Writing for future adaptation and translation

While generally we should not sacrifice the needs of the primary audience, it is possible to adopt strategies and practices that support and facilitate the process of translating and adapting materials. You may find the following suggestions helpful when creating new materials or adapting existing instructional materials for translation.

Writing for future adaptation and translation

- Avoid the passive voice. Write in an active style.
- Write in short, clear sentences, avoiding ambiguity.
- Adopt a gender-neutral style.
- Consider international readers when writing your document, and eliminate regionalisms, colloquialisms, and expressions that may not translate well.
- Avoid non-standard terminology and jargon. If your industry relies on jargon, and you know more standard terms exist, try to include them on first mention.
- Humor can be effective in any language, but injecting culturally-specific humor (such as word plays based on sports terminology, or little-known cultural references) can be obscure to readers from other cultures.
- Consider cultural differences in social interactions, especially in materials centered on scenarios and dialogue.
- When using acronyms and abbreviations, always spell them out completely on first mention, and use them consistently throughout the document.
- Use standard international units. The International System of Units (SI) is the most widely used system of measurement, and has been adopted by most countries. For copy written in the United States, we recommend including parenthetical conversions to SI units.
- Decimal and thousands separators can create confusion, and require translators to carefully change commas and periods, a laborious task for documents containing many figures. Consider adopting the SI-recommended system, which calls for using a non-breaking space as thousands separator, and either a comma or a period as decimal separator (e.g.: 1 000 000.00 or 1 000 000,00). In this way, regardless of the decimal separator used, there is no possibility of confusion, and the translator's task will be made easier.
- Avoid centering content (especially case studies) on a single geographic location. When using concrete geographical examples, clearly label geopolitical features, or consider using generic examples (without any specific geographic location).
- Avoid using imagery centered on a single geographic location, or that might be objectionable in other cultures.
- Avoid using graphics to display large amounts of text, such as tables. Besides making such text not searchable, extracting the text for translation recreating the graphic will be labor intensive. If you have graphics of this type, consider turning them into text-based content.
- Turn hyphenation off.

Delivery format

- Narration can be a useful presentation method, but text-based materials can be just as effective, and easier to work with. If using narration, provide a text-based option.
- Page and graphics layouts may need to change due to text expansion or target language conventions. Allow for flexible spacing of text and graphics whenever possible, especially for navigation menus.
- Create or adapt images with layers to facilitate the translation of labels and other text. Save the original source files so they can be used for translation.
- Allow for easy substitution of graphics and data products (from other locations and in other data formats).
- Consider the end-user of mobile technologies in your choice of file formats.
- Use generic, intuitive ways to display data, rather than organization-specific tools.

Localization

- Implement Unicode support (UTF-8), which will allow you to deliver content in virtually any language.
- When delivering content on web sites or creating software solutions, make sure the interface will allow for text expansion, especially for menu structures, dialog boxes, error messages, etc.
- Avoid concatenating strings in software, and make sure any concatenations are checked in the running software after translation.
- Date and time formats vary from locale to locale. Spelling out dates rather than using abbreviated forms can avoid confusion (for example, 6/12/12 can be read as 12 June or 6 December; 6 June 2012, makes it clear).
- Plan for allowing decimal separators to be changed appropriately for the target locale.
- Content formatting varies in different countries. For example, contact and support addresses, registration forms, and many other aspects may need to be adapted to allow for differences in first name/last name placement, address formatting, sorting options, etc.
- Quotation marks, dashes, parenthesis should be applied according to the grammatical rules of the target language. Some languages require spacing around punctuation marks, which should be entered as non-breaking spaces.
- Local contact information, such as general phone numbers, toll-free 800 numbers, etc. will need to be changed or adapted.
- Consider changing any images used in the source material that could be considered culturally inappropriate or insensitive.

Instructional considerations for adapting existing learning materials

- Can you just replace the cases and examples, or does the conceptual content also require revision?
- Separate conceptual content and cases to the degree possible, without violating principles of good instruction: The teaching of concepts and providing authentic practice should be well integrated.
- Offer a variety of exercise and content formats to increased utility for a variety of learning styles.
- Offer multiple examples to cover a variety of geographic conditions/climatological regimes.
- In some circumstances, it may be useful to fabricate a fictional case to accommodate alternative conditions.
- Be hemispheric-neutral whenever possible. Clearly state orientations or use examples from both hemispheres. Consider using universal terms, such as "poleward", "equator-ward", "austral", "boreal", etc. State clearly the geographic location of case studies and other examples.
- Remember that the data available drives the forecast processes. Build in flexibility to swap examples, and consider that the availability of some data sources may be limited.
- The available technologies also change the observation, forecast and forecast dissemination processes. Consider the cases of both technology-rich and technology-limited situations.

Adaptation of existing learning materials for translation

- Determine the highest priorities for adaptation (it may be too costly to translate everything).
- Adaptation may include removing pages of irrelevant content.
- Can you develop new, smaller resources that merely point to the existing content? In some cases, a completely new publication may be needed to meet local needs.
- Will it be easier to merely add new content without modifying the existing content?
- Involve content experts, instructional designers, and content developers. Consider having external advisors as well. Involve graphic artists for good layout decisions when translating and adapting graphics.
- Inform learners about important changes in the adapted resource.
- Take note of additional time required for potential copyright issues. Obtain rights in advance if possible.
- Consider converting to an easy-to-edit format (like Google doc) before rebuilding an instructional resource.