

Written Language Translator Job Description

This document outlines the competencies, qualifications, and requirements of translators. The competencies focus on the knowledge, skills, and abilities common to a broad spectrum of translators. The qualifications and requirements are based on standards in place in the United States. Therefore, English is one of the assumed working languages for this document. The authors and collaborators include representatives of several different fields and language pairs, and many statements are backed up by sources referenced at the end of the document and in endnotes.

Content

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities	1
Translation protocols	2
Spectrum of translation services	2
Ethics	4
Other factors that affect quality	4
Qualifications.....	4
Professional certification	4
Desirable qualifications.....	5
Work Environment.....	5
Translation equipment.....	5
Resources	5
Contributors	6

Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities

Translators convey meaning in written text from one language into another, with the benefit of research tools and time to review their product. They must convey the style, tone, and intent of the text, considering the target audience of the message and the context in which the translated text will be presented (e.g. a sign, a letter, or a flier). Since there are often cultural or other differences between the audiences of the source and target texts, an effective translation may involve some adjustments. Translation software (machine translation) is not able to make these adjustments. Indeed, a court case in Poland determined that free machine translation is not equivalent to professional translation.ⁱ

The Interagency Language Roundtable (ILR) skill level descriptions for translation performance state that, "Translation is the process of transferring text from one language into another. It is a complex skill requiring several abilities. Consequently, extreme care must be exercised in hiring qualified translators or assigning translation tasks to them. To do otherwise entails the risk that imprecise or even wrong information will be conveyed."ⁱⁱ

According to the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) Standard for Quality Assurance in Translation F2575-14, "The process of translation begins with a text (called the source text) and results in the creation of a text (called the target text) in another language. The aim of the process is to produce a target text (called the translation) that corresponds to the source text, according to the criteria agreed upon in advance."ⁱⁱⁱ

The translator, by necessity, is a reader who interprets the text in the source language and transfers the message as they understand it to the other language.^{iv} Therefore, the translator is, in fact, the co-creator of a new text in a different language and must take seriously all aspects of understanding the written message and drafting the new message. Today, the text a translator sends can be read in a variety of media besides the one originally intended, and can be published and quoted in a variety of locations beyond the original one. Translators need to bear this in mind.^v

Translation is a complex task that combines several abilities. The translator must be able to do all three of the following:

- 1) Read and comprehend the source language in enough depth to understand all the nuances of the message.
- 2) Write with native and professional command of the target language in order to clearly communicate the nuances of the source message to a speaker of the target language.
- 3) Choose the equivalent expression that conveys, as closely as possible, the meaning of the source language message (congruity judgment).

Translation protocols

If there is any ambiguity or a meaning is unclear, translators request clarification from those who requested the translation, in order to ensure that the underlying meaning of the source text is transferred accurately into the target language. This is particularly important in legal copy, operation manuals, taglines, signs, etc.

Spectrum of translation services

Translation is what translators do with a document such as a legal brief, medical record, or birth certificate, in which they translate each section exactly as it appears is in the source document. There is little room for adaptation. In contrast, literary translation requires more flexibility as well as exceptional creative writing skills.

Localization is the adaptation of a translation in order to fit the region and culture where it will be used. The localizer takes into account a wide range of considerations, from spelling and terminology to cultural references.

Transcreation focuses on the underlying message in order to recreate it in the target language and culture. A highly creative service, transcreation is most often used in advertising and marketing texts.

Sight translation, the oral rendition of a written document into a target language, is a mode of interpretation^{vi} and is not performed by translators. Sight translation is for informational purposes only and cannot substitute a written translation.

Machine translation (MT) refers to translation produced by software. Although the quality of MT is improving, it is not able to properly communicate messages with significant nuance. It may serve for predictive, routine text, but not for documents with complex syntaxes or in which words can have more than one meaning. Post editing of machine translation (PEMT) should be done by a professional translator, trained in the review of MT, with the source document at hand. Additionally, the suitability of MT should be carefully evaluated for any materials containing confidential information.^{vii}

Back translation is a review process used for quality assurance in regulatory and other environments. It refers to the translation of a final translated document back into the source language, with no reference to the original document. The purpose is to check that the message is conveyed accurately and completely. The requester should expect to receive a document that conveys the same message in a different way.

Note: When translating a text, the translator may come across issues that require discussion. For example:

- If a radio advertisement must be read in sixty seconds, but the translated text reads in ninety, the translator may need to confer with the requester to determine how to best adjust the length of the text.
- When translating posters or similar pieces, space issues should be taken into account and any necessary alterations discussed with the requester.
- In the United States, descriptive names are often assigned to programs or teams. For example, the translated names of swimming lessons at a recreation facility might cause confusion at enrollment time. If so, it might be best to translate the descriptions but leave the names of the lessons in English.
- When translating program descriptions for a brochure, translators might check to see if the programs are offered in the target language. If a target-language speaker attends a program; will they be able to participate? If not, it might be advisable to insert a line reading, "Sessions in English."

