

# Tips for Good Written Translations

## 1. Before you translate

**Ask: “What should you translate?”**

- Is a written translation the best way to reach this audience?
- How well will the audience use print material?

**Start with a good “source” document (English version)**

- Use language that is clear, straightforward and easy (easier) to translate.
- Be aware of literacy issues when creating the English materials (it is difficult to translate from one literacy level to another).

**Think and plan ahead**

- Budget for translation services, translation review and field testing.  
(A safe estimate is 15-25 cents per word)
- Most translators charge per word, based on the language they are translating into. So you need to plan based on an “estimated” word count. When you translate into Spanish, for example, estimate on having 20-25% more words in the Spanish version.
- Allow extra time, especially if you will need to find, hire and supervise an outside contractor.

## 2. Know your audience

**Learn about the target audience and involve them in the development of the materials.**

- Link with community organizations, unions and others who serve that community.

**Literacy and reading issues**

- What is the level of formal education, reading level of the audience?
- What printed formats are more comfortable or familiar (use of graphics, alternative formats such as “fotonovelas”, etc) for this audience?

**Are there regional differences?**

- Is the audience from a variety of regions or countries? What words are commonly used by you target audience?
- Language and vocabulary can vary greatly, depending on where the audience members are from, where they live and work, etc.
- The same word or phrase can mean different things to different groups.

### 3. Choose a translator based on experience and skills

#### Experience and skills to look for

- Is the translator familiar with and responsive to **regional differences**? (It is ideal for the translator to be a native speaker from or very familiar with the target audience.)
- Has the translator translated **low literacy materials before**?
- Look for someone who **translates concepts**, not just the words (avoid literal translations).
- Are the translator's **English** abilities adequate for her/him to understand the source document? (It is helpful if the translator is already familiar with the content matter).
- Don't let "the lowest price" guide your choice unless it has to.

#### Check out the translator's previous work

- Get references; talk to others who have used the **actual** translator you are considering
- Ask for samples of previous similar and comparable work **by the individual who will be doing the translation** (both the English and translated versions).
- A good translator needs to be bilingual, think methodically and have excellent writing skills.

#### Quality assurance

- Be sure the translator uses an effective system for assuring that their translation is a good one (for example, review by a separate translator or feedback from the target community).

#### Finding a translator

- Places to find translators include recommendations from other programs, community groups, and local translator listings.

### 4. Communicate with the translator before, during and after the translation project.

#### Be very clear about your expectations

- Who the audience is, including regional preferences and literacy issues;
- What format you want to receive the translation in (especially important for languages that use different alphabets or characters);
- How much input your program wants to provide during the translation process;
- Review process requirements, including translator's availability for consultation during review, changes after review, etc.

### **Make sure the translator understands the “source” (English) document**

- Encourage the translator to ask anything in the source document that is not clear.
- Provide a glossary of terms (definitions and any translations of terms you already have).

### **Stay in touch with the translator during the project**

- Ask the translator(s) to provide you with a sample of a few pages they have translated before they do the whole thing.
- Get back to the translator with any significant findings from reviewing or pilot testing the translation; resolve discrepancies where possible.

## **5. Review and field test the translation**

### **Someone besides the translator should review the translation**

- more than one person if possible

### **“Field test” (pilot test) the translation with the target audience**

- Conduct focus or discussions groups; go to ESL classes, union meetings, etc.

### **Consider having the material translated back into English**

- This “back translation” can be helpful if no one you know (and trust) understands the target language.

### **Don’t cut corners in the review process!**

- A “bad” translation can not only misinform your audience; it can undermine your program’s credibility in the community you are trying to reach.

*Adapted from Occupational Lead Prevention Program, California Department of Health Services, September 2001*