the final translation gives the wrong message.
  - For example, “No, benefits will be provided anyway” is translated as “No benefits will be provided anyway.”
- The translator *incorrectly identifies abbreviations or misinterprets specific terminology*.
  - For example, the translator writes that *CIS*, which in your organization might mean “Customer Information Site”, means “Citizenship and Immigration Services.”

- The translator (or the client) *includes text or examples that are culturally inappropriate* for the intended audiences.
- The translator is *inconsistent in using or defining key words or phrases* throughout the document or across different documents that are part of the same body of work. Inconsistency can be confusing to readers, especially when the information being presented is new to them.
- The client *accepts changes to the translation offered by unqualified, ad hoc reviewers*. Many times, clients are tempted to put their faith in unqualified reviewers, because those reviewers just happen to read or speak the language of the translated document. Do not put your faith in a reviewer unless you know that person is qualified—that he or she is a well-educated native speaker and a good writer who is knowledgeable about grammar, spelling, punctuation, and the other elements of acceptable writing. We'll have more about this in the next chapter.



This drawing correctly illustrates the provider/patient relationship in the United States, but it would not be well suited for most Middle Eastern clients. Those readers might consider it inappropriate for women to have medical appointments with male doctors.

- The translator *makes grammar, spelling, or punctuation errors* in the translated document or website. A professional translator may occasionally make errors, but they should be caught in the proofreading process. Untrained translators are more apt to make these sorts of errors.

## Punctuation

It's important to be aware that punctuation usage and rules vary in different languages, even when the punctuation marks look the same. Reviewers may see a punctuation mark that doesn't appear to match what is in the source document but is actually correct!

- Languages that are written from right to left (such as Arabic and Farsi) have adopted some punctuation marks from Western languages, but they are flipped laterally to suit the direction in which the language is written.
- Punctuation marks are somewhat larger in Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and other Asian languages and may be used in different places than in the English language.
- In Spanish, punctuation marks are used differently than in English. For example, in Spanish there are never commas before conjunctions.

## 7: Evaluating Low-Cost Alternatives

Why go through the time-consuming and costly process of hiring a professional translator if you have a handy (and less expensive) alternative means of translation? Read below and you will understand why.

Translation is a skill that requires proficiency in at least two languages: the language of the source document and the language into which it is being translated. It's important to know that just because a person can *speak* or *read* a language does not mean that he or she has the skills to *write* in that language or to *translate* your document.

### Should you ask a friend?

It is rarely a good idea to use a nonprofessional to translate because:

- Your colleague (or friend or relative) may not be a writer. Perhaps he learned to speak the language in his home but never had formal training. “Speaking is not writing. Oral fluency does not guarantee smooth ... writing.”<sup>5</sup>
- Even if your colleague (or friend or relative) speaks and writes the language well, he or she may not be a good translator. Remember that translation requires knowing both languages well enough to understand the content in the source document and to recreate it in translation. The writing in the translation must be grammatically correct and stylistically pleasing, and it must precisely reflect the content of the source document.

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<sup>5</sup> American Translators Association, *Translation: Getting It Right, A Guide to Buying Translations*, p. 10.

- Your colleague (or friend or relative) may not have enough translation experience to adapt the translation to suit the culture and literacy level of the target audience. Even if the document is well translated—the writing is good, and the text is grammatically correct—the target audience won't be able to read it if it's not adapted for the appropriate literacy level.
- When a document is translated by an untrained person, no quality assurance is built into the process. If your colleague, friend, relative, or next-door neighbor translates a document, who will proofread it to check for uniformity? Who will check for grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors? Who will make sure the tone and writing style suit the target audience? Who will confirm—and guarantee—that the document and accompanying illustrations are culturally appropriate?

### A common mistake for an untrained translator

Untrained translators sometimes make this mistake:

The Spanish word *usted* means “you.” Used in formal writing, it connotes respect. *Tú* is a friendly and less-formal version of *usted*, but it is not appropriate for business translations.

