

Garbage in, garbage out!

GARBAGE IN, GARBAGE OUT!

Get better translations by writing translation friendly texts

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INTRODUCTION



Have you ever heard the expression “**Garbage in, garbage out**”, which is sometimes shortened to **GIGO**? It comes from computer science and it refers to the idea that if you provide nonsense input data to a computer program, then the resulting output data will be nonsense too. After all, computers are not actually smart and so they won’t fix up your flawed input. Instead, a computer will simply process the data that you supply. And if you supply nonsense or “garbage”, then all you get in return is more “garbage”. This same principle applies to **writing**.

Maybe you’ve had the experience of reading a set of instructions that was poorly written. Perhaps it contained some typos or some sentences that didn’t follow the usual rules of grammar. Some parts might have been ambiguous (for example, a word with more than one meaning) and you weren’t sure which interpretation was the correct one. You probably had to read the instructions more than once to try to puzzle out what you were expected to do, and maybe you even ended up doing the wrong thing. This type of experience is certainly frustrating!

Example: Disconnect port and drain lines.

This sentence could mean:

- Disconnect the port and disconnect the drain lines; or
- Disconnect the port lines and disconnect the drain the lines; or
- Disconnect the port and then drain the lines.

Now imagine that you had to not only read and understand the text but also translate it. If a text is not clear in the original language, how likely is it that the intended meaning will be successfully transferred into another language? Spoiler alert: it’s not very likely! Translation is a complex task, and the “garbage in, garbage out”

principle applies here too. In order to obtain a useful translation, you need to start with a text that is clear and **translation friendly**. The main goal of this Open Educational Resource (OER) is to help you to learn how to prepare translation friendly texts.

Why is this OER needed?

Many texts end up being translated. However, most writers do not specifically formulate their texts with translation in mind. Rather, translation is carried out as a completely separate process – sometimes as an afterthought – and translators simply have to work with the texts that they are given, whatever state they may be in! As a result, **translation is often an unnecessarily challenging and time-consuming task**. Projects are held up “waiting for the translation”, and they may also run over budget when the translation costs are higher than expected. Sometimes, the translation may even be of a lower quality because the original text is ambiguous or poorly constructed, leading to misinterpretations. This can happen when the translators are highly trained professionals, and it is even more likely to happen when the text is translated by an automatic translation tool (for example, [Google Translate](#), [DeepL Translator](#) or [Microsoft Translator](#)) – a solution that is being used more and more often. A key way of improving the output of the translation process is by improving the input (i.e., the original text). This entails learning how to **write with translation in mind** and crafting a text in such a way as to maximize its **translatability**.

Who is this OER for?

This OER is intended primarily for **anyone who works in a bi- or multilingual environment where texts are going to be translated into another language**. For instance, you might work at a bilingual institution such as the University of Ottawa or the Government of Canada, where most communications are provided in both English and French. By preparing your texts in a translation friendly way, you can help to ensure that the message will be clear to speakers of both languages.

But this OER can actually be helpful for **anyone who writes texts**, even if it's not in an organization that specifically aims to serve people in more than one language. Nowadays, it is not always possible predict whether a text will be translated. You might think that you are preparing a text for readers who speak one particular language (for example, English), but if that text is posted on a website, then a reader who is less comfortable in English could choose to translate it into their dominant language using a free online automatic translation tool, such as [Google Translate](#), [DeepL Translator](#) or [Microsoft Translator](#). Once a text has been written, there is *always* a possibility that it could be translated, so why not prepare it in a translation friendly way from the outset? Since translation friendly writing aims to be clear and unambiguous, your text will also be reader friendly. Win-win!

What's in this OER?

To help you prepare translation friendly texts, this OER will provide some information about what's involved in the translation process, how human translators and automatic translation tools differ, and what techniques you can use to make your text more translation friendly. Of course, this short OER will not turn you into a professional communicator. Professional writers hone their craft through extensive training and experience. However, this OER can help you to avoid some of the common pitfalls that make texts difficult to translate. In other words, it will help you to take out some of the “garbage”.

It's also important to note that even if a text is written in a translation friendly way, this does not necessarily make it a good candidate for automatic translation. The decision about whether or not a text should be translated by a professional translator or a computer tool depends on other factors too, such as the purpose of the text, the language combination and subject matter, and the level of quality needed. Developing your judgement about whether and when to use an automatic translation tool involves developing [machine translation literacy](#) skills, and this OER will help you to do that also.



