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Writing for translation

TRANSLATION CENTRE FOR THE BODIES OF THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Will your text be translated? Make every word count.

This booklet is intended for writers of EU texts in English 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 stay stuck in the same old rut, even if the result is not as good as it could be. 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 is 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 translators convey your words successfully. Translation does not take place in a vacuum: you and the translator can help each other. Remember, your common goal is to get your message across.

We hope you will enjoy using this booklet and we would 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 Government Offices of Sweden, 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 the authors for their permission to use their text and for their valuable suggestions.

You can also consult the [Finnish guide](#) and the [Swedish one](#).

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SOME SUGGESTIONS

- Give the translator background information
- ... and enough time to do a good job
- Do not provide too many versions
- Plan your document, consider who is going to read your text and how it will be used
- Use explanatory headings and summaries, and limit each paragraph to one idea
- Make sentence structure unambiguous
- Avoid long sentences with a complicated structure
- Use vertical lists
- Avoid empty verbs and cut out excess nouns
- Use the active voice wherever possible
- Beware of noun strings
- Always use the same term for the same concept
- Avoid expressions that are specific to your own culture
- Avoid jargon and acronyms

I. PLAN YOUR TEXT

Both the translator and 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 use the track changes function to mark any changes in the text. Yellow highlighting is also effective, because the text that has been changed 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? Deal with 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 content to the information your readers actually need.
- Organise the content 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 may 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 content 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. Translators also benefit from having the most important aspects summarised in one place. It gives them 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 referring to nouns or clauses that have already been mentioned, 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 that 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 to the previous one and leads on 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 using several relative clauses (clauses that start with *that*, *who*, *which*) in the same sentence. 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.' Does *abolition* refer only to the prohibition of the sale of liquor, or also to the abuse of drugs?

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 one 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 that hamper the readability of the text.

Keep words together that belong 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:

✘ Do not write:

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.

✔ Write instead:

Partly as a result of an agreement on a regional framework 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:

✘ Do not write:

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

✔ Write instead:

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 does not seem an obvious choice. 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 “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. This 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 CUT OUT EXCESS NOUNS

'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 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 of these expressions becomes heavy and turgid. Of course, translators can simply transfer cases of such excess noun use to other languages, but the translations will then sound 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 study 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 this 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 is carrying out 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 excess nouns: 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 buzzwords, 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 CONSISTENTLY

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.

Highlight technical terms

It may not always be obvious which words in your text are established terms. If you provide information about the terminological status or origin of these words, it may be easier for the translator to 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 (e.g. ‘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 and by including links to any useful reference documents.

Do not mix national terms and EU terms

Sometimes, texts relate to EU matters but are about subjects for which there are also accepted national terms. For the sake of clarity, however, you should use 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 such as *primary school*, *comprehensive school*, *secondary school*, *grammar school*, etc.

There are also terms that have different meanings in a national context and 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 SPECIFIC TO YOUR OWN CULTURE

Beware of expressions that are closely connected to your own culture. It would not be obvious to non-British people what, for example, *the old school tie* actually means. Consider carefully whether you have to use such expressions or whether you can explain what they mean instead.

Likewise, you should avoid metaphors that are not used internationally, for example *a red herring*, *a spanner in the works*.



II. USE PLAIN WORDS

Put clarity first. If you use difficult words, the translator will probably do so too. Do not overuse pompous words; instead, opt for 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 that 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	 Common words
OSH will be <i>mainstreamed</i> into how we think, work and even how our children are educated.	Occupational safety and health will <i>become a natural part</i> 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 <i>mainstreaming</i> diversity in the employment sector.	The Agency has made recommendations to the EU Member States, the European Parliament and the European Commission on good practices in <i>making</i> diversity <i>the norm</i> 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 <i>benchmark</i> them to EC standards.	The EU is helping to develop a network of new laboratories across Serbia that will monitor the quality of agricultural products <i>with EC standards as the reference point</i> .
Agency start-up funds or studies provide <i>the leverage</i> that allows international financing institutions and other donors to develop work further, and often to inject much-needed capital.	International financing institutions and other donors <i>are often more willing</i> to back projects and inject much-needed capital <i>if</i> there are Agency start-up funds or studies.

Avoid abstract buzzwords



EU prose abounds with words 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 omitted or the idea may be 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 a <i>communication mechanism</i> between the actors in the terminology workflow.	A messaging system between those involved in the terminology workflow.
A number of badland areas have <i>developed</i> in the region where spectacular surface erosion has occurred.	Spectacular surface erosion has made certain areas of the region uncultivable.
<i>In the framework of</i> 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 hinders readability. 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 these 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 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, writing only the acronym thereafter.

