For non-linguists, contracting out a translation can be daunting. Translations are performed in a variety of settings, either by a translator working alone, a translation agency or any combination of in-house staff and external provokers. (For the sake of expediency in this article, we will simply speak of a ‘translation provider’.)

In many ways, medical writers and translators work under similar circumstances. Their tasks as language professionals are indispensable, and yet they are often asked to perform under disadvantageous conditions and timelines. This article provides a brief guide to facilitating your work with a translation provider to ensure that your translation project is processed smoothly.

**The profile you want your translation provider to have**

The first step is choosing a translation provider. It is crucial to remember that there is a danger in using language students, language tutors or bilingual staff, as they may not have appropriate translation skills. Foreign-language competence is no guarantee of translatorial competence. The translation provider you choose needs to have ample experience in translating documentation in your industry and will either have a degree in translation with specialization in your industry or extensive industry experience. Furthermore, they are likely to be registered with one of the national accredited professional associations (such as the ATA in the US; the BDÜ or ADÜ in Germany; the CIoL or ITI in the UK; the ESIF in France; etc.). If you don’t know where to start looking for a translator, these associations can offer you more support than you will find by looking in the yellow pages.

**The translation process and your role in it**

It is also essential for translators to have a contact person they can approach with the questions which will inevitably arise about your company’s in-house style and potential discrepancies or errors in the source text. Whenever possible, please provide parallel texts or relevant publications in either language; other helpful tools include a company style guide or a master list of preferred terminology (such as whether you speak of participants, subjects, volunteers, etc.). A well-maintained company web site, if present, will also be a good resource. Style guides and parallel texts obviously make the translator’s work easier, but they are more than just a helpful timesaver: they ensure a uniform style and consistent terminology across all documentation. A competent translator will often ask about your target audience or stylistic preferences (such as American vs. British English) during the briefing.

Be prepared: a good translator will strip down the text and sentences and will often notice weak spots in the original documentation. If there are any ambiguities in the source text, a good translator will find them and contact you to resolve them. (One example is the word ‘should’, which can pose problems when being translated into other languages. Does the statement like ‘The patient should have a blood test every other week’ mean that ‘ought to if possible’ or ‘must’?) Some people may be put off when a translator is inquisitive, or they may see such questions as an additional source of work. Please rest assured, however, that language professionals are not asking you questions because they are too lazy to look things up themselves. You want to make sure that your translator to be adequately informed about the job.

**What you should know before commissioning a translation**

Standard practice varies from country to country, but translations are most frequently billed by the line or word. It is impossible to provide a general guideline about the range of prices you may encounter, but you may safely assume that the price will increase in proportion to the specialist knowledge that is needed for the text and/or the deadline. However, to save on translations costs, it is always a good idea to decide jointly with your clients or your translation provider on what is actually relevant to your target audience, what the message is you want to pass on and what really needs to be translated. The volume of translation needed may be much smaller than your existing documentation. Also, when you write your original documents, you can facilitate things for the translator by keeping your target audience in mind. For example, internationalize phone and fax numbers by using international dialling codes.

The life cycle of the text should be taken into account before commissioning a translation. It may seem like a statement of the obvious, but the translator should be given the final draft of the text you are working on, as opposed to an earlier draft that may still undergo revision. Much like medical writers, translators are frequently treated as the proverbial low man on the totem pole, and in larger projects there can be smaller delays that eat away at the time that is allocated for the translation. Giving the translator an earlier
Your translation project go pear-shaped. To prevent problems and create the best possible environment for a good translation, please keep the following in mind:

- Carefully choose the people you want to work with; check their credentials and make sure they have the right background and professional ethic about their work.
- Allow adequate time for the translation process within the life cycle of your publication, and consult with the translation provider about realistic deadlines.
- Create or provide stylistic guidelines, a terminology database and parallel texts if available.
- Make sure the source text contains no ambiguities, as these may be amplified by the translation process.
- Encourage your translation provider to ask questions and make comments.
- If possible, schedule a proofreading phase by someone who is both an industry specialist and native speaker, or better yet also a member of your target audience.
- Keep dynamic lines of communication open to facilitate the clarity of the task definition and good project management.
- Your input is vital, so please, get involved!

**Quality control**

In a typical translation project, there are several vital roles, and ideally, they will be held by different people. The project team should consist of a translator, an editor who will review the translation, offer another view on any ambiguities in the source text, etc.; and a proofreader who will provide insight and knowledge from the industry. This multi-stage process is crucial because it allows different pairs of eyes to evaluate the source and target texts. It is often the case that your translation provider will ask you to find or contact a proofreader, who may be one of your associates or a client who is an end user of the translated documentation. This person will be able to spot any type of discrepancies with regard to market trends or local issues that the translation provider may not be aware of. Whatever your role in this process is, get involved, and always tell your translation provider who will be reading the documentation, in which context and on which media. It will ensure things are on the right path from the start. Also, if your documents have to be typeset, always let the translation provider read the typeset version.

If you question the quality of the translation, the first person you need to talk to is the translation provider. Some clients expect translations to be as idiomatic and ‘natural-sounding’ as possible, whereas others expect to find strong parallels between the source text and the target text, if not literal translations. In our experience, English-language texts are particularly likely to undergo scrutiny because English is widely spoken and people often have strong opinions about how a translation should read. There can be multiple ways to render an idea in a foreign language, and the translation provider can always explain the rationale for terminology and stylistic choices. So take time to discuss these issues if they arise with the translation provider. It is not a good idea to pass the translation on to someone else for light editing (such as an officemate who may be fluent in the language in question but might not appreciate in-depth terminology or stylistic issues).

Your feedback on the final translation is always a valuable tool so the translation provider can update terminology and make sure that further documentation will be consistently translated using your most current wording. It is essential to maintain this dynamic communication, especially as the translation process in life sciences and the pharma industry takes place in a fast-paced environment where concepts and terminology are in constant evolution.

So now you know more about the factors which can make your translation project go pear-shaped. To prevent problems and create the best possible environment for a good translation, please keep the following in mind:

- Carefully choose the people you want to work with; check their credentials and make sure they have the right background and professional ethic about their work.
- Allow adequate time for the translation process within the life cycle of your publication, and consult with the translation provider about realistic deadlines.
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- Your input is vital, so please, get involved!

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**There’s still time to win a free banquet ticket for EMWA’s Barcelona conference!**

The closing date for the competition on pages 179-80 of the last issue of *TWS (2007 16(4))* has been extended to 7 April. You can also access these pages of the journal in the member’s only section of www.emwa.org.

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**Comprise, consist of and include**

Fowler’s *Modern English Usage* states of *comprise* and *include*: “As used in newspapers, these may be called a pair of working and stylish words. The one used in ordinary life is *include*; the inferior kind of journalist therefore likes to impress readers with *comprise.*”

The following sentence appeared in Editor’s Choice in the *BMJ*’s issue dated 19 January 2008 and was sent to *TWS* with the comment “If the editor makes a mistake like that, what hope for the jobbing author?”

[Women with osteopenia] comprise more than half of the world’s postmenopausal women.

What is wrong with this sentence? For answer see page 20.