**So are you ready to take out the garbage?
Let's get started!**

This OER is also available in French: [Médiocre à l'entrée](#)
[= médiocre à la sortie!](#)

WHAT IS TRANSLATION?

Although translation is all around us – such as in the subtitles or dubbed shows that we watch on Netflix or on food packaging or in apps such as [Google Translate](#), [DeepL Translator](#) or [Microsoft Translator](#) – many people don't have a deep appreciation of what's involved in translation. This is understandable since translation is a very specialized profession and it can take years of study and training to become an expert translator. But learning even a little bit about translation can help you to create texts that are more translation friendly. This means that your texts can be translated more easily and effectively and therefore be more useful to people who speak other languages.



To better understand what's involved in translation, it might help to begin by correcting some misperceptions. Unfortunately, popular science fiction shows, such as [Star Trek](#) or [Doctor Who](#), often give the impression that translation is a very easy task that can be accomplished in seconds with almost no effort. In reality, translation is a lot more complicated! Another commonly held misperception is that translation is like [code breaking](#) and that in order to crack the code, a translator just has to substitute each word in one language with a word in another language. However, what translators actually do is focus on transferring **the message or the ideas** that are contained in the original text, rather than worrying about translating each individual word. Every language has a different way of structuring and presenting ideas, which is why word-

for-word translation can often produce an unnatural sounding text. For instance, a word-for-word translation of the French phrase “la voiture rouge” into English would produce “the car red”. It's possible to understand the meaning, but that is not the most natural way of phrasing the idea in English. For anyone who is a fan of *Star Wars*, this might remind you of [the way that the character Yoda speaks](#). When he says “Ready are you?” or “Powerful you have become,” Yoda is using English words, but the way that he organizes them is likely based on the grammar of his native language. As sentences get longer and more complex, it becomes more and more difficult to produce meaningful literal or word-for-word translations. Therefore a translator's job is to look beyond the individual words and to identify and extract the underlying meaning or message from the original text, and then to reformulate that message in a natural way using words from the target language. This why a phrase such as “Je m'appelle Nico” in French is usually translated into English as “My name is Nico”, rather

than as the more literal option “I call myself Nico”, or why the French expression “Il pleut des cordes” (which literally means “It’s raining ropes”) is translated into English as “It’s raining cats and dogs”.

The importance of saying what you mean

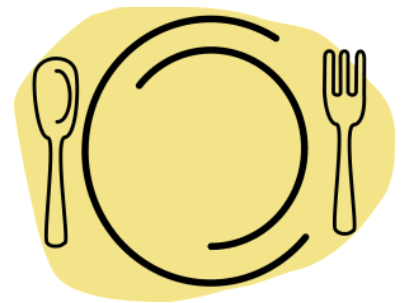
So if translation is really about translating **meaning**, rather than about translating individual words, then it’s very important for writers to express the meaning in a clear and unambiguous way so that a translator can fully understand the *intended* message and can then find the best way to express that in another language. If the message is not clear in the original text, then the translator may end up misunderstanding it and telling the readers of the translated version something very different.

Example: Flying airplanes can be dangerous.

The translation will differ depending on how the translator interprets the unclear text.

- **Meaning 1:** Airplanes that are in the air can be dangerous. = Les avions volants peuvent être dangereux.
- **Meaning 2:** The act of flying airplanes can be dangerous. = Piloter des avions peut être dangereux.

Problems can also be caused by **homophones**, which are words that have a similar sound but a different spelling and meaning. For instance, if you are working quickly, you might accidentally type “their” when you mean “there” (or “too” instead of “two”), and a spellchecker won’t catch this problem because they are both legitimate words. However, the equivalent words in French will be quite different (“là” vs “leur” or “aussi” vs “deux”). Sometimes even a seemingly small issue, such as a missing comma, can completely change the meaning of a sentence. Think of the difference between “Let’s eat, kids!” and “Let’s eat kids!”



Punctuation matters! You may be thinking that a missing comma is really not such a big deal, but faulty punctuation can end up costing millions. Check out these cautionary tales to learn more:

- [The \\$2-million comma](#)
- [Maine dairy drivers settle overtime case that hinged on an absent comma](#)

Find out more

To learn more about what's involved in translation, check out the open access introductory textbook [De-mystifying translation: Introducing translation to non-translators](#).

