

Preparing a Project for Translation

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This article assumes you have already completed the first step in successful translation purchasing —identifying a qualified translation vendor with whom you can develop a good working relationship and a body of experience. Better yet, you have more than one such translation vendor in a pool of possibilities, from which you can make the best choice for a particular project’s timeframe, size and content. Now, how can you help the selected translation vendor provide the best possible product, that meets your needs for timeframe, quality and cost?

If you have control over the content of the document to be translated (that is, it’s something you or your company are writing), examine that content carefully for words and phrases that won’t translate well, such as slang or colloquial expressions. For example, on our Web site we refer to our General Manager as our “head honcho” — after all, we are in Texas! — and our Systems Administrator as our “number one computer guru.” But when we localized our Web site into multiple languages, we reviewed the text and revised phrases such as these, realizing they would present difficulties in word choice for the translator and in meaning for the target audience. Be sure your text is as clear, concise and complete as possible, even if you have to hire a professional editor.

If at all possible, be sure the text is finalized and all “tweaking” is finished before you submit it for translation. Revisions to source documents after the translation process has begun require extra time to organize, coordinate and implement, and increase the potential for the misunderstanding and miscommunication that cause errors. Time is money — and the time it takes to manage even a single revision of a source document being translated into multiple languages is substantial.

You may be involved with translation projects over which you have no content control. In this circumstance, keep in mind that the translation will only be as good as the source, particularly with technical documents. If the source is complex and poorly written, the translation will reflect that reality. The translation vendor will, of course, attempt to make the translation as comprehensible and readable as possible, but producing a quality localized product will be more challenging. Also, translators must carefully balance providing a well-written translation against adhering to the integrity of the source document.

Identify and communicate to the translation vendor the target audience for the translation. Are there government requirements to be met? What is the reading and comprehension level of the anticipated user? What country will it be used in? The target audience most likely will not affect the quality, schedule or cost of the translation, but its “fitness for use” — a key concept in making one word choice over another — may be greatly affected. When you write professionally, you consider who you’re writing to and for, and the practice of translation is no different.

One of my favorite moments during the work day is when a project manager “oohs” and “aahs” over an incoming project that a client has carefully and thoughtfully organized. When that happens, we know we can provide our very best product. Following are some things you can do to ensure your vendor’s delight, which means you will also be pleased with your translation.

- Locate and provide electronic source files, if they exist. You should send only the electronic files you want to be translated, no more and no less. If you send additional electronic files as

reference material, clearly indicate that's what they are. Name the source files something that will have meaning for both you and the translation vendor. If you reference the source files in your correspondence, use their exact filenames. This is also the ideal time to inform your vendor of any special file-naming conventions you (or your technical personnel) may have for target-language files.

- Be sure that any paper copy you send matches the corresponding electronic file — exactly. With multiple source files, post-it notes on the paper copies indicating their correlating filenames are very helpful, saving time and ensuring against mishap.
- Provide reference material and/or a terminology list, if available. If a terminology list is not readily available, the time taken to develop even a brief one, especially of terms, acronyms and abbreviations specific to your organization, is well worth the investment.
- Tend to the administrative details on your end in advance, such as obtaining a purchase order or arranging for a confidentiality agreement to be signed.
- Send a complete “package” all at once — written instructions, paper copy, electronic copy, reference material, terminology list, and contact information. Although your vendor may know who you are and what you want from the briefest of e-mail messages, complete information saves time in the long run and insures efficient order processing.

The translation of graphics can be more complex and problematic than text — ask your vendor about this and expect to speak with a project manager who will have very specific questions. Are electronic files available? What software were they created in? What format are they? Are they editable? Do you need electronic target files? Fonts also need special attention. If particular fonts are required for your document's layout, can you provide them, or is the translation vendor to purchase them or substitute similar ones? Are they for the Macintosh or the Windows operating system? If the target translation is to be in a double-byte character language such as Japanese or Chinese or a bidirectional language such as Arabic or Hebrew, do you have the fonts and software to correctly display and print it? There are good and easy solutions to most graphics and font situations, and the translation vendor will be knowledgeable about them — just let them know the issues exist in your project.