### Working with an untrained translator

Despite the risks and warnings, you might choose to—or *have to*—use an untrained translator in some instances, such as when:

- you have no budget to hire a professional;
- the document does not seem important enough to warrant the expense of professional translation;

## Reviewer's checklist

Compare the translation to the source document.

- Is the content the same as in the original?
- Is the tone the same? Is it respectful?
- Is the formatting consistent with the original?
- Are the title, proper nouns, and phone numbers the same?

Are the examples and illustrations culturally relevant?

Will the translation adequately explain unfamiliar concepts to the new readers?

Make a note of:

- Grammatical errors
- Spelling mistakes
- Punctuation errors
- Omissions
- Colloquialisms and jargon

- the target audience is very small, and it is familiar with your “translator” and his or her language skills; or
- you are convinced that the untrained person possesses the skills required to do the job.

Here are some tips for working with an untrained translator:

- If there is a choice, pick a native speaker who was educated in his or her native country.
- Make a checklist of the things you consider essential to a good translation, and discuss them with your translator.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> [www.kwintessential.co.uk/translation/articles/best-practice.html](http://www.kwintessential.co.uk/translation/articles/best-practice.html)



- Find another volunteer — a native speaker or writer of the language in the translation. Ask that person to read and review the translation using your checklist.
- Field-test the translation, if possible. Field-testing can help identify problems or errors in the document or tell you whether your untrained translator is doing a decent job.

## Should you use translation software?

Machine translation (MT), as it is called, translates phrases (usually, word by word) and individual words without regard to context or how words are used in the real world. There are a variety of MT software products on the market, but, so far, MT cannot adapt a text to a specific educational level or culture.

Computer software is not the same as a human translator. While useful in some circumstances, it is severely limited by its inability to know or make judgments about words, phrases, and writing styles that contribute to clear communication with the target audience. Because of these limitations, errors frequently show up in computer translations.

## When MT might help

MT may be useful in certain circumstances, because it might give its user the gist of what's in the source document. But *the gist* is not the same as true understanding.

MT might also be useful to help translators find the right word; it could be used almost like a dictionary.

***incumbent***  
**(English–Spanish)**

1. *incumbido*
2. *obligatorio*
3. *que le incumbe*
4. *titular*
5. *beneficiado*



Here's what results from asking MT to translate the word "incumbent" into Spanish. The MT produces five options, but the translator must figure out which of the five fits the context.

## Translation aids

Some translators use specialized translation software (Trados or DéjàVu, among others) to help them in their work. These tools — known as CAT (Computer Aided Translation) or TM (translation memory) — are databases that store glossaries and segments of text that have been previously translated. The human translator decides what segments to use and what terminology to apply on a phrase-by-phrase or word-by-word basis.

These tools save typing time and help maintain the overall consistency of terminology across different documents. But once the translator combines the database entries with his or her own translation, it is necessary to review the whole document carefully for consistency and cohesion.

Translation aids are merely tools. They have to be used and fed by skilled human translators to reap the benefits they are capable of providing. The same tools used by unskilled or inexperienced translators would yield poor results.

## When MT is unlikely to help

Some people like to use MT to create a first draft—using the resulting “translation” as a type of template to fashion the final translation. The underlying theory is “it’s easier to edit than to write.” However, a bad first draft makes the second draft twice as hard for the reviewer or translator, because he or she has to check the English version and the language of translation constantly to be sure the content is all there. The translation may actually end up taking twice as long as it would have if the translator had been working with the source document instead of the MT output.

- \* A machine cannot think, and the translation process requires careful thinking. You cannot rely on MT, because computers are limited in their capacity to simulate human thought processes. Here’s an example:

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### *English Original*

*We are unable to log you in at this time, please call New Hampshire Enrollment Services at 1-888-888-8888.*

### *MT translation*

*Somos incapaces de iniciar la sesión en en este momento, por favor llame a los servicios de inscripción de New Hampshire en en 1-888-888-8888.*

### *Translator*

*No podemos iniciar la sesión en este momento, llame a New Hampshire Enrollment Services al 1-888-888-8888.*

In this case, the MT uses the word “*incapaces*” for unable. But in this context, “*incapaces*” means that the person is *disabled* in such a way that he or she cannot answer the phone. Also, the MT does not know that “New Hampshire Enrollment Services” is a proper noun and should be left in English. And, finally, the MT repeats the word “en.”