HUMAN TRANSLATORS AND AUTOMATIC TRANSLATION TOOLS: COMMON SENSE VS ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

As you have learned, getting a good translation depends heavily on the translator's ability to understand and extract meaning from the original text. These days, texts can be translated by people or by computers (for example, [Google Translate](#), [DeepL Translator](#), [Microsoft Translator](#) or [ChatGPT](#)), or sometimes by a combination of the two. But there are some significant differences between the way that people approach translation and the way that computers approach translation. Knowing more about the strengths and limitations of both people and computers can help you to better understand the risks involved in using automatic translation tools. In addition, knowing more about how people and computers translate can help you to prepare your texts in a more translation friendly way in order to increase the chance of getting a good quality translation.

Professional translators: they *get it!*



Before a translator can re-express a text in another language, they first have to understand what the original text is saying. Only once the meaning of the original text is clear can the translator begin the process of finding the best way to express that same message in another language. If a translator cannot understand the original text, then they cannot translate it effectively.

Because translators are highly trained professional communicators, they can sometimes puzzle out the intended meaning of a poorly constructed text before beginning to translate it. For instance, translators can often spot typos, recognize faulty grammar, research ambiguous meanings, and compensate for a variety of

other types of issues in the original text. In other words, a professional translator would realize that the original sentence “Let’s eat kids!” is probably missing a comma and would know how to translate and punctuate the sentence correctly in the target language (i.e., “À table, les enfants!”). Of course, in the unlikely event that the

text happens to be about *cannibalism*, then a professional translator would know that the comma is *not* missing and they would translate accordingly (for example, “Mangeons des enfants”). Human translators are capable of understanding meaning, and they are able to use common sense, contextual cues, and real-world knowledge to help them to interpret the most likely meaning of a text, even when it is not expressed particularly well. But what about computers?

Automatic translation tools: pattern matching and counting

Free online automatic translation tools, such as [Google Translate](#), [DeepL Translator](#) or [Microsoft Translator](#), are becoming increasingly popular. Although these tools cannot replace professional translators in all circumstances, they can be helpful for meeting some types of translation needs. However, to get the most out of these free online tools, it pays to be careful about what you put into them. Remember: **garbage in, garbage out!**



Unlike people, computers do not actually understand language. They process it, but they don't understand it. So how do automatic translation tools work? The current approach to automatic translation is a data-driven approach known as **neural machine translation** or NMT. To make these data-driven tools work, they require data. In the case of translation, the data consist of texts that have already been translated by professional translators.

Computer scientists begin by gathering a VERY large collection of existing texts. This is called a **training corpus**. In the training corpus, they align the texts sentence by sentence, so that it is clear which sentences in the two languages are equivalent. For instance, here is a short excerpt that illustrates some aligned sentences that have been taken from the bilingual website of the University of Ottawa. The English and French texts have been aligned at the sentence level.

This is the University of Ottawa	Voici l'Université d'Ottawa
The University of Ottawa is the largest bilingual (English-French) university in the world.	L'Université d'Ottawa est la plus grande université bilingue (français-anglais) du monde.
Discover all the good reasons to choose the University of Ottawa.	Découvrez toutes les bonnes raisons de choisir l'Université d'Ottawa.
The University of Ottawa's campus is a walkable, compact village nestled in the core of vibrant Ottawa.	Niché au cœur de la dynamique ville d'Ottawa, le campus de l'Université d'Ottawa est un village compact et propice à la marche.
Located in the heart of Canada's capital, we have ready access to the great institutions of our country.	Située au cœur de la capitale du Canada, elle jouit d'un accès direct aux plus grandes institutions du pays.
We offer the space, expertise, tools and technologies to push the boundaries of knowledge and help you to become your best future self.	Nous vous offrons les espaces, les outils et les technologies pour que vous repoussiez les limites du savoir et deveniez la meilleure version de vous-même.
Join a community of bold, caring and engaged people like you to build a better society and a more sustainable world.	Joignez-vous à une communauté composée de gens audacieux, bienveillants et engagés comme vous pour bâtir une société meilleure et un monde plus durable.

Of course, this excerpt shows just a handful of sentences taken from one website, but to train an automatic translation tool effectively, a training corpus needs to have millions and millions of aligned sentences originating from many different sources.

Neural machine translation tools are based on *artificial* intelligence (AI), which means that the tool contains an *artificial* neural network. The emphasis on *artificial* is important here. People possess a real neural network (i.e., their brain) and are capable of truly understanding a text. In contrast, AI-based tools do not understand anything. Instead, they can only process texts using techniques such as pattern matching and counting. In this way, NMT tools can partially imitate what translators do, but not fully. NMT tools do not understand the underlying meaning of the texts; they only look for superficial similarities.