Most importantly, clearly and explicitly communicate your expectations, requirements, and instructions to the translation vendor in writing. If you are unsure of the answers to the following questions, they can help you decide what's best for your needs.

- What are the target languages?
- In what locale will each language be used?
- What is the deliverable? Paper copy? Electronic copy, and what format — Microsoft Word, Excel, or PowerPoint, PDF, Quark, or something else?
- Do you need an estimate? This should be provided in writing from the translation vendor, and you should also confirm acceptance of the estimate in writing.
- What is the delivery method? Overnight courier? Disk? CD? E-mail? Fax? FTP? A combination of methods?
- Who is the completed work to be delivered to?
- What is the specific date or general timeframe for completion of the translation? If it is a large project, do you want it delivered in parts as they are finished, or complete at the end?
- Are there any special formatting requirements or other instructions?
- Who should the vendor contact with questions, and how and when is that person best reached?

If you are new to the translation process, have the vendor explain it to you, ask a lot of questions, provide as much information as you can, and allow adequate time for completion of the work. Keep in mind that a change in scope of the project, such as adding or replacing documents or languages, will affect the timeframe and cost; and hastening the due date may also affect cost. And beware of the following “myths”¹ about translation:

- Anyone with two years of high school language, or who lived in another country for three years during early childhood, or who can type in a foreign language, can translate. (Truth: Writing in another language, which is what translating really is, requires the same education and immersion as writing in the original language.)
- Translators can translate both ways just as easily. (Truth: Translators normally translate only into, not out of, their native language, and most translators only have one native language.)
- A good translator doesn’t need any reference literature. (Truth: Reference literature is enormously beneficial in understanding meaning and making good word choices.)
- A good translator gets it right the first time, without any editing or proofreading. (Truth: Do you get your articles, memos or reports right the first time, without any editing or proofreading?)
- Translators will soon be replaced by computers. (Truth: Yes, as soon as functional artificial intelligence is developed and widely implemented.)
- A 100-page technical manual that took four months and three persons to write can be translated by one translator in two days. (Truth: Let’s assume that a 100-page manual averages 250 words per page, for a total of 25,000 words to be translated. Let’s also assume that a full-time, experienced translator can translate 3,000 words per day. Simple math informs us that the project will take at least eight days for translation, not including editing or proofreading, or formatting. And this formula can be adversely affected by a large number of factors, such as the quality, complexity and subject matter of the source document, the actual number of words, the “popularity” of the source and target languages, and the translator’s schedule and previous commitments. The point is that good translation work takes a reasonable amount of time.)
- Translating is just replacing each word in the source language with the same word in the target language. (Truth: Alaskan Indians have numerous words for snow in their native languages; English has one — and in Texas, none!)
- Spanish is Spanish, all around the world. (Truth: The Spanish in Mexico is different from the Spanish in Spain; the French in Canada is different from the French in France; and the Portuguese in Brazil is different from the Portuguese in Portugal.)

“Quality” is a concern for many translation buyers — if you can’t read the target language, how do you evaluate the product? Ask the translation vendor what their quality process is— translations should always be translated and edited by a native speaker of the target language. You may also want to arrange for an “in-country review” by someone in your company who lives and works in the target locale. This native speaker of the target language will add value with their knowledge of jargon and nuance particular to your industry, your company, and your market position. Ask the translation vendor if they would be willing to coordinate this process for you, among reviewers you select, by refereeing feedback and implementing revisions. Note that a frequently requested, although usually ineffective, method for testing translation quality is the “back translation,” where a translation from language A to language B is translated back to language A by a different translator. However, most clients are confused and disappointed by the result, because the original wording is not the result. Word choice can be both accurate and subjective, and often there are no “right” or “wrong” answers.

In summary, thorough upfront project organization and clear and complete communication with the translation vendor about the scope of work, including timeframe and cost, are the contributions you, the client, can make toward ensuring a successful translation project. And having done your part, you can relax and be comfortable with your right to expect timely, high-quality and as-specified execution by the translation vendor. For more information, download *Translation: Getting It Right—A Guide to Buying Translations*, produced by the Institute of Translation & Interpreting and available in PDF format at www.iti.org.uk.

¹Morry Sofer, *The Translator's Handbook*, 4th ed. (Rockville, MD: Schreiber Publishing, 2002), p. 42.

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