Content Creation

Technical Writing for Translation

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Technical writing and content creation are difficult enough tasks in their own right and finding the right technology specialist agency that can consistently produce quality content is not easy. Add to that the need to then turn that quality content into material suitable for use around the world - in an array of languages - and the problem gets a lot bigger.

This document gives a range of things to consider and use to allow your technical content to be the best it can be in any language whether you plan to use a locally based technical translator or just Google translate.

Technical writing for automated translation

Although the Internet has succeeded in bringing the technology community together, this community still speaks many different languages. As a result, when information is only available in an unfamiliar language, the common response is to use a free online translation tool, such as Google Translate. With this in mind, the need to produce clearly written communications has never been greater.

Indeed when budgets won't allow for translation into multiple languages, blogs and websites can use widgets such as global translator that will automate and cache the pages effectively creating a 48 language website effortlessly. As long it is clearly stated that the translation has been done automatically it is rare to see a complaint, but the benefits can be significant.

Of course, it's well known that online translation tools lack attributes such as 'tone' and 'suggestion'. However, there are ways to help improve automated translation. For instance, sentences should always be clear and concise. Keep well away from slang terms, colloquialisms, neologisms and ambiguities, as well as any unnecessary clauses, fragments or run-on sentences. Similarly, idioms, proverbs and figures of speech that are well known in English may have absolutely no relevance in another language, particularly when translated automatically. (German speakers get a blue eye rather than a black one and sleep like a marmot rather than a log. Don't forget 'you can't teach an old dog new tricks in English', but *auf Deutsch* what little Johnny can't learn, old John will never learn. (Was Hänschen nicht gelernt hat, lernt Hans nimmermehr.)

Furthermore, do not split compound verbs and always use common vocabulary. Additionally many people find that non-technical translation services will translate word for word and even translate technical terms that ought to remain in English - 'user-friendly' being translated into amichevole in Italian for example (meaning friendly as in a person!)

Like most things it is best to keep it simple and stick to one idea at a time: bite-size chunks of information are far easier to translate than long, complex sentences strung together with commas and semicolons. Always explain abbreviations and acronyms in full. It is also a good idea to assess whether key words or concepts you are mentioning have homonyms in other languages. Otherwise the result can be downright rude - or funny at best. In Spanish for example, the term 'fresa' means as much strawberry as...

Using a consistent word or term for a product or process is especially important in technical writing. In English, writers often prefer to avoid repetition, but this can confuse speakers of other languages as well as online translation tools, so a happy balance is needed. Incidentally, the same is true with business concepts. Modern French - especially Belgian French - makes heavy uses of English words, be it 'management buy-out' or 'Chief Executive Officer'.

One test of writing for translation is to use an online tool to 'back-translate', which will give a clear idea of comprehension, though the ultimate test is to find a local distributor or sales office executive that can check for you. You may even ask if they are happy to translate the material in the first place, although true technical translation is an art not a science and, as with writing, some people are better than others. Also beware - many sales people can't help themselves when it comes to modifying text so you may also need to ensure that they avoid the temptation and that text remains on brief.

Writing for automation checklist:

The following rules will stand you in good stead when working with real-life, 'flesh and blood' translators, but they become critical where your finely honed prose is set to be translated by a computer.

- Use short sentences. Keep it simple.
- Cut the clauses. Ditch the sentence fragments. Simple sentences and grammatical structure (subject-object-verb) are the only way to go.
- Avoid ambiguity, as in "I saw her duck." Well, which is it? A duck that quacks that belongs to her? Or was she avoiding a flying object?
- Look for multiple meanings when proofing. Good luck. If you don't find it, your tool may just do it for you.
- Remove extra words. Editing out unessential phrases and extra words will make for a simpler, better translation. Since the algorithms have fewer translation variables to wrestle with and better style with fewer words in the translation, it will also be more accurate.
- Don't remove necessary words, and don't go too far with editing. In English we drop a lot of words when we write, especially when writing informally. Keep those articles, prepositions, pronouns and so on where the machine can find them. English speakers are able to fill in the blanks and fully understand — not so when the reader is a translation engine.
- Misspelling does not compute. A misspelled word will not translate — end of story, end of translation.
- Ditto on punctuation. One accidental full stop can completely change the meaning of a sentence and trash your translation.
- Spell-checking and proofreading after you write and before you translate are pretty basic quality assurance steps.
- Slang is so like, whatever. No slang and no jokes for an automatic translation. The words 'lost in translation' could not have been more appropriate for irony. Stay earnest and formal. That's why 'witty' headlines and snappy editorial copy so often translate badly with these tools. Rule of thumb: Good automatic translation style comes in one flavour . . . plain vanilla.
- Use "Do not translate" coding. Some tools will allow you to place code around a word or phrase, which allows the word to pass through the engine without getting translated.
- Check your translation. Translate the output back using a different auto translation tool. That reverse translation may help you to spot the most glaring errors. Recast those problem sentences in English and see if the back translation gets any clearer. Don't expect miracles here. But it may be some comfort to know that the original translation is better than the back translation.

- Keep source and target together. No garbage in the tool, less garbage out.
- But garbage there will be. That's why we like to keep a copy of the source with the target translation to create a bilingual output so that those errors can be spotted and corrected later if need be.
- Identify what you used to do an automatic translation. Avoid blame by giving credit. Letting people know that you used a machine to communicate with them allows them to read with caution, and keeps them from feeling they've been short-changed on a real translation.

