

A Translator's Guide to Work

When I first started translating ten years ago, I really had no idea what to expect. Translation is a weird profession in the sense that you know what it involves but not necessarily how to get started. Beyond that, our problems are only compounded by the fact that most freelancers work independently so our profession is even harder to gauge.

It's pretty counterintuitive that translators communicate for a living but don't talk to each other. Talk about a missed opportunity! That's why I decided to compile **a list of all the things I wish I'd known** to pay it forward for newbies.

Table of Contents

Getting Started.....	3
Definition and background	3
Building a portfolio	3
Learning the lingo	4
Identifying key resources	5
Researching the best dictionaries.....	6
Finding work	7
Identifying translation agencies.....	7
Application process	8
Finances	9
Taxes	9
Keeping records	9
Agency expectations.....	11
Big vs. small	11
Big agencies.....	11
Small agencies	11
Toxic work culture.....	12
Software.....	13
Avoiding scams.....	14
Translation tips.....	15
Glossaries	15
Volume per day	15
Determining your rate	15
Speed vs. quality	16
Areas of specialization (see also 'Getting started → Building a portfolio').....	16
Technique	17
General advice.....	18
Final thoughts	20

Getting Started

Definition and background

Just to make sure we're all on the same page, I'm going to define translation and talk a bit about who works in the field. There's apparently some confusion.

Merriam Webster defines [translate](#) (v.) as "to turn into one's own or another language." That means the person who translates is called a translator. Pretty simple, right? Here's where it gets a little complicated.

Translators are people who translate one language (in)to another. By definition, they have to know at least two languages proficiently in order to do their job. Some grow up speaking both while others learn a second language by studying it, living abroad, etc. That means that translators don't all have the same training or qualifications but are generally thought of as skilled professionals.

Many translators work remotely on a freelance basis. Technically, they work from home. I personally will scream if I watch one more video presenting translation as an easy, entry-level, work-from-home job to be sold to the masses. Instead, the [US Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) asserts that most translators enter the work force with a bachelor's degree. It's not exactly something you can pick up overnight.

Building a portfolio

If you've never translated before, the first thing you're going to need to do is create a portfolio. All that really means is having **a few sample documents** from a few areas of specialization to show some of your work. It takes a few hours from start to finish and is the first step towards landing a job.

Many agencies ask their applicants to **take test translations** instead. It's basically the same thing except that they provide the content to translate which is usually around **300 source words**. Translation samples should be about the same word count and in either case, what matters is that your work is as perfect as possible.

You're going to need to choose one or more **areas of specialization** to write samples or take test translations. It's a good idea to stick to major sectors like medicine, law, marketing, business, etc. at least in the beginning. You don't need a separate degree or experience in the field to translate them in most cases so start off with something you think you'd like or would be able to do with research.

Agencies sometimes break down their areas of specialization into **very specific subcategories**. Don't worry about any of that yet. If you end up as a patent translator for litigation proceedings, that's all fine and good but it's probably a little too niche at this stage.

My advice for building a portfolio is to find some **online content** in your source language in **three different subject areas** and translate 300+ source words in each. Create a carefully translated, consistently edited and visually streamlined Word document, add your name and email to the header and save it as a PDF. DO NOT forget to proofread it.

If you're required to do a **test translation** as part of an agency application, sometimes the directions say you need to finish it in an hour. Disregard that completely unless it's timed on their website. The only thing you need to worry about is doing your **best work** and delivering it by the **deadline**. Honestly, those two skills are far and away your most important assets in this career so make a habit of honoring both.

Learning the lingo

Translation seems fairly intuitive and it is, for the most part. However, if you're new to the field, there are still some basic terms you're going to need to learn.

Bilingual table: a two-column table in a Word or Excel document containing source and target segments of a translation.

Glossary: a table of accepted translations in the source and target language used by many agencies, end clients and/or individual translators.

It's common to work with multiple glossaries at once in order of their importance.

