WRITING FOR TRANSLATION

Will your text be translated? Make every word count.

This booklet is intended for writers of EU texts for translation. In it you will find tips on how to structure your texts to make them concise, unambiguous and easy to read.

It is difficult to change one's way of writing and much easier to plough on in the same old rut, even if the result is not optimal. You can always improve your writing, but self-criticism is a tricky business. This booklet offers help.

In an enlarged European Union with over 20 official languages – and the potential translation costs involved – it will be of even greater importance to make every word count.

For a text to reach its readers, it is essential for writers in a multilingual environment to keep the translator in mind. This booklet gives advice on how you can help the translator convey your words successfully. Translation is not done in a vacuum: you and the translator can help each other. Remember, your common goal is to get your message across.

Finally, we hope you will enjoy using this booklet and welcome any suggestions on how we could improve it.

The booklet is based on the Swedish document Tala för att tolkas. Skriva för att översättas, published by the Swedish Government Offices, Ministry for Foreign Affairs. The Swedish document is a translation and adaptation of the Finnish guide, Käännetäänkö tekstisi, tulkataanko puheenvuorosi?, written to celebrate the Finnish EU presidency during the second half of 1999. The authors of the original Finnish text are Aino Piehl and Inkaliisa Vihonen. Barbro Ehrenberg-Sundin is responsible for the Swedish adaptation. The Translation Centre wishes to thank these persons for permission to use their texts and for their valuable suggestions.

You will find the Finnish guide at
http://www.kotus.fi/files/581/eu-opas.pdf

and the Swedish one at
http://sweden.gov.se/content/1/c6/03/07/12/7789caef.pdf.

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1   Plan your text

Both the translator and the readers prefer texts that are informative, clear and concise.
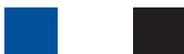
… for the sake of the translator

Give information about your subject and any useful terminology. Indicate where the translator can find other documents on the subject. Plan your writing to allow the translator enough time to do a good job. Translating is skilled work that takes time. Do not provide too many versions of the same text. If you must do so, remember to indicate which is the most recent version and mark any changes clearly in the text. The yellow highlight is particularly effective, because the changed text remains visible when printed.

... and the readers

What is the purpose of your document? After reading it, will your readers have to make a decision? Handle a certain situation? Solve a particular problem? Change their attitude towards something? Both **what** you write and **how** you write it are of crucial importance.

- Limit the contents to the information your readers actually need.

- Organise the contents in a reader-friendly manner.

- Show the reader the structure with a clear table of contents, informative headings and summaries. A list of abbreviations and a list of technical terms can also be useful (see also section 9).

This applies to practically all non-literary texts: memos, reports, letters, decisions etc. For highly formal texts such as laws and other regulatory documents, there may be more restrictions as to the contents and structure. They should still be clearly and comprehensibly written, however.

2   Emphasise what is important

Use summaries

Summarise the most important aspects of the text and place the summary first. All readers are pressed for time. The majority only have time to read the summary. The translator too benefits from having the most important aspects summarised in one place. It gives him or her an overview of what the text is about.

Explanatory headings

Headings, especially sub-headings, should also bring out the most important points of the text. A heading such as *Mergers need to be monitored more carefully* is more informative than *Monitoring mergers.*

Limit each paragraph to one idea

A new paragraph signals a new idea. Develop this new idea until you introduce the next idea in a new paragraph. Present the main message of the paragraph in the first sentence and/or sum it up at the end.

