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Technical translation:
the essentials

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Preparing the right technical documentation for your products is a huge and complicated task. How do you make these documents available in a wide range of languages? What are the essential elements you should take into account? How do you organise your translation and choose the right partners?

This mini-guide is intended to point you in the right direction. Our mini-guide is subdivided into three steps.

1. Firstly, we define the field of technical translation.
2. Secondly, we look at the specifics of technical translation.
3. Finally, we talk about the qualities of a good technical translator.

This gives you a guide to take all these factors into account when choosing or evaluating your partner.

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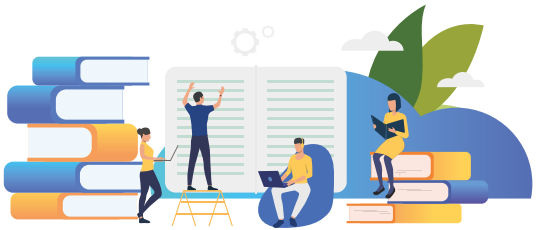
1. What is technical translation?

Admittedly, the term 'technical translation' is a broad concept, and in a sense, any translation is technical. However, we would like to specifically address the translation of documents by technical authors (instruction guides, user manuals, etc.) or more specifically: texts related to the practical application of scientific and technological information.

Making a mistake is not an option at all: mistakes and misinterpretations can have dramatic consequences. The first things that come to mind are medical devices, the pharmaceutical industry and the impact on a patient if the prescribing information contains errors. But the risks involved with a translation error in mechanical engineering or construction, for example, can also be just as far-reaching. An imprecise or incorrect translation could mean that vital information is missed out. And that could result in the improper use of machinery, potentially resulting in an accident.



What makes technical translation different?

1. Specific terminology

Probably the biggest difference between technical translation and other translations lies in the use of specific terminology. Ideally, technical authors use a well-defined list of terminology to be used (or completely avoided) when writing. What are the potential consequences? The problems that crop up in relation to terminology in the mother tongue also manifest themselves when the resultant documents are translated. We often recommend capturing and translating terminology before even starting to write the source documents. By doing this, it is possible to avoid countless discussions about quality, because a clear terminology list is available from the start for the translators working on the project. We cannot therefore overemphasise that this terminology list should be used at the very outset, when writing in the source language. If there are terminological inconsistencies in the source language, how can the translator ever hope to achieve consistency? Source-language inconsistencies will make the translator's job even more difficult.

2. Writing conventions

The writing conventions that apply to technical writing in a specific language (e.g. use of the third person or the imperative) should be transposed accordingly in the translation. Some languages require a formal imperative

('vous', 'Sie', etc.), but for other languages, a more informal register is acceptable.

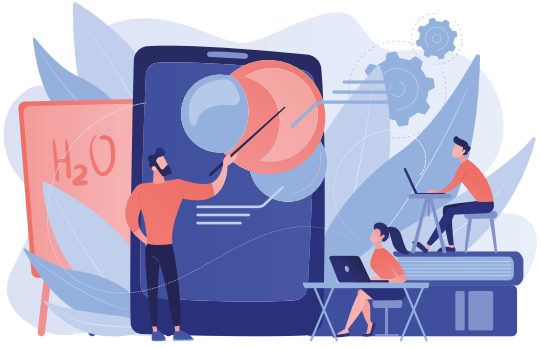
Another recommendation we make is that when writing in the source language, technical authors should avoid the potential for ambiguity and modality.

Some tips?

- Avoid double negatives, such as 'it is not impossible'
- Write in the present tense and avoid modal adverbs (such as 'unlikely') and modal verbs (such as 'may'), for example, in sentences such as 'if you apply X, Y is unlikely to come off', or 'You may have to apply X to avoid Y coming off'.

3. Specialist language, but clarified

Technical documents are often written by specialists in the subject matter. They are not necessarily linguistically proficient. A critical check of the source text at the linguistic level is therefore appropriate, checking for things such as spelling, grammar, consistency and clarity. The translator should therefore check the source text for these error types, because, as already mentioned, precision in translation is of the utmost importance.



4. Characteristic rigid structure

Technical documents often have a very rigid structure. Technical standards such as IEC/EN 82079-1 are often binding in terms of structure, in particular, what information should appear and where in the document.
The standard order is then, for example, Identification, Orientation, Safety, Description, Product life cycle, Components, Index.

2. What makes a good technical translator?

Psychological insight

Just like a technical author, a technical translator must also be an effective and efficient communicator. This is what psychologists call 'cognitive psychology'. In commonplace language, this means the technical translator needs to understand how anyone reading their translation receives and processes information. The easier it is to process information, the easier it is to remember.

Identification of the target group

Since technical documents are often action-oriented, the technical author and, of course, the technical translator need to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the target audience. At the most basic level, for example, both the technical author and the translator will want to know whether the document is aimed at an audience of specialists or the general public. Of course, this is just the beginning.

Understanding of the subject matter

A technical translator must also have a thorough understanding of the subject matter they are translating. Each technical translator develops their own specialism: some specialise in subject areas such as software, others in medical equipment and the automotive industry. Very often, technical translators continuously improve their knowledge in their chosen field. They do this by reading, attending conferences, and other ways of brushing up their skills. This way, they keep their specialist knowledge up-to-date.

Understanding of cultural and language sensitivities

Finally, like other translators, a technical translator must be alert to the specific sensitivities of the market and of the language in which they work. Some terms, more specifically abbreviations, can be quite offensive in another language, which is why we wish to avoid giving examples here.

3.What are the different types of technical translation?

A user manual is a typical example of a technical document (which needs 'technical translation'). Yet there are many other documents that have similar characteristics and require the same kind of organisation and skill to translate efficiently.

- Interactive training material, learning software
- User manuals (including the LED or non-LED interfaces of machines or applications on computers) must be translated consistently with what appears in the manual
- Patents
- Development documentation
- User research
- Security data files

This is just a brief outline of technical translation. There's a lot more to say. Much more. Therefore, consider this white paper as a starting point, to help you find your bearings.

And feel free to consult further with us on specific problems or needs within your own industry or organisation.

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