(See also 'Translation tips → Glossaries')

Human translation: a translation done by a person (so not MTPE).

Language pair (LP): an indication of the source and target language often written in abbreviated form such as DE>EN (German into English).

Some translators only translate one language pair while others offer two or more. If someone translates multiple language pairs, each one is listed separately. Usually, > means a translator translates the source into the target language but not the other way around whereas <> means they translate into both languages.

Localization: a step which sometimes follows translation which is meant to further adapt a document to fit a particular country, region or group.

Interpreter: the person who (verbally) conveys what said from one language to another.

There are several types of interpreting (simultaneous, consecutive, etc.) which are not addressed in this article.

***On interpreting vs. translating:** interpreting and translating or interpreters vs. translators are often used interchangeably even within the industry but actually, they're two separate skill sets.

Invoice: a document you create/fill out for every purchase order so that you get paid for your work. It's like a pre-receipt. Some agencies require you to create your own invoice while others have their own template or submission system.

Machine translation post-editing (MTPE): an automatically generated translation which is edited by a human translator.

Native speaker: someone whose mother tongue is the language in question. It's generally recommended if not required that your target language is also your native language and many agencies require it.

Post-editing (PE): see machine translation post-editing.

Project Manager (PM): a translation agency employee who sends you job offers via email. PMs often have backgrounds in translation and/or are multilingual themselves but that's not always the case. They may or may not know the languages in your language pair.

Proofreader/editor: the person who proofreads a translation for accuracy, grammar, etc. before it's delivered to the client. Most agencies require that their translators also proofread which is most often charged per word.

***On proofreading vs. editing:** editing may refer to more significant changes to a translation including rephrasing, stylistic corrections, etc. In general, though, proofreading and editing are used interchangeably within the industry even though they're technically

slightly different.

***On editing vs. post-editing:** editing is a type of revision that follows translation whereas post-editing means translating a machine-generated text. They are NOT the same.

Purchase order (PO): a document sent to translators including relevant job details like payment, deadline, PM and assigned vendor (you).

Rate per word: what you charge per word. Usually, it's counted based on the source word count.

Revision: changes required of the final document (i.e. translated and proofread file). Clients aren't always happy with the final translation and require the translator to make changes. This happens even to seasoned translators and is normally included in the original price. Translators are rarely expected to revise the same document several times.

Segment: an individual box in translation software or within a bilingual table. A segment is normally a complete sentence or other sentence fragment which is translated from one (source) language to another (target) language. Translations are easier to work on in this format and prevent translators from making mistakes in the document's original formatting.

Source language: the language you're translating from.

Style guide: a set of specific writing standards translators (and other writers) have to follow for a specific client, agency, file type, etc. It's not uncommon to need to abide by multiple style guides at once in order of importance.

Target language: the language you're translating into (usually your native language).

Translation memory (TM): a database that stores segments for the benefit of future translations/translators.

***About TMs:** careful! Translation memories can and do contain errors so don't assume they're correct or the best version for your specific translation.

Translator/linguist/vendor/language service provider (LSP): a person who translates.

***On interpreting vs. translating:** interpreting and translating or interpreters vs. translators are often used interchangeably even within the industry but actually, they're two separate skill sets.

***On translators vs. LSPs:** technically, an LSP is more of an umbrella term for anyone who works in the wider industry so the services offered may include interpretation, localization, language training, etc.

Word count: the number of words in a job or document. Word count is almost always based on the total number of words in the source language and is the most common way to determine the price of a job.

Identifying key resources

If you've never translated before, you probably won't know where to start. The good news is www.proz.com is as useful a resource today as it was for me ten years ago and it covers TONS of industry-specific issues. (It's kind of an eyesore if I'm being honest but you'll get past that.) You can pay to become a member but so much of it is available for free that I'd suggest trying the free version first.