Rank your ideas

Show how important something is with phrases like *first and foremost, in spite of this, apart from this, otherwise,* or simply state it: 'The most important aspect of the proposal was… Of less importance, however…'

Expressions that have an emotional impact must be unambiguous. The following sentence: 'An act was adopted in 1997 in the field of health and safety at work, but its enforcement *leaves much to be desired.'* would be better phrased as 'An act was adopted in 1997 in the field of health and safety at work, but its enforcement is *inadequate.'*

3   Show your train of thought

Use connectors

You can connect paragraphs and sentences in many different ways, for instance with:

➡ pronouns that refer to already mentioned nouns or clauses, e.g. *she, he, it, these, that, who, which;*

➡ repetition of key words;

➡ words that introduce sub-clauses: *if, provided that, so that, since, in spite of, even though, while, when, after* etc.;

➡ other connectors such as *therefore, however, in which case, the objective is, consequently, thus, on the other hand, on the contrary, in the same way, otherwise, also, namely* etc.

Link each sentence to the next

In well-written texts, sentences often begin with an idea which is already known or has been mentioned earlier. New information is then added. The next sentence develops this new information further. Each sentence is thus anchored on the previous one and linked to the next:

‘The Council has one minister from each Member State. Which minister is appointed for a given meeting depends on the agenda. If this includes, for example, environmental matters, then the minister for the environment will attend. If, on the other hand, the meeting is about foreign policy or general political affairs, the foreign ministers attend as members of the General Affairs Council.’

4 Make sentence structure unambiguous

Avoid putting together in the same sentence several relative clauses (clauses that start with *that, who, which*). The result is usually confusing, as it is not always clear what each relative clause refers to. Think twice when using *that, who* or *which*. Is the meaning clear?

Do not write:

> The agency must ensure that *specifications for technical interfaces that are necessary* for the use of generally available networks are published at the right time.

Write instead:

> The agency must ensure that **such** *specifications for technical interfaces* **as** *are necessary* for the use of generally available networks are published at the right time.

Check that the sentence structure is unambiguous. Consider, for example: 'Of particular importance is the discussion of the abolition of the prohibition of the sale of liquor and the abuse of drugs.' How far does *abolition* stretch?

5 Avoid long sentences with a complicated structure

Vary the sentence length

Long and unwieldy sentences create many problems for the reader, so avoid squeezing too much information into each sentence. This does not mean that you should write very short sentences throughout the text. It is, in fact, not the length itself that creates reading and translation problems, but rather a surplus of contracted sentences, subordinate clauses or other intrusive phrases which hamper the readability of the text.

Let words that belong together stay together

Avoid inserting supplementary information between words that belong together. If you try to include a lot of information in the same sentence, the structure often becomes convoluted. Extra information may instead be placed at the beginning or end of the clause. The following example shows how clause elements may be split up in an unfortunate way. The rewrite suggests how this can be avoided:

> *The increase* in these requests in 2002, partly as a result of agreement on a regional framework which outlines the ETF support to the Commission in the region, *is expected* to have a substantial impact on the Department's workload in 2003.

> Partly as a result of an agreement on a regional frameword which outlines the ETF support to the Commission in the region, *the increase* in these requests in 2002 *is expected* to have a substantial impact on the Department's workload in 2003.

Here is another example and a solution, which will be developed further in the next section:

> *Parties* to a patent licence agreement that contains obligations that are not covered by Articles 1 and 2 and that do not possess such competition-inhibiting effects as are referred to in Article 3 *should be offered* a simplified procedure.

> *Parties* to a patent licence agreement *should be offered* a simplified procedure if the licence agreement
> – contains obligations that are not covered by Articles 1 and 2
> and
> – does not have such competition inhibiting effects as referred to in Article 3.

Use vertical lists for clarity

When you need to include several items in a single sentence, try presenting them vertically, introducing the points with dashes, numbers or letters. This approach will force you to structure your sentence clearly and is worth considering even where the use of a list is not obvious. Take, for example, the following sentence:

'Sensitive documents are documents originating from the institutions or the agencies established by them, from Member States, third countries or International Organisations, classified as "TRÈS SECRET/TOP SECRET", "SECRET" or "CONFIDENTIAL" in accordance with the rules of the institution concerned, which protect essential interests of the European Union or of one or more of its Member States in the areas covered by Article 4(1)(a), notably public security, defence and military matters.'

