



How to Successfully Tackle Translation Tests

If approached with the right mindset, translation tests can be a professionally enriching experience for translators.

It's safe to say that most translators don't consider translation tests to be their favorite part of the job. In fact, it might be the most dreaded part of a translator's day. But it doesn't have to be that way! As we all know, translation tests are the way most companies judge our work and ultimately hire us, so they're here to stay. When approached with the right mindset, these tests can actually be a professionally enriching experience (seriously!). And you must be mindful that there's a lot more being judged than your translation ability.

When I first launched my career as a freelance translator, I had so many questions about what clients really wanted from a translation test. After many years working as a full-time translator, and now

with a rather large number of translation tests under my belt, I've learned that both failure and success on these tests can be great teachers.

READ THE INSTRUCTIONS

This first tip seems obvious, but it cannot be taken for granted (in fact, it's worth spending two full paragraphs covering it!). Before you work on any translation test you need to know exactly what the client wants you to do. Does the translation test have a deadline? In what format should it be returned? Are there character restrictions? Are there any specific instructions included with the test package? Companies are testing your ability to follow instructions as much

as your translation skills. Make sure you review the email exchange and follow any instructions included in the body of the email as well as in the document itself. Sometimes instructions are included in the translation file. **WARNING:** review Excel files carefully because one of those tabs might include your instructions.

You should also think about the unstated expectations based on your background knowledge of the client. Some clients seek a creative translation, while others might care about the localization for a specific target market. Knowing that information ahead of time will help you meet, and hopefully exceed, the client's expectations.

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WHEN IN DOUBT, JUST ASK!

If anything in the instructions isn't clear, make sure you ask for clarification—don't take anything for granted. If the client didn't provide reference material, a glossary, a style guide, special instructions about the language variant, or the level of formality of the translation test—ask about it! The client might not be able to provide you with any of this information, but it never hurts to ask. By asking for a confirmation or clarification, it shows that you're being attentive to the instructions and striving to meet their expectations. Additionally, it shows that you realize extra material may be necessary when working on a project.

For many years I assumed that companies didn't send any additional material because they wanted to see how I was able to “fend for myself,” but this assumption has cost me. On one occasion, I didn't pass a very important translation test because the terminology was not what the client wanted. I went back to the client and explained that



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I hadn't been sent a terminology list and that was why I couldn't use their preferred lexicon. They told me that I should have *asked* for a glossary, and that they would have given it to me had I asked for it.

Looking back, I now realize that the company was testing whether or not I would be proactive in requesting whatever I needed to render an accurate translation that met their terminology preferences. So, when in doubt, ask for more references and specifics. The worst thing that can happen is that they won't give you any. However, taking the initiative to be proactive can make all the difference!

RESEARCH SMART

If you're not provided with any reference material, you'll need to use your ability to do online research following commonly accepted guidelines. It's important that you refer to official glossaries and that you're able to cite references to the terminology you use, should this be required. By researching, you might be able to find out where the

text has been extracted from online. While this scenario isn't likely, I have seen it happen more than once! This deep-dive for company intel can give you more information about the client's background and terminology preferences. In fact, having a curious spirit is one of the most important traits of a successful translator. Translation tests can have specific terminology on an obscure subject matter, and even though you won't always be an expert on the topic, what matters is your ability to research and find accurate terminology.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL

A translator's attention to detail is as much on display as anything else. Translation tests are bound to have tricky sentences, segments that cannot be translated directly and might need complete rewording in the target language, etc. It's your job to identify those areas and resolve them to the best of your knowledge and ability. In an ambiguous situation, it's sometimes a good idea to leave a comment. I suggest you leave a sentence or two

explaining why you chose a certain word or phrase, such as "More context is required here in order to make the best possible translation. Could you please clarify the ambiguity in the part that reads [. . .]?" Include the note in the body of the delivery email or use track changes to mark it up within the file you send back.

What are some details to ensure your success? You may need to flag a mistake in the source text, segments that need to be "transcreated" entirely (here, your choice needs to be explained), the use of character restrictions, reference links in need of localization, or even the gender of the target audience. Other details to keep in mind are how acronyms should be treated, measurements, and alphabetical order.

THE TWO Ps: PROOFREAD AND BE PUNCTUAL!

Your work is not finished after you're done with the translation. Once you've got it all down on paper, you reach the most critical part of the job: proofreading. Proofreading your own work is important in any translation project, but it's an absolutely critical stage to passing a translation test. Ideally, try to step away from the project and come back to it the next day, allowing you to examine your work with fresh eyes. If there's no specific deadline, take advantage of the extra time to proofread your work well. The best case scenario allows you to proofread more than once with intervals of time in between each readthrough.

Resist the temptation to have your work proofread by another translator. The test is meant to judge *your* translation skills alone. Unless you plan to work with a particular proofreader on all of your projects, you need to recreate the real scenario and produce the translation quality that you'll be able to live up to consistently.

I cannot stress the importance of punctuality enough. If the translation test has a set deadline, you need to meet it. Companies are testing you on your ability to meet deadlines, because

deadlines are often as important to the client as the quality of your translation. If the test doesn't have a set deadline, make sure you take a reasonable amount of time to get it back to the client. In my opinion, a good rule of thumb is to send it back between three to five days after you receive it. This timeline is reasonable for a translation test of 500 words or less, but it depends on your schedule and the client's schedule.

ALWAYS ASK FOR FEEDBACK

Whatever the outcome of your test, always ask for feedback. Feedback is a great way to learn more about the client's expectations and, frankly, it's also a great way to learn from any mistakes you might have made. Some companies will be very open with their feedback. They might even give you a markup of the document and show you the comments their reviewer made on your work. Other companies are

more secretive. They might not tell you anything about your results on the test, but it's always worth it to ask.

If you've passed a translation test, it's an excellent opportunity to learn about what you're doing right. Did you get any comments back? What aspects of your translation did they like the most? Any phrases or particular terms that they would ask you to change the next time?

PRACTICE AND LEARN

Translation tests don't have to be a burden. Approached the right way, they're just great practice. Consider each one as an opportunity to demonstrate what a great translator you are and to learn about your strengths and weaknesses. Even if you don't agree with the reviewer's comments, you can, for example, learn that the client is not a good fit. That's valuable information! Take each translation test and make it a fun challenge to learn from the experience.

Translation tests are only a small window into what it could be like to work for a particular client, and for the client to get a sense of what it could be like to work with you. The real test will be an actual project you undertake, with a set deadline, and specific instructions and guidelines to follow. Only then will you finally know if the relationship will prosper! ●



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