Important resources on www.proz.com:

•**Blue Board** to determine whether an agency is worth your valuable time. Check it *every single time!*

- KudoZ** is a way to get extra help with tricky words/suggestions from other translators who compete for points. It's free and SO useful! Just remember to check past entries and the term search to make sure your query hasn't been covered before.
- Term search** is a good place to start if you need help finding a particular term.
- The **software comparison tool** gives you an overview of some of the most commonly used translation software programs on the market.
- The **job board** which includes some content for free member. It's a good place to start but don't expect amazing work or great rates right off the bat.

Researching the best dictionaries

There are many online dictionaries for most language pairs and it's worth your time to check out the top contenders. As a rule, check translations in more than one dictionary and do some extra research for something you're not yet familiar with.

Identifying language-specific reference sites

- Translation dictionaries like <https://www.dict.cc/>, <https://dict.leo.org/>, <https://dict.tu-chemnitz.de/>, <https://www.spanishdict.com/> and <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/>
- Source language dictionaries like <https://www.merriam-webster.com/>, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/> or <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/>

Finding work

1. As I already mentioned, the first thing you'll need is a **portfolio** including sample translations. You can create one using any content you can find in your area(s) of specialization which just refers to content you'd like to translate the most. Remember to include samples in three areas of specialization with a source text of around 300 words.
2. Next, you'll want to apply for **free jobs** or **jobs at any pay rate** to gain relevant experience. You can even ask if someone would be willing to write you a **letter of reference** based on your work in lieu of payment.
3. Lastly, you can start **applying to translation agencies**. Most will require you to have at least a couple work references or past jobs so your first few gigs might be free or very low pay. **This is not the kind of job where you can expect to get regular work overnight.**

Bear in mind that many major agencies only accept applications from translators with several years of experience. However, smaller agencies are sometimes more willing to work with new translators so there's still a way around it. You can also apply to individual jobs on www.proz.com or other job boards which are open to new translators at a lower pay rate.

Don't worry, the beginning phase doesn't last forever! Once you're in with a couple agencies, the grind gets easier.

Identifying translation agencies

One way of targeting agencies is by **choosing a city** and searching for listed agencies. The benefit of working remotely is casting a wider net but know you're not the only one with that strategy. In other words, apply ad nauseum especially when you're first getting started.

Important! Check a company's **Blue Board rating** on www.proz.com every single time (yes, really) and don't even think about getting mixed up with iffy companies. A lot of translation websites are utilitarian at best so they're not much to look at. You can take a peek if you're so inclined but steer clear of agencies with fishy photo ops, a friendly-bordering-on-manic contact person or other weird vibes.

A lot of **major agencies** have offices all around the world or at least in multiple locations which means they translate enormous volumes. Sending applications to separate branches of the same agency might feel like you're upping your chances of getting hired but they're often processed by the same person or department. Just don't.

Definitely consider targeting countries where your **source language is spoken**. They might bring in the majority of work. You'll have to deal with things like scheduling around time zone differences or alternative payment arrangements (i.e. currency conversions, transfer fees, etc.) but most translation agencies are used to doing business internationally. The main thing? Don't let a little inconvenience stand in the way of you and available jobs.

For more considerations on the pros and cons of big and small agencies, see 'Agency expectations → Big vs. small.'

Application process

Unfortunately, most agencies are saturated with applications and often have more people in their database than jobs to fill. It's a situation that puts translators at a disadvantage.

I'd suggest applying to as many agencies as you can. You won't hear from most of them especially if you're new but that's just the nature of the business.

Practical tip: you may be blissfully unaware of anything holding up your application. Sometimes applications get stuck mid-process if one of your references doesn't respond or if anything else was missing or entered incorrectly. If you ever get a holiday message from an agency you applied to but never worked for, I'd suggest contacting their HR department for details.

My experience is that larger agencies are way more likely to hold up your application process by ignoring reference requests regardless of how long you worked for them. Not cool, guys! If you're shopping for a way out with a large agency, ask their HR department if they'd be willing to write you a letter of reference instead and save yourself the headache.