The reader is swamped with information. The sentence would be far more readable in the form of listed points, setting out vertically the three essential characteristics of a 'sensitive document'; namely, the origin of the document, its security classification and the interests protected by the document.

'Sensitive documents :

- originate from the institutions or the agencies established by them, from Member States, third countries or International Organisations,

- are classified as " TOP SECRET", "SECRET" or "CONFIDENTIAL" in accordance with the rules of the institution concerned, and

- protect essential interests of the European Union or of one or more of its Member States in the areas covered by Article 4(1)(a), notably public security, defence and military matters.'

For rules on punctuation in listed points, consult the *Interinstitutional style guide.*

6   Avoid empty verbs and 'nominalisation disease'

'Empty' verbs are verbs that have to be supported by a noun to make the action of a sentence clear, for example, *carry out, do, implement, undertake, bring about, give rise to.* It is perfectly acceptable to say *assess* instead of *carry out an assessment, research or investigate* instead of *conduct/carry out research/investigations* and *complicate* instead of *give rise to/create complications.*

A text suffers from nominalisation disease if it contains too many nouns derived from verbs (e.g., *investigation* from *to investigate*). These nouns are then usually combined with an 'empty' verb (*carry out an investigation*). A text with many such expressions becomes heavy and turgid. It is, to be sure, not difficult for translators to transfer cases of such nominalisation to other languages, but the translations then become just as heavy as the original.

Do not write:

There is a possibility of prior Board *approval* of these investments.
The Centre *made a decision* that a s*tudy be carried* out by the Personnel Department into the *necessity for the provision* of training in this area.

The following is easier and more natural:

The Board might *approve* these investments in advance.
The Centre *decided* that the Personnel Department *should study* whether *training* in the area is *necessary.*

7   Use the active voice wherever possible

Passive constructions may, at times, be unclear. If you write *Sweden's position is being considered at present* then both the reader and the translator may wonder who is considering the position. Think carefully whether you are able to supply information about who performs the action. In this case, are Sweden's representatives considering what position Sweden is to adopt, or is it the ministers from the different countries represented at the meeting who are considering Sweden's opinion?

The same applies to the passive voice as to nominalisation: it is easy to transfer the passive voice to the translation. But then the reader will suffer from the same ambiguity.

It is also unnecessary to use the passive voice in sentences where there is no doubt about the doer: *The proposal was submitted by the department* becomes simpler and more straightforward as *The department submitted the proposal.*

8   Beware of noun strings

Combinations of nouns may have the undeniable advantage of expressing matters concisely. But the longer a noun string is, the more difficult it is to read and translate. Long series of nouns must be broken down in most languages. Take, for example, the noun string *efficiency monitoring of material exploitation and the recycling industries.* You need to read it several times to understand it. The phrase is easier to analyse if you separate words that form combinations, as in *monitoring the efficiency of those who exploit and recycle the material.*

The translation is further complicated if the noun combination consists of several abstract fashionable words, as in *focus area strategy development.* It is inefficient to sacrifice intelligibility in favour of conciseness, and better to explain at slightly greater length what you actually mean.

9 Use technical terms and expressions in a consistent way

Variety may be the spice of life, but variation may also lead to confusion and misunderstanding.

Use the same term or expression for the same concept

If you decide to vary the text by using different terms or expressions for the same concept, for example *area support* and *area payments*, the translator may think that you mean different things and struggle to bring two concepts (instead of one) into the translation. Consider the effect of the terms *guidance, guideline, guidance document, note for guidance,* all real examples found in a single text, where the author meant the same thing in each case. Since the translator seldom has any personal contact with the author, it is usually impossible to check what is intended.

