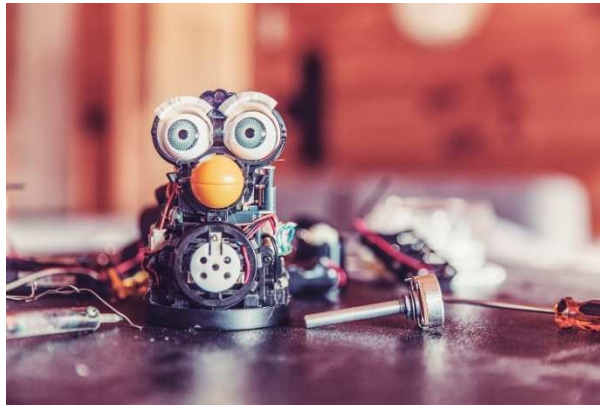


# Save Time and Money – Tip No 1: Don't DIY



First things first, if you want to save time and money on translations, remember this rule:

## Resist the temptation to do it yourself. Full stop.

Speaking is not writing. Oral fluency does not guarantee smooth, stylish writing, especially in another language!

Even if you regularly negotiate successfully in French, German or Spanish, and spend lots of time in the countries where those languages are spoken, 99 times out of 100 your written command of a foreign language will be immediately recognised as “foreign”.

**If you wish to project an international image, you will probably be better served by a less ethnic approach. In many cultures, awkward or sloppy use of the local language – especially by a native English speaker – is not amusing. It is insulting.**

For non-linguists, buying in translation is often a source of frustration. The suggestions in this blog post are aimed at reducing your stress and helping you save time and money on translations.

## A universal truth?

The sheer variety of translation projects is daunting. So daunting, in fact, that even experts sometimes wonder if there is any single piece of advice that applies to all translation projects:

“Always do X.” “Never do Y.” “Do Z, and you’re home free.”

How about this:

**In every translation project, the buyer and the translation service provider (translator or translation team) should agree in advance on a set of specifications to be followed while carrying out the project.**

This statement is more powerful than it might appear. It provides the basis for a universal definition:

**The quality of a translation is the degree to which it follows the agreed-upon specifications. Simple but true.**

If you don’t identify what you want up front—or do identify it but those instructions don’t reach the person doing the work, or are not understood by him or her—you are unlikely to get a good translation. Patching up a poor translation definitely won’t help you save time and money, since it may also mean patching up your image and reputation if you have inadvertently offended (“I didn’t know X meant that in Colombian Spanish!...”) or left readers grappling with an incomprehensible phrase. Ask any translation service provider, and you’ll get a raft of examples of lost time and budget due to crossed wires.

A European lens manufacturer printed the English version of its annual report in full colour with a typographical error on the front cover: “Optical Products Worldwide”. The company and the translation supplier each thought the other was proofreading. The covers were pulped and reprinted (at considerable cost).

Failed translation projects are as different as frogs and falcons, but they have one thing in common: time, money and frustration could have been saved if both sides had agreed in advance who did what, when and how. If they had drawn up a set of specifications. Learn about them below as they will enable you to save time and money on your future translations projects.

## Time, money and image...

Translation is a risky business, as Mead Johnson Nutritionals of Indiana found out a few years back, when misleading Spanish instructions on bilingual labels forced it to recall 4.6 million cans of Nutramigen Baby Formula. Following the flawed directions could have caused illness or even death, said company officials.

Feedback from sharp-eyed linguists has served Swedish housewares company Ikea well. “Svalka” means “refreshing” in Swedish—a fine choice for a line of drinking glasses, thought management. Unfortunately it means “landfill” in Russian. (The company’s Moscow team axed the final “a” for glasses sold locally, retaining an exotic flavour while avoiding an unfortunate association.)



A California manufacturer of medical equipment sold a device in France without a French translation of the instructions for using it, wrongly assuming that all the operators would be fluent in English. In France, French language documentation is required by law. Far worse: patients died from radiation overdoses administered by poorly informed technicians.

## So how do you Save Time and Money on Translations?

### Top 10 Specifications

The bare-bones specifications from which many others are derived are:

1. the audience and
2. the purpose of the translation.

Besides these, the most basic specifications are also the best known:

3. The Deadline
4. The Price
5. The Subject area and type of text
6. The Source language and regional variation
7. The Format (word processing file? XML?)
8. The Volume (how many words, characters, etc.)
9. The Target language and regional variation

That makes nine. For an even ten, we would add:

10. Identification of the steps to be followed during the production phase, after analysing the source text. These steps are essentially the same in both the American and European standards. Here are the most basic ones: translation, bilingual checking and monolingual checking.

An absolutely critical part of this tenth specification is to identify who is responsible for each step of the production phase, and to define the specialized know-how of each person (for example, subject-matter expertise). If any basic step is going to be skipped, that should be noted, and a reason given. In the “optical products” example above, if the specifications had indicated who was responsible for proofreading, the reports would not have had to be reprinted.

Following the above guidelines will help you save time and money on your future translation projects, reduce the risk of ruining your reputation and allow your business to grow in a way you would expect it to, without any nasty surprises.

## How to get the standards

### THE EUROPEAN STANDARD

To find out more about the European standard, see:

<http://www.cen.eu/cenorm/aboutus/index.asp>

To obtain a copy of the European standard, contact the standards body in one of the 27 European countries that belong to CEN: <http://www.cen.eu/cenorm/members/members/index.asp> (search for EN 15038)

### THE AMERICAN STANDARD

To find out more about the ASTM standard or to obtain a copy of it, see:

<http://www.astm.org> (search for F 2575)

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