Applying to agencies is fairly uniform. Usually, they'll ask you to return a sample translation within a few days and get back to you with your results within a week. Don't be discouraged if you're accepted by some but rejected by others. There are other fish in the sea and you'll get your chance!

My last piece of advice is to apply in your strongest language pair and to translate into your native language. Many agencies let you add other language pairs later but never underestimate the value of first impressions.

Finances

Money matters! This is a HUGE topic. Before diving deep, I should preface this by saying 1) freelance translators have a relatively **straightforward finances** and 2) **I am not a finance guru** by any stretch of the imagination. As a matter of fact, I wish I'd learned more about it early in my career (or now, even) and would encourage other freelancers to do the same.

Taxes

If you're a freelance translator and you don't hire out to others, chances are your business taxes will be **relatively simple**. You'll need to pay self-employment tax in the US or VAT in Europe (or whatever the equivalent tax would be in your country of employment). Don't forget you'll also be responsible for other taxes AND the rate you're paid includes the taxes you'll owe.

Translation? (Pun intended!) **The money you take home after taxes is way less than what you charge.** You still have to pay considerable taxes every year and factor that into your spending.

General tips:

- In the US, you're supposed to **pay your taxes quarterly**. If you don't, you can pay yearly which will cost you more.
- If your taxes are complicated** for any reason and you're worried about doing them wrong, **get them done professionally**. Pay for it and be done. Seriously. I pay for almost nothing I don't have to and it's a little spendy but believe me, it's worth it.
- If you find yourself living abroad while running your own business, see if there's a way to **schedule appointments with a local tax office** to make sure you know what's up. You don't want surprises when it comes to money owed so PLEASE be proactive.
- Depending on the local and federal tax laws, **working from home** is something worth mentioning for a potential tax credit.
- Save your receipts** for work-specific purchases like software.
- Ask about **other credits** that might be available to you as a freelancer for things like office supplies, business expenses, etc.
- At the very least, **create a tax folder** for receipts, records, etc. and review it ahead of your tax appointment.
- Your taxable income refers to **money you've earned**, not what you've charged since they're not always the same figure. By the same token, your records refer to the **date you were paid**.
- Most agencies pay online so your records should be easily accessible that way. However, some still insist on sending checks through the mail so put them in a safe place!

Finances seem scary, particularly to those of us who are better with words than numbers, but money is important to your business. Establish a financial records system early on for your own sanity come tax season.

Keeping records

It's very likely that you as a translator will have multiple agencies or sources of income even when you work full-time. Here are my suggestions on how to handle slightly complicated financial records:

- Keep separate financial records for **each agency**
 - Keep a **master set** of financial records using the totals from each source of income
 - Be fastidious!** Some agencies have terrible records so be on top of yours. I'm saying payments of several hundred dollars may slip through the cracks if you don't spot them yourself.
- Your records** don't have to be overly complex but you should keep track of some important details (especially if you're dealing with flakey agencies or payments).

Here are some **categories to include**:

- Project Manager to assign you the job
- Job title or description (especially if you work for the same end client repeatedly; you won't remember this later but it's useful if there are payment problems later)
- Payment amount
- Delivery date
- Date of invoice submission
- Date of received payment
- Job number
- Invoice number, if applicable

Try to **update your financial records once a week** so you don't forget important details or amass a mountain of work. If you run into problems with past or missing payments or other weird things worth investigating with accounts payable, it's much easier to solve if the problems are still fresh. Having all these details at your fingertips also means it's easier to spot a potentially serious error. For what it's worth, agencies with **solid payment systems** are **incredibly valuable** to translators. Problems with payments may indicate sloppy work culture elsewhere or a system that's broken internally. Let that be your first red flag of an agency you might consider leaving.

Agency expectations

Big vs. small

Working for a big or small agency is largely a matter of preference. However, here are some tips to consider based on my own personal experience.