Thanks to **www.scribd.com** for some of these.

Writing for a technical translator

So that's the one size fits all method dealt with!

Traditionally the best methods to get your message across are to use a technical translation company or a network of technical translators or technically qualified individuals in each country. Our experience is that you will end up using both of these depending on your technologies and markets.

A technical translation company has many benefits not least that they will take one piece of content and deliver multiple pieces back with a single invoice. However, experience typically will lead you to find that as they will use a different individual in each region some translations will be better than others. Not only that, because they have access to different people to do the work, this week's French may be excellent and next weeks awful.

Things to consider when using a technical translation company

1. Will the same translator do every piece of work in one language? Translators will learn from their mistakes and from what you want. It is important to feedback your changes so they can review them and then learn from them. You don't want a translator to be repeating the same mistakes over and over.

2. Do they really have an expert in your field? Just like tech agencies, technical translators can be working on a variety of topics. You don't want a person do translations for camera manuals one day and semiconductors the next, sandwiched with pieces on composite milling.

3. Can they provide it back to you in the format you want? If you send it in Word then you will expect it back in the same. The same goes for In Design and Quark Xpress!

4. Word list. It is a great idea to keep a living word list. So for each English word you keep a readily available list of what the word or phrase should be in each language. Best to keep on a shared area so multiple people can add to and amend it. This is also an excellent starting point for your multi-language SEO.

5. Deadlines - as the companies are subcontracting the work typically turnaround times can be quite long and 'flexible'!

Things to consider when using a network of specialist translators or technically qualified individuals

1. Make sure they don't translate word for word or translate technical words that will stay in English. At least if they do they will hopefully only do it once! Don't forget to use your word list and keep it up to date.

2. Be aware that translators are well known to change the interpretation of the message. If that is OK great, but if your corporate headquarters wants a global message then be aware!

3. Make sure they are based in the country and are a native speaker, languages change and you don't want your content to sound like it was written in 1950!

A cut out and keep summary
Follow technical writing best practices, including:

1. Write short, clear sentences. Limit dependant clauses. One thought per sentence helps translators and increases savings from translation memory matches.

2. Avoid idiomatic expressions. These are more easily misinterpreted.

3. Avoid cultural references. They may not work across borders.

4. Make sure symbols are internationally recognized. Don't assume that a symbol has the same meaning in other markets.

5. Use automation. Use automation in your documents for Table of Contents (TOCs), Indices (IX), cross-references, variables and internal/external links. Also, make sure to use style sheets so that any updates or resizing can be automatically applied.

6. Prepare for text expansion. Most languages are 20% longer than English, so remember to account for text expansion when designing or creating your original printed piece, including artwork, graphics or charts. Also consider that your documents may need to be resized (U.S. letter sizes are normally converted to A4 for foreign markets).

7. Link your graphics. Whenever possible, try to link graphics in a document rather than embed them. This simplifies replacement in localized versions and future updates. Linking graphics also reduces file size, which is friendlier to use with translation tools.

8. Provide editable source files. Providing editable/layered source files, including images, is critical to smooth localization of artwork for printed materials. If no editable source files are provided, re-creation will most likely be necessary prior to localization, which can add considerable time and cost to the project.

9. Compress your files. Compress all files when delivering electronically. Compression helps protect corruption-prone fonts and speeds transmission. Also cross platform issues can appear if the files are not zipped.

10. Provide instructions. When handing off files to your translation provider, be sure to define the scope of the project, tools and versions as well as the desired deliverables. Specify any information needed to generate deliverables including output format (PDFs, HTML, image types, etc.) and settings.

11. Organize your file submissions. File submissions should include all relevant files for translation in working condition and should not include extraneous or unused files. An organized folder structure aids enormously in efficient localization by ensuring that unwanted files are not processed or, conversely, necessary files are missed. Messy structures can also delay project kickoffs and create technical issues such as broken links, which in turn causes compiling errors.

12. Get rid of returns. Avoid using hard and soft returns within sentences. Using them will add extra time at the localization stage as broken sentences cause difficulties for the translation team and their tools.

13. Avoid ambiguous words and jargon. Jargon is technical terminology that has been modified by those in a particular profession. It assumes both technical and local knowledge and is idiomatic to a particular professional 'culture'. Jargon is a 'short-cut' but only for those few who know it, and is inappropriate for international content.

14. Spell out a term's acronym on the first occurrence, followed by the acronym in parentheses. Subsequent usage can be confined to the use of the acronym. In non-linear documentation (such as on-line help), where material is unlikely to be read sequentially, a term should be spelled out on the first occurrence for each topic in which it appears.

15. Use words with a precise meaning. Unambiguous terminology aids understanding. For example, use 'Install the application' rather than 'Set up the application'.

16. Do not use verbs as nouns. For example, 'This function gives an analysis of the problem and offers a solution.' The nouns 'analysis' and 'solution' convey most of the meaning in this sentence, while the verbs 'gives' and 'offers' are practically meaningless. A better sentence would be: 'This function analyzes the problem and solves it'.

Conclusion

With over twenty years' experience of providing technical translations for technology companies we have come to see them as a true art form. If done well they can greatly improve engagement with your target audience, but if done badly they can turn what was an excellent piece of work into something worthy of ridicule. Hopefully the points in this document will help you in selecting good technical translators whatever tech market you operate in.

Although of course you can save yourself the trouble by using a technology marketing agency that employs local language speakers and uses all the techniques and practices above.

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