A term that is often associated with AI is **machine learning**, but the *learning* is also artificial. In the case of translation, a computer scientist will feed the very large training corpus of aligned sentences into the automatic translation tool, and the NMT tool will look for patterns. For example, it might identify the pattern “the University of Ottawa” in the English sentences, and then identify a corresponding pattern – “l'Université d'Ottawa” – in the French sentences. The computer doesn't understand the meaning of a text. It doesn't know what a university is or what a city is. It only sees patterns of characters, and it can count how often these occur. So the computer can keep track of the fact that it has seen multiple examples of the pattern “the University of Ottawa”, and it can note that whenever that pattern occurs in English, there is a corresponding pattern in French (i.e., “l'Université d'Ottawa”).

People can often learn new things by seeing just a few examples, but remember that computers are not actually learning. They are just looking for patterns. In order to be sure that what they are seeing is actually a pattern and not just an accidental combination of words, they need to see many, many examples. This is why

the training corpus for an automatic translation tool needs to have millions of texts. This is also why automatic translation tools make mistakes: they don't actually understand the text.

Unlike a person, a computer won't try to figure out what you *meant* to say. It will simply process what you actually said. A computer won't compensate for typos, poor grammar or other language issues. It will accept the problematic input and translate it "as is", which in all likelihood will result in a nonsensical translation. **Garbage in, garbage out!** Here are some translation that were generated by Google Translate. Because the English texts contain an error or can be interpreted in more than one way, the translations proposed by the automatic translation tool ended up being incorrect. Do you think that a human translator would have made these mistakes?

Original sentence	Translation into French that conveys the intended meaning	Translation into French proposed by Google Translate	Comment
The unhappy customer <u>flipped over</u> tables in the restaurant.	Le client mécontent a <u>renversé</u> les tables du restaurant.	Le client mécontent a <u>fait un saut</u> sur les tables du restaurant.	The verb "to flip" can be either transitive (to flip a thing) or intransitive (to do a flip oneself).
The airplane <u>sword</u> skyward.	L'avion <u>s'est envolé</u> vers le ciel.	<u>L'épée</u> de l'avion vers le ciel.	The words "sword" and "soared" are homophones with different meanings.
The company offered <u>four year long</u> scholarships.	L'entreprise a offert quatre bourses d'études <u>d'une durée d'un an</u> .	L'entreprise a offert des bourses d'études <u>d'une durée de quatre ans</u> .	The missing hyphen in "year-long" caused the number and duration of the scholarships to be mixed up.

Choosing between professional translators and computers



have a translation that is:

For translation projects, there are three competing factors to be taken into consideration: time, cost, and quality. Of course, in an ideal world, you could get a high-quality translation in a short time for a low cost. But in reality, it can be difficult to achieve all three at once, which is why this problem is known as the **triple constraint**. Usually, you can get two out of three, but you may need to compromise on the third one. For example, in the case of translation, you can

- **Fast** and **cheap**, but of **lower quality**;
- **Fast** and **good**, but **more expensive**;
- **Good** and **cheap**, but it **takes longer**.

Automatic translation tools are very fast, but they produce lower quality texts. Meanwhile, human translators are very good, but they take a bit longer. On the surface, online automatic translation tools seem to be cheap, but if the mistakes that they make have serious consequences, then this choice could end up being costly.

A key thing to take into account when choosing whether to use an automatic translation tool is **the consequence of getting a poor translation**. If the translation is for your own personal use or for internal use within your team or company, then the stakes are probably lower than if you plan to share the text widely or publish it on your company website. Likewise, if the content of the text is about planning the office holiday party or organizing a company softball team, the consequences of a poor translation will be relatively minor. In contrast, if the text is about a financial audit or a new product, then a low quality translation could have serious repercussions, such as tarnishing the company's reputation or even creating legal problems. Of course, there is a third option also, which is to ensure that a text that has been translated initially using an automatic translation tool will later be verified and, if necessary, corrected by a competent person.

In any case, regardless of whether your text will be translated by a person or by an automatic translation tool, **it pays to write in a clear and translation friendly way**. Even though human translators are more capable of spotting and correcting or compensating for problems in the original text (for example, typos, homophones, missing punctuation), a text that contains such problems will certainly slow a translator down, which could end up delaying or increasing the cost of a project. The upcoming sections will present some tips that you can use to create translation friendly texts.