Big agencies

- Have a greater volume of work
- Generally provide more stable, steady work
- Often pay less per word
- Will require more of your unpaid time on things other than translation (i.e. poor internal communication, following up with HR, payment problems, etc.)
- Have a mix of good, average and poor PMs
- May give you a false sense of job security which doesn't exist for freelancers
- Are less receptive to feedback
- Treat translators like cogs in a machine
- Are often disorganized
- Are more concerned with speed than quality

Small agencies

- Have a smaller, more inconsistent volume of work
- Will try to give you more jobs you'd particularly like after you've worked with them for some time
- Are likely to give you very important end clients
- Are more receptive to feedback in case of miscommunications with PMs or other potential problems
- Have high expectations of their freelancers
- Rarely if ever have payment problems and/or attend to do them quickly
- Are more understanding of limited availability on vacation or during conferences, school work, etc.
- Often have wonderful relationships with their translators
- Are more accommodating of no/limited software
- Expect equal treatment from you
- Definitely won't have evening/weekend availability

After reading this list, you might think it's automatically better to work for smaller agencies. (Then again, you as another translator might have a completely different take on large vs. small agency work but I can only speak from experience.) It's not all cut and dry, though. I've clearly had overwhelmingly positive experiences freelancing for small agencies. It's worth mentioning they're also more likely to close without much notice whereas larger agencies are often around for decades.

It's possible to work for a number of small agencies at once but they also rely more heavily on their translators. What that can sometimes mean is that you're expected to be a reliable translator even when you're hit from three different angles (agencies) at once. It's not easy to juggle or sustainable in the long run.

Lastly, having a close working relationship with an agency can be a wonderful thing. If you're building your career with multiple employers at the same time, though, they may start to give you more and more work or bigger jobs. You're going to have to make some difficult choices and/or consider cutting an agency when that day comes but that's not such a bad problem to have.

Translators interested in book translation of any kind will need to do specific research about how to corner that market. I think it's no coincidence that both book translations I was offered came from small and medium-sized agencies because the relationships with their linguists are that much stronger.

Beginning translators should consider working for agencies big and small but there are advantages and disadvantages of both. You're likely to develop your own preferences after some time so take these ideas with a grain of salt.

Toxic work culture

Other LSPs may have other stories and I certainly hope my experience in large agencies was an exception to the rule. Let's not forget that translation is an industry which reports a high level of job satisfaction overall and in terms of content, I'd have to agree. However, I'd be remiss to gloss over this issue altogether.

Toxicity in the virtual workplace feels important to include especially because I don't think it's given much attention. I, for one, assumed that working as a freelancer meant leaving crappy workplace situations behind. You *will* get out of things like boring meetings, sexual harassment on the job and the gossip culture that thrives in real-life office environments so it does have its benefits.

It's fair to point out that large agencies often pay less per word or per hour because they can. It's crappy but fairly standard. Also, don't be surprised if a PM tries to pressure you into working for really low rates. Just because someone works in another location doesn't mean their tactics can't be toxic so don't be afraid to cut people out of your virtual working life.

At the mild end of the spectrum, many PMs are routinely bad at returning messages even though it impacts your job and is part of their role. At the far end, you may run into triangulation of communication, HR personnel who are seemingly on permanent vacation, falsely reported resignation, etc. Unhealthy work culture tends to spiral out of control so do yourself a favor and get out ASAP. Other translators may have their own thoughts on this topic but I've only ever run into really nasty situations in huge agencies.

If your goal as a freelancer is to foster a healthy working environment, pay attention to the warning signs and stay on top of your applications.

Software

The software game is constantly changing in the translation industry but it's harder and harder to find work without owning some of your own.

Most agencies specify which software they work with and if they don't, send them a message to ask. While you're at it, try to get a sense of how much work you can expect (in terms of word count, number of hours a week, etc.) before you take the plunge. Software is a huge expense and it's not always worth buying in the long run.

