Writing for a global audience
25 Do's and Don'ts

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Writing localization friendly is not doing extra work, but doing it in a better way.

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Surprisingly, companies invest heavily in their technical or marketing writers while providing little guidance or training on how to prepare documents for international exposure to their teams. Writers too often focus on an English audience when crafting content. They forget that their text will serve as a base for content in other languages via translation.

Regardless of the excellence of your translation team, the quality of translated files may not be as good as you would like if the English text is not written with localization in mind. Naturally, a quality translation is dependent on how well the original text is written.

Proper training of writers and developers alike will help avoid costly mistakes while vastly improving translation outcome.

Remember, the cost of a single error in the source document is multiplied by the number of languages that are involved in the localization process.

Do it right from the beginning.

Do's and Don'ts when Writing for a Global Audience

1. Write simple and short sentences. Avoid using more than 20 words in any sentence. The simpler the sentence, the easier it is to translate.

2. Be direct and avoid unnecessary words. Do not try to polish your sentences unless you are writing a marketing piece that requires it.

3. Beware of slang and colloquialisms. Informal words and phrases that we use in everyday conversations should be avoided.

4. Use consistent terminology. Use the same word to describe the same action.
   Example: Stick with "Click" if that is how you begin. Avoid changing to "Press" or "Hit" later on.

   Glossaries provide explanation for product specific items and functions.

5. Develop glossaries and include explanatory context for all product-specific and specialized terms. Keep a separate list of terms that have special meanings as you write.

6. Use consistent styles.
   Example: Do not use single quotation marks for button names ('Submit') and then suddenly switch to double quotation marks ("Submit"). Stick with what you begin with.

7. Provide context for your main ideas.
   Example: "Operator" could mean anything. Ask yourself whether a native English speaker could easily understand the term.

8. Specify ahead of time which words don't need to be translated, such as product names. Add these to the glossary you are creating.

9. Allow for text expansion of up to 30% of the original text. Don't use the maximum allowed space in the layout for English and ask your translators to do the same. It is just not going to work.

10. Use active voice. Passive voice can be confusing and ambiguous.

11. Use simples verb formats.
Example: Use "make" instead of "utilize."

12. Make list items complete sentences.

13. Make the list items parallel in structure.

14. Be careful with phone numbers. Their format can be practically anything from four digits to ten digits, or they can even have letters.
Example: 1-800-GO-GLOBAL

In Polish the word "her" will be translated differently, depending on the sentence.

"I saw her" and "I didn't meet with her" will use two different words: "ją" vs. "jej". It is better to avoid using pronouns for variables.

Many European cell phone numbers do not have area codes, and for an international audience it is important to include the country code. Only use numeric characters.

15. Limit pronouns as they call for disaster.
Example: The French word "il"' could mean "he" or "it", so your subject may be unclear to a French reader. Additionally, pronouns may change depending on the context.

16. Replace pronouns with nouns wherever possible. Write, "The event was very popular," instead of, "It was very popular."

17. Be smart about the use of variables. Different languages use different word orders, and gender specific languages may use different genders for certain objects. The sentence may lack sense after inserting a variable.

18. Specify if a noun is plural or singular.
Example: "Mail" can be both plural or singular in English. However, the translation will vary in most languages depending on if it is a singular or plural form.

19. Avoid negative constructions.
Example: Use "Sign up to access the content," instead of "You cannot access the content without signing up."

20. Avoid string concatenation; in other words, do not split sentences with the hope of reusing the same content.
Example: It is a common mistake to do, "Our newest product [%productname%] is going to be released on January 12." Even though English will work fine by using the same %productname%

in different sentences, this simply won't work for some languages. The sentence syntax will change in many languages, which will require additional articles or modifications of the name.

Avoid concatenation. Avoid idioms in order to eliminate confusion. The translation will not be correct if the translator misunderstands the idiom.

21. Avoid "invisible plurals." These are usually two-word phrases (noun + noun), in which it is not clear whether the first noun is meant to be singular or plural.
Example: Is "program update" an update of one program or a general procedure for multiple programs?

Example: Is "file retrieval" going to retrieve a single file or multiple files?

22. Avoid the overuse of abbreviations and special symbols. Provide an explanation in the reference file or glossary if you need to use abbreviations.

23. Proofread your text for typos and inconsistencies before you send it out to translators. Your translation team cannot be responsible for mistakes that originate from the original text.

24. Make sure that spaces after periods are properly inserted. Many translation companies and professional translators use translation tools for efficiency and better quality. These tools will automatically match the source format; In other words, if you miss a space after period, the space will also be missed in the translated file.

25. Make sure your text is final before you submit it for translation. Additional updates to the text will impact the price and schedule, since it will require re-translation or modification.

Contact Globalme at info@globalme.net if you need additional help on writing content for a global audience.

Globalme is a Vancouver based language services provider. We offer translation, voice-over, foreign transcription and localization solutions to a variety of industries. Our innovative team works closely with our clients to re-design, develop and deliver products that are adapted for worldwide markets.

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