TRANSLATION FRIENDLY WRITING



We live in a multilingual world. Some countries, such as Canada, Belgium, and Switzerland, have more than one official language, meaning that their governments have an obligation to provide many texts in all the official languages of that country. In other regions, groups of countries have decided to cooperate to develop various types of agreements to facilitate trade, immigration and travel. The European Union is a good example of a group

of independent nations working together to achieve common goals, and translation plays an important role in enabling them to communicate with one another. Even when there is no formal obligation for translation, there are many reasons why it makes sense to provide information in more than one language. Sometimes it might be for business reasons (for example, to increase sales), but other times it might simply be because it's kind or helpful to do so!

This OER seeks to raise awareness about the “**garbage in, garbage out**” phenomenon as it applies to writing for translation, and to provide some practical tips to help you improve your writing so that you or your readers can also obtain better translations. Remember that when creating a translation friendly text, the overall goal is to **write clearly and unambiguously**, so take the time to **plan your text** before you begin writing, and also to **proofread your text carefully** once it has been written.

Because every language has different features, there may be some structures that are problematic for certain languages but not for others. This OER focuses on providing tips that are not language specific and that could be helpful regardless of which language you are writing in.

Find out more

Some of the tips provided in the following sections have been inspired by brochures produced by the Translation Centre for the Bodies of the European Union, which can be freely downloaded from their website:

- [Writing for Translation](#)
- [Writing for Machine Translation](#)

You can also consult:

- [How to Write for Machine Translation](#) (KantanAI blog)
- [Writing for Machine Translation](#) (Isabella Massardo's blog)

TIP 1: USE PLAIN WORDS



The plain language movement is growing. According to the [International Plain Language Federation](#), “**A communication is in plain language if its wording, structure, and design are so clear that the intended readers can easily find what they need, understand what they find, and use that information.**”

Poor communication is expensive. Readers take longer to understand the texts, and they may need to call you for an explanation. They could make an error filling out a form, and then you need to restart the process. What’s more, as you have already learned, a poorly written text is also more difficult to translate. In contrast, if a text is well written, more people will be able to understand and act on your message quickly and appropriately—in one or more languages.

One of the main ways to write plainly is to choose common or everyday words—plain words—over their less common or more obscure equivalents. This strategy is beneficial when your text might be translated using an automatic translator. As explained previously, current systems use a data-driven approach, where the tool learns by looking at examples. Rare or obscure words are less likely to appear in the training corpus, whereas everyday words will be plentiful. This means that the automatic translation tool will be more familiar with the everyday words and will have a better chance of translating them correctly.

Find out more

- The [Language Portal of Canada](#) and the [Our Languages blog](#) contain numerous resources and links to help you learn more about plain language.
- If you want to have some fun, why not try the quizzes [Weed your words](#) and [Weed your words again](#) offered by the Language Portal of Canada?
- You can also use the free online app [Hemingway](#), a plain language checker that works a bit like a grammar checker, to obtain suggestions about how to write more plainly.

Try it!



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<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/garbageingarbageout/?p=75#h5p-2>

TIP 2: BE CONSISTENT WITH TERMINOLOGY



All languages contain synonyms, which are words that have a similar meaning (for example, “fast” and “speedy”). Using synonyms might appear to make a text more interesting, but sometimes synonyms can add confusion because it might not be clear to the reader whether you are referring to one thing in different ways, or to two different things. In addition, some synonyms are actually quasi-synonyms because although their meanings are similar, they are not exactly the same. In that case, substituting

one word for another could actually alter the meaning slightly – a difference that could be magnified after translation.

Some types of text, such as literature, emphasize style. However, many of the texts that we write are more functional or pragmatic in nature (for example, memos, reports, emails). To make a text more translation friendly, be consistent with the terms that you use. Even if repeating the term might seem a little boring, it will be clearer and the text is more likely to be translated correctly.

Find out more

- The University of Waterloo’s Writing and Communication Centre discuss [The power of synonyms: the good, the bad, and the in-between](#), with some helpful suggestions about when synonymy can cause problems.

Try it!



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<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/garbageingarbageout/?p=77#h5p-10>

TIP 3: AVOID ABBREVIATED FORMS



Abbreviations are shortened forms of words and we use them quite often when writing in order to save time and effort. However, the overuse or combination of too many abbreviated forms creates a sort of alphabet soup that can be challenging to decipher. While people may be able to piece together the intended meaning of an abbreviated form by using common sense or the surrounding context, these options are not available to an automatic translation tool, which doesn't understand anything. Therefore, abbreviated forms can cause a number of problems for

automatic translation.