Mark out technical terms

It may not always be obvious which words in your text are established terminology. If you inform the translator about the terminological status of these words, he or she can find their precise equivalent. An established term should be marked typographically. It may be italicised or placed within quotation marks in the same way as in legal language (for the purposes of… 'regional support' means…). You can make the translator's job easier by providing the equivalent in the target language in brackets. You can also make the reader's job easier by listing technical terms, with a brief explanation, at the beginning of your document.

Do not mix national terms and EU terms

Sometimes, texts relate to EU matters but are about subjects for which there is also an accepted national terminology. For the sake of clarity, however, you should keep to the EU terms, which the translator will also find easier to recognise. If, in EU texts, one uses the expression *primary* and *secondary education,* then it is preferable to use this expression in other texts on the same subject, instead of national terms like *primary school, comprehensive school, secondary school, grammar school* etc.

There are also terms which have different meanings in a national context than in an EU context, for example *primary education,* when referring to the British school system. To avoid confusion, you should clearly indicate whether this refers to part of the school system in the UK or to the first half of the educational system in an EU context.

10 Avoid expressions which are specific to your own culture

Beware of expressions which are closely connected to your own culture. It is not obvious to foreigners what, for example, *the old school tie* actually means. Consider carefully if you have to use such expressions or if you can explain what they mean instead.

Likewise, you should avoid metaphors which are not used internationally, for example *a red herring, a level playing field.*

11 Use plain words

Put clarity first. If you use difficult words, the translator will probably do so too. Do not overuse pompous words; opt for prefer plainer alternatives. Here are a few examples:

Instead of:	*Use:*
ascertain	find out
endeavour	try, attempt
expedite	hasten, speed up
necessitate	need, have to, require
prior to	before
provenance	source, origin
subsequent to	after

Avoid professional jargon from your own specialist area

When you write about your own professional subject, you run the risk of using jargon which is only understood by you and your colleagues. For instance, *mainstream, benchmark* and *leverage* could produce a variety of results in translation. Consider the following sentences:

Jargon words	*Common words*
OSH will be *mainstreamed* into how we think, work and even how our children are educated.	Occupational safety and health will *become* a *natural* part of how we think, work and even how our children are educated.

The Agency has made recommendations to the EU Member States, the European Parliament and the European Commission on good practices in *mainstreaming* diversity in the employment sector.

The EU is helping to develop a network of new laboratories across Serbia that will monitor the quality of agricultural products and *benchmark* them to EC standards.

Agency start-up funds or studies provide *the leverage* that allows international financing institutions and other donors to develop work further, and often to inject much-needed capital.

The Agency has made recommendations to the EU Member States, the European Parliament and the European Commission on good practices in *making* diversity *the norm* in the employment sector.

The EU is helping to develop a network of new laboratories across Serbia that will monitor the quality of agricultural products *with EC standards as the reference* point.

International financing institutions and other donors are often more willing to back projects and inject much-needed capital if there are Agency start-up funds or studies.

Avoid abstract fashionable words

EU prose abounds with fashionable expressions such as *framework, procedures, practices, activities, developments, operations, enforcing, ensuring, structures, areas, support, prioritise/ priorities, synergy, key, mechanisms, globalisation, paradigm, enhancement, -related.* Sometimes such words are the right ones, but they may often be deleted or the idea expressed more simply:

Instead of

Consider

monitoring procedure

monitoring

computer-related crime

computer crime

security-related provisions

security provisions

area-related aid

area aid

A messaging system as *communication mechanism* between the actors in the terminology workflow.

A messaging system between the actors in the terminology workflow.

A number of badland areas have *developed* in the region where spectacular surface erosion has occurred.

Spectacular surface erosion has made certain areas of the region uncultivable.

In the framework of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions General Assembly the 'Golden Stars of Town Twinning' was awarded in Poznan, Poland.

At the General Assembly of the Council of European Municipalities and Regions the 'Golden Stars of Town Twinning' was awarded in Poznan, Poland.