Know that every agency is different and so is their software requirement. That means you can't just plan on spending \$1000 on software and assuming you can use it anywhere. It doesn't work that way. Not only do you need to spend your own money in order to be able to work, every software program is different so you'll have to spend a little time learning the ins and outs.

Here are some things to consider **before buying software**:

- How **reliable is the agency**? You're making an investment so choose wisely!
- Is the software **required**? Alternatively, do they also offer bilingual tables or other workarounds?
- Is there a **free version** of the same software and if so, does the agency accept it? If so, will it limit your jobs?
- Does the agency offer **job-specific access** to its translators (i.e. no purchase necessary)?
- Does the agency offer a **discount** if you do need to buy it? (The savings can mean hundreds of dollars so DO ask.)
- Some software programs can be **rent or bought** — ask if either version is accepted.
- Check whether there's a **trial version** available which is usually free for 30 days.
- No matter what, make sure you're getting the **right version**, not just the correct brand
- Ask your agency how often it requires a **software update** (i.e. completely new purchase); it's usually every 1–2 years.
- Some agencies have their **own systems** so they don't require buying your own software. Let's hope that trend continues!
- Keep your receipt** for tax purposes.
- Don't install software on an older laptop** or you'll need to buy it again when that one dies.

For all other software-related questions, don't be afraid to ask. www.proz.com is a good place to search for answers as are other online translation forums. There are a lot of explanatory videos available on YouTube, too.

You might need a few days to get used to the overall feel of using a translation software but the good news is the layouts are usually fairly similar from one brand to the next. Make sure you actually submit your work correctly the first few times you use it because it's super easy NOT to.

Avoiding scams

There are many upsides to working online but probably the worst thing is being scammed. This is by no means a complete list but here are some things to avoid for minimal exposure.

- Don't work with translators on jobs outside of your agency unless you yourself know them (aka in real life)
- Only work with reputable agencies, sworn translators, etc. based on many ratings
- Start off with a few smaller jobs in case you don't get paid
- Be suspicious of international phone calls especially if they're from individual people (i.e. anything other than an agency you've already worked for)
- Know that larger jobs are paid in installments and withholding large payments is suspect
- Judge poor writing
- Turn down job offers from individual people you don't know who are unassociated with reputable agencies

One time, a translator approached me for work outside of the agency that had brought us together on a job. (Working with other translators is difficult to do well even at the same agency but that's another story.) I did about a week's worth of work for her and never saw a dime. You know who you are, lady! I'm still mad about it.

The worst part about being scammed (by qualified professionals in your field, no less) is there's very little you or anyone else can do once the damage is done. Translators work across international lines basically at all times so trying to chase down money in another country is next to impossible. Do yourself a favor and stick to the main roads where money is concerned.

Translation tips

Glossaries

For those of you unfamiliar with glossaries, let's get into the basics.

Agencies may provide you with glossaries for specific end clients to ensure terminology is consistent across the board.

Individual translators sometimes create their own glossaries. You can make them for individual jobs or even make a master glossary over the course of your career. I personally don't think it's worth the time to create and carefully maintain a master glossary but instead write down important terms and their translations for each job I'm working on.

Do your research and pick your terms carefully **from the beginning**. It's a huge waste of time to have to change terms after the fact so use these religiously.

Volume per day

The volume of work you do depends on a lot of things but is somewhere in the neighborhood of **2,000** words for **human translation** or **4,000** for **MTPE**. Beginning translators should focus more on quality than speed so don't rush through work for the sake of it.

The volume you do also depends on the **difficulty** of a particular job or the **area of specialization**. Some jobs are considerably harder or more research-intensive than others which is why it's important to review jobs carefully before accepting them. The longer you translate, the better you'll be at estimating your average speed.

As a final note, *please* don't take a job if you don't have enough time for it! Avoid missing deadlines or delivering sloppy work at all costs because good work is what keeps you in business.

Determining your rate

The first thing to clarify is that most translators and agencies use a **rate per word**. It most often refers to the **price paid per source word**. For example, if a job is 1,000 words and the rate per word is \$.05, the price for the job would be \$50.00. Proofreading or editing rates are also usually also calculated on a per-word basis.