Ethics

Translators who belong to a professional association are required to affirm that they will abide by the Code of Ethics of that association. Codes of ethics typically mention confidentiality and accuracy, as well as working within the scope of one's skills and qualifications. The following are sample codes of ethics for translators:

[American Translators Association Code of Ethics](#)

[Association of Translators and Interpreters of Ontario Code of Ethics](#)

[AUSIT Code of Ethics and Code of Conduct](#)

Other factors that affect quality

The following factors will also affect the quality of the translation:

- Time allotted for the translation. This may involve time to research terminology specific to the subject matter.
- Subject matter expertise on the topic being translated.
- Knowledge of the writing principles used to communicate in the field of a particular topic.
- Review by a second, equally qualified, translator. Written publications are typically reviewed by an editor, and this includes translations.

Qualifications

Professional certification

Translators achieve their certification by passing a written exam that tests performance skills in translation in a specific language pair (for example, English to German). Certification exams are designed to reflect the realities of the field.^{viii} The exams evaluate a translator's ability to accurately communicate a message from one language into another language, with minor errors in syntax and vocabulary, so the document is clear and usable for the target audience.

Certified translators can provide documentation showing the certifying or assessment body, subject matter expertise, and the specific language combination levels assessed.

In the United States, translation testing is provided by the American Translators Association (ATA) and government agencies, such as the US Department of State or the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services.

Translators maintain their certification through continuing education credits and are bound by a code of professional conduct.

Instructional courses, on the other hand, provide certificates for participants.^{ix} These include short courses (certificate of attendance) as well as degree programs at universities (certificate of completion, diploma or degree).

When no certification exams are available through the ATA or government agencies for a given language, the requisite skills mentioned above could be tested by a qualified public or private entity.

Although interpreters and translators typically need at least a bachelor's degree, the most important requirement is to have reading and writing language proficiencies at the [ILR level 4^x](#), also called Advanced Professional Proficiency. At that level, "Errors of grammar are rare including those in low frequency, complex structures."^{xi} Job prospects should be best for those who have professional certification.

Desirable qualifications

- Bachelor's degree (four years of tertiary education)
- Translation coursework
- Professional certification of interpreting, or interpreting coursework or experience, if the translator is required to interpret

Work Environment

Translation equipment

Translators typically use the following:

Word processors such as Microsoft Word. Translators are often familiar with other software products in the Microsoft Office suite. Translating Excel and PowerPoint documents involves adjustments to space constraints for readability.

Computer Assisted Translation (CAT) tools utilize a translation database called a translation memory. This database is created by the translator, the language service provider, or the end client.

Properly used, CAT tools help the translator record previously researched terminology and phraseology to ensure consistency for the end client. Occasionally, translators are asked to work with a package created by someone else that has locked segments translated by others. Translators must do a final edit in the target file format or website to ensure accuracy and make final readability adjustments for the target audience. This may involve shortening phrases and changing their order and syntax, or changing segments altogether to match images.

For millennia, translation has facilitated international relations, trade, and the dissemination of literature, science, art and law. In today's world of technology and instant communications, fields and subject areas may have changed and the way the work is performed does not cease to evolve, but the need for skilled, professional translators remains the same.

Resources

- [Before you hire / ask yourself: "What are my project's needs?"](#) Translation and Interpretation Procurement Series, Federal Coordination and Compliance Section, May 2014
- [What does it mean to be a certified linguist?](#) Translation and Interpretation Procurement Series, Federal Coordination and Compliance Section, May 2014

- [ILR Skill Level Descriptions for Translation Performance](#), Interagency Language Roundtable
- [Translators do the writing](#) (American Translators Association)
- [T&I Descriptions](#), NAJIT, 2016

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ⁱ [Poland Rules on LSP Using Google Translate; Defines 'Professional Translator'](#), Slator News, February 16, 2021

ⁱⁱ [Interagency Language Roundtable Skill Level Descriptions for Translation Performance](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [ASTM F2575-14 Standard Guide for Quality Assurance in Translation](#)

^{iv} Deconstructing Traditional Notions in Translation Studies, Edgar Moros, Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011

^v Moros, 2011

^{vi} [ASTM F2089-15 Standard Practice for Language Interpreting](#)

^{vii} [The Issue of Data Security and Machine Translation](#), SDL Blog, December 12, 2019

^{viii} [Validity of Psychometric Assessments](#), Psychometric Resource Center

^{ix} [Certificate, Certification, or Both?](#) Institute for Credentialing Excellence

^x [Interagency Language Roundtable Skill Level Descriptions - Writing](#)

^{xi} [Occupational Outlook Handbook: Interpreters and Translators](#)