 Do not write:	 Write instead:
The main objectives are to include ethnic minorities as well as <i>ENAR</i> and <i>ECRI</i> .	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 <i>NFPs</i> and Member States to support the recruitment of <i>SNEs</i> .	The Agency encouraged the National Focal Points (NFPs) and Member States to support the recruitment of seconded national experts (SNEs).

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 subject.

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, for example Commission Regulation (EC) No 817/97 or 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.

Wherever 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. Add your contact details for the translator if you are willing to be contacted to discuss the text. An open dialogue between the author and translator guarantees a successful result.

13. SHOW TECHNICAL AWARENESS

Nowadays, the figure of the translator as a linguistic curator, surrounded by a mountain of books and equipped only with a pen and paper, is far from the reality. Most translators now use software solutions, known as CAT (Computer Assisted Translation) tools, which help them to:

- > speed up the translation process,
- > improve consistency,
- > enhance the overall quality, and
- > handle an array of documents in different formats.

A key activity in the current translation workflow consists of 'cleaning' documents before and after translation. The aim is to ensure:

- 1) that the documents and the CAT tool used to process them are compatible;
- 2) that the layout and other technical aspects of the file are not negatively affected during the translation process.

If you wish to send a document for translation that shows technical awareness of the translation process, as well as being linguistically correct, make sure to respect the following guidelines:

File formats

When drafting a document from scratch in Word, PowerPoint or Excel, instead of saving it as **.doc**, **.ppt** or **.xls**, try to save it as **.docx**, **.pptx**, or **.xlsx**. These file formats are more performant and less prone to cause technical issues.

PDF files

Although they are a safe way to share documents, PDF files are usually harder to edit or process in comparison with their original file formats. Thus, whenever possible, send the original file rather than its PDF conversion.

Adaptative layout

The layout and elements contained in a document can change drastically after translation.

For instance, depending on the language combination, the translated text may be considerably longer or shorter than the original. When drafting a document, make sure that the general layout, text boxes or shapes used can easily accommodate text of a different length to yours.

Embedded content

Does your document include elements from other files, such as images, graphs, charts or tables? If you have the source files for this content, do not hesitate to send them over with your translation request. This will make the preparation of your request easier and faster.

Non-editable images

If your document includes non-editable images displaying text (e.g. company logos), it is important to specify whether this text should be extracted for translation or if it should remain in the original language. In the case of logos, if they have already been translated into other languages, please send these versions so that they can be inserted into your translation.

Comments

If there are any comments in your document, specify whether:

- 1) they can be removed in the translated version;
- 2) they need to remain but should not be translated; or
- 3) translation is necessary.

Track changes

If you have been working with track changes while preparing a document, remember to accept or reject all changes before submitting it. If you want the translations to reflect these modifications using track changes, leave this function on in your document.

Automatic elements

Bullet points, automatic numbering and automatic table of contents are very important elements to consider when preparing your document. For instance, instead of typing numbers when making a list of items, or copying bullets from a PDF document, use the proper options available in Word. This will save a considerable amount of time during the preparation of the file for translation.

Content not to be translated

If a section of text should not be translated in your document, make sure to use a different colour to highlight this and leave instructions, either by sending a message or by introducing a comment. This will guarantee that this content is not extracted for translation and will remain unchanged in the translated versions.

By adhering to these guidelines, you can help speed up the translation process and avoid the need for a series of questions requesting clarifications.

14. REFERENCE DOCUMENTS

[Interinstitutional Style Guide](#) – The EU institutions’ editorial rules, published by the Publications Office of the European Union, 2000-2019.

This guide sets out the rules for drafting EU texts. The annexes contain useful lists, for example names of countries, EU programmes and databases, as well as keys to acronyms, currency codes, etc. The electronic version of the guide is updated continuously. Of particular relevance is **[Part Four: Publications in English](#)**.

[English Style Guide – A handbook for authors and translators in the European Commission](#).

This guide has been produced by the English units of the European Commission's Directorate-General for Translation.

Martin Cutts: Oxford Guide to Plain English (Fourth Edition). Oxford University Press, 2013, ISBN 978-0199669172

Some useful websites:

[Plain Language Commission](#), where you can find rewrites of EU Directives and EU Regulations.

[How to write clearly](#), available in all official EU languages.

[Plain English Campaign](#), free guides.