Alternatively, translation is charged at an **hourly rate**. There are a few agencies which pay translators **per line**. If you work for an agency and have a standard rate, you may also have different rates for some clients, if you're a preferred translator, rush jobs, etc.

To this day, I'm still confused by what to charge and I've been in business for ten years. It's not that rates are a secret; you can easily look them up anywhere. It's just that even if you establish a rate, **it may vary** depending on the job, area of specialization, deadline, etc.

There's no way to talk about rate without mentioning the role of MTPE. Most human translations have been replaced with machine translation post-editing or MTPE which means that translators

are expected to work twice as fast. The result is a rate per word which has essentially been **cut in half** so holding out for better pay is likely a losing strategy in the digital age.

The other thing worth noting is that many freelance translators work almost exclusively for agencies. If that's the case, whatever rate you charge is **hypothetical** because agencies pay substantially less than the going rate in any given language pair. Even if you're working for one agency in a single area of specialization, the rate per word you're offered may vary considerably by job.

I don't mean to suggest that it's fair to offer translators **terrible rates** because as common as that is, it's not a good practice. The quality of work suffers, clients aren't happy with the final product and things go downhill from there. However, what I really mean to say more generally is that you should be somewhat flexible because rates aren't set in stone. Factors like the economy and technology play important roles in our industry so your rate will almost certainly reflect that.

Speed vs. quality

In the rates section, I alluded to the overhaul of the industry thanks to MTPE. What it also amounts to (in my professional experienced opinion) is an unfortunate prioritization of speed over quality. Demanding that translators work very quickly means we have less time for necessary aspects of the job like research, verification of official titles or rephrasing to best fit the target language. It's a costly mistake to slide these things under the rug.

The danger is that hasty translation leads to an uptick in errors and mistranslations. Things like the nuance of language or natural phrasing become secondary to making minimal technical corrections. Agencies offer specific training to that end and customers complain the translation sounds mechanical. It's like we're encouraged to do the bare minimum yet shocked by poor results. As much as technology is the wave of the future, it's no excuse to sacrifice the quality of your work. I can't tell you how many times I've seen basically untouched MTPE content in TMs or obvious typos that went completely unnoticed. Good translation is all about solid writing so start putting some thought into your words and some pride into your content.

Areas of specialization

Translation as a field is fairly broad so most translators choose to specialize in a few areas of specialization. Beginning translators would benefit from gaining experience in nearly any subject area but it's wise to avoid highly specialized or difficult texts if they're not in your wheelhouse.

Technique

Since I never studied translation as a subject, I don't know how it's taught. I have had the good fortune of meeting and speaking other translators or interpreters over time and have come to the conclusion that our approach to language is much more individualized than you might assume.

I'll also say the longer I translate, the more I value reading. Obviously, accuracy is hugely important to translation and requires ongoing reading and research for every job you do. Let's not forget that this job is all about **the ability to write well** so don't slap some words on a page and call it a day.

So what does writing or translating well mean in real terms?

- Keep reading (at least occasionally) in your free time
- Research unclear grammar or writing standards on a regular basis
- Highlight sentences or segments you aren't sure about so you can check them again later
- Spend extra time on difficult passages
- Be very specific and consistent with your terminology
- Emphasize natural language and ease of comprehension in the target language
- Read about the subject you're translating in both languages particularly for tricky terminology or concepts you're unfamiliar with. There's no way to translate well if you don't understand the content.
- Change the sentence format if it sounds better in the target language
- Do what's standard in the target language even if you have to defend it to a client or PM
- Write with your audience in mind
- Remember your role as an invisible hand; translate well without a trace

Being **careful about your craft** is one of the best ways to keep yourself in business. Clients may come back to you with a higher pay, a preferred translator role, glossary requests, etc. and agencies will give you better jobs, important end clients or more offers if you've demonstrated you're worth it.

