

# NINE THINGS YOUR TRANSLATORS WISH YOU KNEW

BY RACHEL A. DAVIS  
Member

If you're a technical writer with more than, oh, say, forty-five minutes of experience in writing for international audiences, you've likely encountered the frustrations and challenges that often come with multi-language translation. So what are the secrets to a stress-free and productive translation experience? How can you make sure that you're getting the best value for your money, while ensuring that misunderstandings and schedule delays are kept at bay?

To find out, I asked Kristin Constantineau and Cyle Hajek, directors at International Language Services (ILS), a multi-language translation and localization firm in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Kristin and Cyle have over fourteen years of combined translation experience, and they know how to smooth the process. Here are the top nine things they want you to know before you submit your next translation project:

## 1. Keep translations in mind throughout your writing process.

Writing with translation in mind is more than knowing which languages you'll support. It means paying attention to all those nuances and often-overlooked details of writing that vary from culture to culture. Use the following guidelines to ensure a translation-friendly writing style.

### Don'ts:

- Avoid making unnecessary culture- or location-specific references. Time

zones, units of measure, and national holidays are particularly troublesome. Sports analogies should be strictly avoided.

- Avoid jargon and clichés. For international readers, these are ambiguous and confusing at best, meaningless and baffling at worst.
- Avoid references to fiction or myth, which are unlikely to be understood outside their country of origin.
- Don't include complex similes and metaphors, no matter how clever they might be in English! Chances are, your wit won't translate across cultures.
- If possible, avoid the use of homographs (words that have the same spelling but different meanings or pronunciations). These words can cause problems for writers, translators, and readers alike!
- Avoid using excessive noun strings. The nature of technical writing lends itself easily to cumbersome strings of nouns and their descriptors. It's hard to avoid. Keep in mind, though, that if it's potentially confusing in English, it's probably doubly confusing when translated.

### Do's:

- Use short, concise, and complete sentences. Simple sentences are easier to translate and understand.
- Use a formal tone. Maintaining a formal writing style offers a sense of respect and credibility for both domestic and international readers.
- Locate phrases next to the words they modify. This simple step will save your

audience lots of backtracking and re-reading.

- Repeat nouns instead of referring back to them. Too many references across sentences and paragraphs can cause confusion for even the most proficient reader.
- Leave lots of extra space in your documents to permit expansion during translation. Translated documents can require up to 30 percent more space than their English counterparts. Keep this in mind when writing and laying out your English text. According to Cyle Hajek, ILS's director of quality, "Keep your writing and your layout simple. It's going to get bigger anyway, so don't make it more unwieldy than it already is."
- Keep your language simple. While you undoubtedly have an impressive vocabulary, save your more obscure usage for the English-major types who will appreciate it. Readers of technical manuals want information as quickly and simply as possible. Period.
- Use complete clauses or complete sentences when making lists. Incomplete sentences are often problematic when it's time for translation.
- Hyphenate phrases or noun strings that modify other words. Using hyphens might look awkward at times, but it provides a very clear indicator of what's being modified.

## 2. Leverage your translation memory with consistent terminology.

If you want to save money and take advantage of your translation memory,

use consistent terminology throughout your manual. Better yet, use that same terminology (wherever possible) across multiple documents as well. Leveraging your translation memory in this way will simplify the job for everyone. It's often easiest to create boilerplate or "standard" text in sections like *Safety* or *Warranty*. If identical features are shared across multiple product lines, meet with all relevant project team members ahead of time to agree on a standard text for those features. This will save lots of translation time and money later.

**3. Choose the right application for your documentation—and use that application properly.**

Let's face it: Microsoft *Word* is probably not the best option for your graphics-intensive 350-page maintenance manual. But you'd be surprised at how many translation clients will submit just such a manual, complete with text-rich graphics already embedded. Most translators prefer a document with "live text" instead of one with cross-references, tags, and other predefined variables. Some of these English-language software time-savers end up costing time and creating confusion during the translation process.

**4. Never underestimate the importance of pictures.**

Effective photographs, diagrams, and illustrations can do more to create a clear understanding than even the most competent, graceful, and savvy writing. A picture really is worth a thousand words (and thousands of dollars in translation costs!). An important note here: It's usually best to avoid embedding text within your graphics, so the graphics don't require additional updates. Instead, use text boxes outside of graphics.

**5. Understand the difference between translating for publication and translating for information.**

According to the American Translators Association (ATA), there's a significant difference between translating "for

publication" and "for information." Translating for information means providing a technically accurate but unpolished translation that's "good enough to understand." In a "for information" translation, the finer details of good writing (smooth transitions between ideas, consistent terminology, correct word order, etc.) will probably be sacrificed for speed and cost-effectiveness. In translating for publication, however, grammar and style are critical elements, along with technical accuracy. Creating a "smooth" and polished final product is the goal of "for publication" translations, which are usually preferred when customers see the final product.

**6. Finalize your text before having it translated.**

Changing your text after translation is under way will affect your cost and schedule. By ensuring that the text is final before handing it off, you'll save yourself lots of time and headaches. Of course, it's not always reasonable to expect a "final, final (no, really), final" document every time. And translators understand this. Do your best, though, to ensure that your project team signs off on a document before you submit it for translation. If they insist upon changes after the fact, make sure they understand the effect on time and budget.

**7. Talk to your translators.**

Don't just throw your project over the wall to be translated and then wait a couple of weeks to get it back. Talk to your translation team. Help them understand the project's goals, priorities, and potential pitfalls. Explain areas of text that were particularly challenging to write; they'll likely be challenging to translate as well. Discuss your company's needs, or any unique concerns you have about the project.

Also critical? Make sure your translators understand your audience. You wouldn't write for retiring medical professionals in the same way you'd write for young skateboarding enthusiasts, and neither should your translators. Make sure your translators understand the readers for whom they're writing.

**8. Ask lots of questions while you're writing.**

As a technical writer, it's your responsibility to provide clear and concise instructions for your readers. This means putting yourself in their shoes—even if those shoes are on a different continent! Ask lots of questions as you write: Could your text be interpreted in another way? Are you using simple sentences and clear language? Have you used any culturally biased language? Is the text appropriate for its intended audience and media? Your translators will probably be glad to help you make your writing translation-friendly: you'll become a better client for them, and their job will be easier in the long run.

**9. Respect foreign-language typographical conventions.**

The ATA often laments the number of translation clients who feel compelled to "adjust" foreign-language typography to bring it into line with English standards. They point out the following often-abused typographical conventions:

- French requires a space between a word and the colon that follows.
- French uses « and » for quotation marks.
- In German, nouns require capital letters.
- In Spanish and French, neither months nor days of the week require an initial capital.
- Ignoring the pesky and seemingly minor details of accents, umlauts, and ordinals can mean the difference between year (año) and anus (ano).

Following these nine rules will mean a better writing process for you, a quicker and more efficient production process for your translators, and a more enjoyable experience for your readers. Happy translating! **i**

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*Rachel Davis, a member of the Twin Cities Chapter STC, is a freelance writer in Minneapolis and owner of Red Dog Writing Services ([www.reddogwriting.com](http://www.reddogwriting.com)). She specializes in nonfiction writing, with an acute interest in technical and historical subject matter. She can be reached at [rachel@reddogwriting.com](mailto:rachel@reddogwriting.com).*