Avoid abbreviations and acronyms or explain them at the beginning of the text

The extensive use of abbreviations and acronyms in official texts makes them much less readable than they need to be. Abbreviations and acronyms should be used sparingly and only when absolutely necessary.

It is often impossible for readers and translators to decipher acronyms, and sometimes they even stand for something different in another language. The *Interinstitutional style guide,* which contains the EU institutions' editorial rules includes a list of the most common acronyms and their meaning. The style guide suggests that the first time you use an acronym in your text, you write out the name in full and then give the acronym in brackets.

Do not write:	*Write instead:*
The main objectives are to include ethnic minorities as well as *ENAR* and *ECRI*.	The main objectives are to include ethnic minorities as well as the European Network against Racism (ENAR) and the European Commission against Racism and Intolerance (ECRI).
The Agency encouraged the *NFPs* and Member States to support the recruitment of *DNEs*.	The Agency encouraged the National Focal Points (NFPs) and Member States to support the recruitment of detached national experts (DNEs).

12 Give the translator background information

Translators do not necessarily have the same amount of information about the subject as you do. Nor, as a rule, do they have the same mother tongue, or as much knowledge of the culture and social systems of your country or organisation. Nonetheless, you and the person translating your text have a common objective, which is to produce a satisfactory translation.

You should therefore give the translator adequate background information, including technical terms that have been used previously, and any earlier correspondence or other documents relating to the matter.
For official documents (e.g. statutes or memoranda), it is often enough to quote the document number to enable the translator to find the text easily: Commission Regulation (EC) No 817/97, Council Directive 96/257/EC.

It is important that you quote the source correctly, especially if the quotations are from EU texts that have already been translated. This saves a lot of time and work for the translator.

Where possible, you should also provide the equivalents of titles and names of organisations. If, for example, you know what your title or the name of your organisation corresponds to in the target language, this can only be helpful, for example: Mr Nigel Robertson, Director of Education (directeur de l'administration scolaire communale).

Native speakers of another language are not always able to tell whether a name is masculine or feminine. You can help the translator and avoid potential embarrassment if you mention the person's first name and state Mr, Ms or Mrs.

In conclusion, look upon translation as teamwork between you and the translator. Give him or her information about how you may be contacted and be ready to discuss the text. An open dialogue between the author and translator guarantees a successful result.

Reference documents

➡ *Interinstitutional Style Guide*
The institutions' editorial rules. Office for Official Publications of the European Union.

This guide sets out the rules for drafting EU texts. The annexes contain useful lists, for example names of countries, Community programmes and databases, as well as keys to acronyms, currency codes etc. The electronic version of the style guide is updated continuously. You can find it at
http://publications.europa.eu/code/en/en-000100.htm

➡ *English Style Guide.*
This guide has been produced by, but not just for, the English units of the Commission's Translation Service. You can find it at
http://ec.europa.eu/translation/english/guidelines/documents/styleguide_english_dgt_en.pdf

➡ *Utrikes namnbok.* *(The Book of Foreign Names).*
Swedish authorities, organisations, titles, EU and EC institutions, EU titles and countries in Swedish, English, German, French, Spanish, Finnish and Russian, 6th revised edition. Utrikesdepartementet (the Swedish Foreign Office), 2002. You can find it at
http://www.sweden.gov.se/content/1/c6/07/96/73/f40ec06f.pdf

➡ *Martin Cutts: The Plain English Guide.*
How to write clearly and communicate better. Oxford University Press. 1996.
ISBN 0-19-860049-6

➡ *Some useful web sites:*
Plain Language Commission,
where you can find rewrites of an EC Directive and EC Regulations:
http://www.clearest.co.uk/

The Commission's Translation Service:
http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/translation/index_en.htm

How to write clearly (the successor to the Commission's Fight the Fog),
available in all EU official languages:
http://ec.europa.eu/translation/index_en.htm

Plain English Campaign, free guides:
http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/free-guides.html