The last thing I want to say about technique is that you can be a skilled translator without needing to know every single word by heart. Our job involves continuous learning and context clues so don't expect yourself to be superhuman. Develop your own technique over time and trust the process.

General advice

A lot of these things may sound obvious but they could surprise you if you're trying to juggle multiple jobs and entrepreneurial roles at once. Here are a few words to the wise:

Write a brief list of all your jobs including the assigning PM, description and deadline. Check it often (i.e. multiple times a day). Forgetting a job or mixing up deadlines could get you fired and working on lots of little things is confusing for anyone.

Carefully read/review a job offer before committing to anything. If it's harder than you guessed or will take you longer to do, you'll still get paid the same price or need to meet the same deadline.

Turn down at least as much as you accept. In the beginning, I was afraid to say no to anything because I thought my PMs would think I wasn't interested in working. It's actually much better to be choosy within reason. Avoid taking jobs you don't feel comfortable with (and at a certain point, even the ones you'd rather not do). The main objective is being a reliable translator.

Stay on top of your financial records. This one is obvious but important! If you don't update your records and submit your records in a timely manner, it could cause some problems. Most agencies require that you submit your invoices within a certain amount of time of receiving the PO (often 30, 45, or 60 days). Besides that, billing is a hassle, you won't remember the details of older jobs and it just turns into a headache.

Don't work on projects that require collaboration with other translators. I get it; that sounds harsh and unwarranted. The thing is you don't know them, you don't know what problems they could bring to the table and you won't be paid more. It's just extra work and potential stress.

If an agency splits a job between translators and you don't have to do anything but adhere to normal instructions, it's a different story. I can't speak to the legalities of outsourcing agency work and wouldn't recommend it. Based on personal experience, I can tell you that collaboration means handling a flakey translator plus his/her last-minute, unqualified replacements and the aftermath. Don't do it.

Read and reread the job-specific directions before getting started. Reread them throughout your translation. Usually, PMs expect you to review all the files they send you for a job almost immediately after you've claimed it because mistakes happen and you might be missing files. You'll need to tell them ASAP.

Plan around weekends off. Freelancers can work whenever they need to and that's a great thing. However, agencies may have limited staff on weekends so try to get all your questions answered for a Monday deadline by Friday.

Remember to check the time zone. Translators work for clients in other time zones all the time. Some job offers and invoices list the deadline and time zone to be clear but ASK if there's any hesitation.

Work for multiple agencies. The translation industry is inconsistent in terms of work volume. It's also prone to slow and busy times of year, last-minute changes, changes in clientele, etc. Doing most of your work for one agency may mean you get big jobs but you've got to have a plan B when things are slow.

Raise your rates over time. If you've been working for a single translator or a small agency for a while and have a good rapport, you can raise your rates with them. It's worth a try at the very least. If they're happy with your work and you go up incrementally, the worst that can happen is being told no or that it might impact your work volume.

Keep learning. You'll need to do research about individual jobs and update yourself on writing standards, grammar resources, etc. on an ongoing basis. Isn't that half of what makes this job so fun anyway?

Find social support. Although not strictly necessary, it may be helpful to make another translator friend or two to compare notes. They might have timely information about available jobs or advice for tricky work situations. If you don't know one in person, you could consider attending a foreign language Meetup in your area (post-Covid), joining a translation book club or searching for fellow translators on language learning apps. It's like having a self-appointed work friend and mentor in one!

Final thoughts

Becoming a translator involves more than just proficiency in a second language. You'll need to familiarize yourself with terms, industry standards, basic bookkeeping and online work culture. You'll also develop your writing and research skills and get used to continuous learning. Everything from this point on involves **building on your baseline** so you're already in a good place.

Are there **other things you'd suggest** to new translators or things you would have done differently? Have you learned some new hacks since starting your translation career or changed your ways? **Feel free to share.** In the meantime, thank you for your readership and thoughtful consideration and I hope to see you again!