Tips on Writing for Translation
The basic rule for writing materials that will be translated into foreign languages is this: Make your language as clear, straightforward, and unambiguous as possible. Whether the translation will be done by professional translators, machine translation, or a combination of both, the quality of the source text is the key to ensuring a smooth and accurate translation process.

This white paper gives you some tips to help you write materials that will be translation-ready. These tips are especially relevant for business and technical writing. (In marketing materials, especially ad campaigns, you may often need to break these rules. Translating advertising may require transcreation rather than more literal translation.)
**Word Choice**

**Be consistent**
You may have learned in writing class to vary your word choice in order to make your writing more interesting. When you are writing for translation, however, it is better to consistently use the same words to convey the same concept. You could say that a CD was “inserted,” “placed” or “loaded” into a CD player, but it's better if you pick one verb and stick to it. Consistent word choice also makes human translation less expensive. Most translators use a translation memory (a database of previously translated terms and phrases) to avoid translating the same words over and over again, and they charge for repeated content at reduced rates.

**Stick to primary meanings**
Choose your words according to their primary dictionary meaning. For example, the primary meaning of “meet” is “encounter,” not “satisfy.” Sticking to primary meanings will make your word choice more consistent. This does not mean that you can’t use language metaphorically. As long as the metaphor is based on the primary dictionary meaning of the word, there should not be a problem. For example, even translation software recognized the meaning of “bridge” in the sentence, “We can help bridge the differences between Asian and Australian business.”
Word Choice (cont.)

Avoid idioms

Every language has idiomatic expressions that are really shorthand for longer sentences (“Later.” instead of “I’ll see you later.”) or are metaphors (“Cat got your tongue?”). These types of expressions vary not only by language, but also by locality. A literal translation of such a phrase may be meaningless or unintentionally humorous to a foreign audience and there may be no real equivalent in the other language.

The same rule applies to metaphors based on sports or other things that might not be familiar in other cultures. Saying that someone “hit a home run” as a metaphor for success would not necessarily translate and, if it did translate, would probably not resonate as well in another culture.
Phrasing

**Use articles where possible**

Use definite and indefinite articles wherever possible. Some technical writers have been taught to omit articles for the sake of brevity, but this also sacrifices clarity.

**Avoid using nouns as adjectives**

In English, we often use a noun to modify another noun ("That dress color suits you"). Sometimes this results in a series of nouns strung together ("university plant biology research center"). A noun string can be hard for English-speakers to unscramble, but it is even harder for translators—human or software. It’s better to reword the phrase ("The color of that dress" or "the university’s center for research on plant biology").

**Don’t omit “that”**

Using “that” as a relative pronoun or as a conjunction, even when you can omit it in English, is actually helpful for translation because it clarifies the intent of the sentence. For example, write “the car that he bought” or “I knew that he bought the car.”

**Avoid phrasal verbs**

Verb combinations, such as “set up” or “shut down,” are called phrasal verbs. Such phrases can be hard to avoid in English, but they often create problems for translators and translation software. Try to replace them with simple verbs ("establish an office" instead of "set up an office").

**Use nouns, not pronouns**

Repeat a noun instead of using a backward-referring pronoun like “it,” “they,” “this,” or “these”. Repeating the noun ensures that the reference is clear.
Sentence Structure

Identify the actor
Style rules advise writers to avoid passive voice, but passive voice is appropriate in some cases and is necessary when the “doer” cannot be identified. However, whether you use active or passive voice, identify the person doing the action if that is possible. The identity of the actor can make a difference in how a verb is translated. “Bob painted this room” or “This room was painted by Bob.”

Use parallel construction
It is particularly important in writing for translation to make sure that equal parts of a sentence share the same structure. For example, the sentence “Her job is filing, typing and to open the mail” is problematic; two gerunds are followed by an infinitive. Be sure that you consistently use parallel construction (“filing, typing and opening the mail”), even to the point of repeating structural elements (“by writing for translation and by maximizing the efficiency of translation software”).

Punctuate correctly
Incorrect use of punctuation can completely change the meaning of a sentence, as illustrated by the joke about the koala bear that goes into a bar, eats, shoots, and leaves. Check your punctuation carefully. In particular, make sure you separate subordinate phrases and clauses from main clauses with commas.
Sentence Structure (cont.)

Be careful with modifier placement
Dangling and misplaced modifying phrases are common mistakes in English. Sometimes the meaning may be clear from the context, but software cannot tell. Very often misplaced or dangling modifiers confuse human readers as well. Make sure that the sentence includes the noun or pronoun that a modifying phrase relates to. Place modifying phrases near the nouns or pronouns that they modify. Consider this sentence which has entertained school children for years:

George Washington wrote his Farewell Address while riding to Washington on the back of an envelope.

The phrase “on the back of an envelope” relates to the verb “wrote” and should be near it.

George Washington wrote his Farewell Address on the back of an envelope while riding to Washington.

Convert lists
Bulleted or numbered lists of items that follow from an introductory sentence fragment are a problem for translation software. Translation software cannot relate each item to the introduction, and many readers have the same problem. Wherever possible, convert each list item into a phrase, sentence or clause. Remember to include the correct punctuation when doing this conversion.
Brevity & Clarity

In addition to these specific rules, keep in mind that translators charge by the word. Conciseness is generally a good thing in business and technical writing, but when you are writing for translation, a word saved is money saved. Keep your writing as tight as possible.

Many of the tips given in this paper may seem to violate ideas of brevity. Brevity is important in writing for translation; translation is usually charged by the word; however, clarity and the elimination of ambiguity are even more important for the translation process. Ambiguity leads machine translation systems to guess at your meaning (usually incorrectly) and it leads translators to ask numerous questions, slowing down the translation process. Be concise, but not at the expense of meaning.

_Brevity may be the soul of wit, but wit doesn’t always translate well._
Checklist for Writing/Editing for Translation

☐ Consistent word choice: Is the same word or phrase used consistently to convey the same content?

☐ Primary meaning: Are words used in their primary dictionary meaning?

☐ Idioms: Have idiomatic usages been eliminated?

☐ Articles: Are “a,” “an,” and “the” used wherever possible?

☐ Nouns as adjectives: Have nouns that are used as adjectives been replaced by possessives or modifying phrases wherever possible?

☐ “That”: Has the word “that” as a relative pronoun or conjunction always been included rather than assumed?

☐ Phrasal verbs: Have simple verbs been used to replace verb phrases?

☐ Pronouns: Have nouns been repeated rather than replaced with pronouns?

☐ Actors: Are the actual “doers” specified for each verb where possible?

☐ Parallel construction: Do equal parts of sentences always share the same structure?

☐ Punctuation: Is punctuation always used appropriately?

☐ Modifiers: Have you checked for and corrected any dangling or misplaced modifying phrases?

☐ Lists: Are bulleted lists made up of free-standing sentences, clauses, or phrases?
Further Reading