Here's a website (ristoranteilcampagnolo.com) in the original Italian with the MT in English below. Note the poor quality of the MT!

## When MT is very risky

For translations that include medical terminology, use MT with extreme care — not only because generalized translation software is more likely to perform poorly in a specialized field, but also because a bad medical translation can result in high human costs.

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Remember that a translation that doesn't meet minimum requirements for quality and accuracy may end up costing your agency extra time and money and may affect positive outcomes for your clients. Possible effects on your readers of a poor or sloppy translation include the following:

- They don't follow critical instructions.
  - They miss important deadlines.
  - They don't understand the benefits to which they are entitled and upon which they rely.
  - They do not get the benefits they need.
  - They feel disrespected.
- 

## What they say about MT

"As a general rule of thumb, do not use raw computer output for anything outbound.... It is simply not suitable; you run the risk of looking inarticulate. Even stupid."

ATA, "Translation: Getting it Right," page 12

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"Automated translation systems are far from perfect, and even Google's will not put human translators out of a job anytime soon. Experts say it is exceedingly difficult for a computer to break a sentence into parts, then translate and reassemble them."

"Google's Computing Power Refines Translation Tool," *The New York Times*, March 8, 2010

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"Paid human translators, unsurprisingly, still produce the best results."

From "The many voices of the web," *The Economist* (no author given), March 4, 2010  
[www.economist.com](http://www.economist.com)

# 8: Desktop Publishing

## What is desktop publishing?

Desktop publishing, also known as DTP, is the final step in preparing some newly translated documents for publishing or printing. The term came into being when people started to use computers and laser printers to typeset and design documents rather than using the conventional printing methods of the time.

If your source document is designed or formatted professionally (using specialized design software), the translator will usually pass the translation on to a desktop publisher to typeset it and recreate the design.

- \* The cost for desktop publishing is separate from the cost for translation, although the translation team you choose may provide both services.

## Text expansion or shrinkage

Depending on the target language, the amount of space that the text occupies may shrink or expand after translation (see illustration on page 13).

Therefore, while the translated document should mirror the original in most respects, its format may have to be modified or altered to accommodate the space differences.

## Pitfalls related to formatting

Here are some common pitfalls that can affect the cost, readability, or cultural appropriateness of your translations:

- Sending a draft document to be translated and typeset before it has been finalized

Rather than saving time, this will slow down the process. Once the text is typeset, the document will have to be reset every time a change is made.

- Attempting to include as much text as possible on one page to save on printing costs

Remember that a text-heavy page is difficult to read and not visually inviting. (Not to mention that the translated text could be up to forty-five percent longer than the original!)

## Some important distinctions

**Desktop publishing** is the process by which the graphic and textual elements of pages are arranged for in-house printers (laser or inkjet) or commercial printing.

✳ Desktop publishing is always priced separately! It is necessary when a document is typeset in a distinct manner that requires specialized software — for a book or an application form, for example, or for a web page. Desktop publishers use design software to format and combine text, data, photographs, charts, and other graphic art or illustrations into pages that are ready for printing.

**Typesetting** is the process of placing text into a predesigned document and arranging it on the page.

**Graphic design** is a creative process whereby the designer comes up with ideas for visually communicating specific messages. The design may be created in special software, with typeset words placed appropriately within it.

## Cost-saving tip

If the document that you're sending for translation will need desktop publishing, send a text-only document (such as a word-processing document) to the translator along with a PDF (portable document format) of the formatted document. It will be easier for the translator to work with the text-only document, and it will help him or her to have the PDF for a visual reference of what the final document will look like after desktop publishing.

- Not considering and seeking advice from your translation team about the cultural relevancy of design elements

It is important to think about the needs of the target audience before designing the document. You may even want to use different design elements than those in the original document for the translated version, such as different colors or images.



