

Technical Writing:

8 Tips to Make Your Texts Translatable



Technical Writing: Are You Writing in a Translatable Way?

For many companies, technical documentation is a considerable expense. Add in the cost of translation and a project can quickly go over budget. However, technical writers and editors can avoid this by making a few simple changes to the writing process. Creating an editorial guide, for instance, is one of the most important. This white paper provides a few guidelines about how to create an editorial guide that ensures technical writing is suitable for translation.

Many of the problems that crop up during translation and significantly impair quality can be traced back to problems in the source text. These problems can be corrected in technical documentation by following a few basic rules of thumb.

Technical writing is considered suitable for translation when the fact that it will later be translated into one or more languages is taken into account during the writing process. Many linguistic and non-linguistic features of a text affect its translatability. On the linguistic level, factors such as clarity and textual consistency are crucial. In addition, technical features such as file format and text formatting influence a text's compatibility with translation tools such as translation memory systems (TMS). Furthermore, a text that is culturally neutral is easier to translate without inadvertent changes in meaning.

POST-EDITING IS COSTLY

Technical editors who take the issue of translatability seriously during the writing process avoid additional costs that may arise during or after translation. This can lead to considerable savings depending on the number of languages into which a text is translated. Furthermore, post-editing costs time and increases the likelihood of errors during the translation process.

This approach also benefits the quality of the source text since factors such as clarity, understandability and terminological consistency are equally important in the source text. A source text that is straightforward and free of error significantly increases its translatability.

SIMPLE YET EFFECTIVE CHANGES

In general, following basic principles of rule-based writing ensures a solid foundation for a high-quality translation. Textual inconsistencies, run on sentences, unnecessarily complicated language and inconsistent terminology should be avoided from the outset.

General pointers such as consistent use of spellcheck, logical organization of process-based information and avoidance of filler words may be obvious to some technical editors – just as submitting the final version of a text for translation should be obvious. However, experience shows that these seemingly obvious pointers often bear repeating.

KEEP IT IN CONTEXT

An editorial guide that includes authoritative guidelines and sentence templates provides editors with a very useful resource. Such a guide should always contain a section about making technical writing suitable for translation.

In order to determine what is important when writing a text that will eventually be translated, it is helpful to have a basic understanding of both the translation workflow and the tools that are used during translation. Nowadays, technical translations always use a translation memory system. Put simply, a translation memory system is like a large database of cataloged translations in which text segments from the source text and their equivalents in the target language are saved in pairs, known as “matches.” Thus, it is important to consider the issue of segmentation and provide a list of symbols and character formatting that can be used by the translation system to define segment boundaries. Using symbols and formatting characters carelessly can cause sentences and ideas that belong together to break apart and lose coherence. These symbols include graphic anchors, manual hyphens or tabs.

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CONSISTENCY INCREASES MATCH EXACTNESS

It is important to use accurate grammatical references in order to avoid misunderstandings. Segment boundaries in a translation memory system usually correspond to sentence breaks. In order for the system to yield a high match rate, which allows more text to be reused, grammatical references should be unambiguous. Demonstrative and personal pronouns that refer to entities not contained in the sentence should be avoided.

Consistency is the most important aspect of a successful translation. If segments of text are identical in the source text yet formatted differently, or if content is the same yet worded differently, the translation memory system's ability to recognize it is drastically reduced. It is essential to include this pointer in an editorial guide. Technical documentation that lacks consistent wording is usually difficult to comprehend. Besides that, it also decreases the match rate, which from a translator's point of view is a very valuable aid. This not only increases the likelihood of error, but also inadvertently raises costs. This is because matches are generated automatically by the translation memory system and their cost is usually prorated accordingly. If the translation tool is unable to identify the previously translated source text because it has been inconsistently translated or formatted, the cost of translation will be the same as if the text were brand new. This can make translating lengthy documentation into a large number of languages quite pricey.

AVOID CULTURAL SPECIFICITY

Conveying information in a culturally neutral manner is another important consideration. It is easy to overlook cultural references, which, for instance, are often hidden in gender-specific wording, jargon, references to country-specific standards and/or geographically or culturally specific representations. Therefore, it is important for editors to develop a feeling for cultural references. When using pictograms and symbols, editors should be aware that certain signs and symbols may elicit different meanings in different cultures.

ESTABLISH AND ENFORCE TERMINOLOGY

It is a good idea to devote a special chapter to the topic of terminology. Using pre-defined corporate terminology ensures consistency in the source and target texts. Ambiguous terminology, unnecessary Anglicisms and indecipherable abbreviations can cause misunderstandings and hinder the flow of the text. Such abbreviations lead not just to clarification queries from the translator, but in the worst-case scenario, to confusion for the eventual user. Web-based or file-based term lists and glossaries that can be searched as references are a good way to remedy this problem. Ideally, the terminology will have been defined for each target language prior to translation of the actual documentation. The desired terminology for the translation project can then be provided to translators in the form of term databases. Translators should also receive a key for abbreviations contained in the source text in advance.

DEFINE STEPS FOR FURTHER PROCESSING

Non-linguistic problems can likewise be minimized in advance. A comprehensive editorial guide should also include a section devoted to file formats and layout. When authors write or edit texts, it is important to use file formats and formatting that is easy to process. Current translation memory systems support most common word processing formats and layout programs, as well as XML or HTML exports from content management systems. Non-editable exports such as locked PDF files or CSV and Excel files with multiple columns are not ideal for translation and often cause problems when converting the files back into their original format.

ENSURE PROPER LENGTH

Texts usually have to fit within text fields that have a limited amount of space and/or line restrictions. The fact that texts are often longer after translation is frequently overlooked. Therefore, it is important not to use up all the space in text fields in the source text. This ensures that technical editors can prevent truncated texts and avoid making adjustments to the text layout in the target language (Fig. 1).

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industry



40.8%

Activaciones de implantaciones
empresariales en iPad para
servicios financieros: índice cuatro
veces superior al de cualquier otro
sector



Fig. 01

TAKEAWAYS

GUIDELINES



Technical

- Consistent formatting
- Use of segment delimiters
- Cultural neutrality
- Layout and space reserves
- Fonts and character sets
- Appropriate file formats
- Final verification



Linguistic

- Segment boundaries
- Consistent wording
- Pronominal references
- Terminology lists
- Abbreviations keys
- Non-translatable text and brand names
- References and style rules



Rule-based writing

- Logical sequences
- Short sentences
- Sentence construction
- Filler words, empty phrases, jargon
- Consistency verification



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Conclusion

Each and every employee can contribute to ensuring high-quality translations. Clearly written, culturally neutral documentation in a format that is easy to edit not only improves the ability for translators to accurately render the source text in another language, but also simplifies data exchange and makes for a seamless transfer between various editing environments. In order to make the translation process as smooth as possible, priority should be given to establishing clear work procedures, which also prevents the need for queries. A well-thought-out editorial guide that is geared toward employee needs is key to ensuring a successful translation process. No editorial guide is complete without a section on translatability.

Straightforward guidelines and procedures reduce ambiguity, lift employee morale, save time and increase productivity. Clearly worded messages increase the end customer's satisfaction – regardless of the language or target market.

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About text&form

text&form was founded in 1996 by four translators with a passion for language. It has since grown organically to become a language service provider at the forefront of the translation industry. We are committed to providing our customers with high-quality translations and customized solutions to ensure that they can deliver the highest quality content possible. In any language they need.

Today text&form serves its global customers from its offices in Germany and Canada.

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