## 9: What Will It Cost?

Now that you have a better understanding of the process, you can see that translating a letter, brochure, form, or other document is more complex than it first appears. That complexity will be reflected in the cost of translation.

A translation provider may charge you by the project (size and scope), hour, or page. But the most common way to charge is by the word. Per-word cost typically includes the actual translation as well as the following:

- *Project management.* Your translation team or translator probably handles a number of translations simultaneously and must manage resources (people!), costs, revisions, timelines, archiving, and all other components of project management.
- *Research on a particular culture, community, and language.* The translator may need to research the commonly used words or subculture of the target audience to write in such a way that the audience can read and understand the content.
- *Revisions.* Revisions mean additional translation — and sometimes even rereading and rethinking the source document — so as to be consistent in writing style. Revisions may also involve additional desktop publishing.
- ✱ Ask your translator to build a certain number of revisions into the per-word price. Additional revisions will cost more.

- *Archiving.* If you ask them to, translators can archive completed translations for a specific time. When you need a document, perhaps years after the translation is completed, it will be ready and available.
- *Overhead.* A small portion of the operating costs of running a business will be included in the per-word cost of translation. Included will be phone calls, meeting time, and other time necessary for ongoing communication.

The cost of translation may also be affected by the following:

- *The language.* Here, the laws of supply and demand come into play. There are fewer speakers of some languages and, consequently, fewer translators in those languages. For example, in the United States there are more than 28 million native Spanish speakers but fewer than 250,000 Armenian speakers. Because the pool of Armenian translators is smaller, it costs more to translate into Armenian.
- *Complexity.* Technical subject matter or very complex documents require more of the translator's time.
- *Urgency.* Urgently needed translations are more costly. "Rush" fees, usually charged for translations done within one or two days, should be spelled out in your translation contract.

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## Getting the best for your budget

No budget is infinite. Each prospective translation client must work within the constraints of the funds that are available. Shop around and aim to get the best-quality translation at the best price. But keep in mind that price is just *one* factor when deciding which translation provider to choose.

- ✳ It is unwise to choose a translator or translation team solely on the basis of price.

Weigh the pros and cons of professional translation before choosing a translator or translation agency. Keep in mind that the investment upfront in a professional translator may save a lot of headaches later on.

## Negotiating costs for large projects

Translation is an art in which each term, phrase, or piece of information must be thought through carefully. Most large projects do not command large discounts because of volume: The time-cost relationship remains the same for a 200-word letter as for a 200,000-word book.

Economies of scale generally do not apply to translation, because translation must be done phrase by phrase and sentence by sentence and cannot be reproduced automatically or mass-produced.

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Here are some typical translation charges. Prices may vary.<sup>7</sup>

- One or two page letter, with 300–500 words: \$350, including proofreading
  - 3-panel brochure: \$500–\$750, including desktop publishing
  - Web pages: \$100–\$200 per page (depending on the complexity of the original design) to write the text in HTML and format the page as in the original. (HTML stands for HyperText Markup Language. It is one of the most commonly used languages for web pages.)
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<sup>7</sup> This guide was published in 2010; the costs quoted are relevant and accurate for that time.

## Keeping translation costs down (in order of importance)

1. *Integrate translation into your project plan from the start*, allowing plenty of time for the translator to do his or her work and for the document to be reviewed, proofread, and reviewed again. More often than you might imagine, a client spends months carefully writing, editing, and polishing a document and then gives it to a translator in the hope that it can be turned around in 24 hours. Yet last-minute translations can drive costs up by fifty to one hundred percent, and the rush to completion may compromise the quality of the work.
2. *Give the translation company final documents, not drafts*. Do not send documents with changes tracked. Always make the changes and send the “final” version.
3. If you anticipate changes to the original, *include a certain number of revisions* in your contract with the translation company, so that those changes are factored into the negotiated cost.
4. If you must make changes, *list them together and send them at the same time*, in one marked-up document. The markups will make it easier for the translator to identify changes and save time.

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11419 Sunset Hills Road  
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