Some abbreviations can refer to more than one long form (for example, *St.* can mean either *Street* or *Saint*). Others may be confused with a word (for example, *in* could mean the preposition *in* or the shortened form of *inch*). Acronyms, which combine the first letter of all the words in a phrase, are frequently written in all caps, but the newly formed word could be confused with an existing word (for example, does *PIN* mean *personal identification number*, or is it simply the word *pin* written in all caps?).

Another challenge is that some shortened forms do not have an official translation in another language, and so they should remain in the original language. For example, rather than having a different short form in each language, the short form [ISO](#) is used to denote the International Organization for Standardization in all languages. Therefore, it does not become IOS in English or OIN in French (for *Organisation internationale de normalisation*). Rather, it should always remain ISO regardless of the language in question. Because automatic translation tools are not smart, they may run into problems when they encounter and try to translate abbreviated forms.

Find out more

- In an article for the *Observer*, the professional magazine of the Association for Psychological Science, authors Andrew Hales, Kipling Williams and Joel Rector explain how [abbreviations](#)

can hamper communication and alienate the audience.

- Do you think that [FAST CARS](#) are meant to be driven? Well, think again...

Try it!



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<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/garbageingarbageout/?p=82#h5p-4>



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<https://ecampusontario.pressbooks.pub/garbageingarbageout/?p=82#h5p-5>

TIP 4: MINIMIZE THE USE OF PRONOUNS

Pronouns are words that can replace nouns or noun phrases. Substituting a pronoun for a noun can make a text seem less repetitive, but sometimes it can lead to confusion if it is not clear which noun the pronoun is replacing. The greater the distance between the pronoun and the noun, the more challenging it can be to connect the two. In the case of automatic translation, tools tend to have difficulty connecting nouns and pronouns that appear in different sentences, even if these sentences come one right after the other.

The use of pronouns may also lead to problems when translating from a language such as English, which does not use grammatical gender, into a language such as French, which does use grammatical gender. For instance, the pronoun “it” in English must be translated into French using either the masculine form “il” or the feminine form “elle”, depending on the grammatical gender of the original noun. If it is not clear which noun is being replaced by “it”, then the automatic translation tool could assign the wrong gender to the pronoun, and the resulting text could be confusing.

Original English text	French translation proposed by Google Translate	Comment
The <u>candy dish</u> was empty, but we were already tired of eating <u>it</u> .	Le <u>plat de bonbons</u> était vide mais nous en avons déjà marre de <u>le</u> manger.	The pronoun reference in the original sentence is faulty because although the writer <i>intends</i> “it” to refer back to “candy”, it technically refers back to “dish”. The computer is not intelligent and processes the sentence literally (choosing the pronoun “le”) instead of recognizing the intended meaning (“les” (bonbons)).
I knocked my favourite <u>teacup</u> off the countertop. I was upset when <u>it</u> broke.	J’ai fait tomber ma <u>tasse à thé</u> préférée du comptoir. J’étais bouleversé quand <u>il</u> s’est cassé.	Because the noun “teacup” and the pronoun “it” are in different sentences, the tool is unable to connect them. Although “teacup” is feminine, the translation tool translates “it” by the masculine pronoun “il”, which gives the impression that “il” is replacing the masculine noun “comptoir”.

A human reader or translator can use real-world knowledge to figure out that the teacup, rather than the countertop, is broken, or that the candy, rather than the dish, was being eaten. However, an automatic translation tool is not intelligent and does not understand the text or the way that the world works. To reduce this type of problem, consider repeating the noun instead of replacing it with a pronoun.

Find out more

- The Grammarly website has a detailed overview called [What are pronouns? Definitions and examples](#).

TIP 5: FAVOUR THE ACTIVE VOICE

The active voice is typically more straightforward than the passive voice because it is clear who is doing the action as well as who is receiving it. With the passive voice, it may be possible to leave out the information about who is carrying out the action, such as in the sentence “The company’s proposal is being considered.” In this case, it is not clear **who** is considering the proposal. Although the passive voice is a legitimate option, it often leads to constructions that are longer, more complex and more difficult to understand. Therefore, the active voice is usually a more translation friendly option.

Find out more

- To learn more about the active and the passive voice, take a look at the [Purdue OWL resource page on Active and Passive Voice](#), which includes a section on [how to recognize the passive voice and reasons to avoid it](#).
- To learn even more, check out the [resources](#) and [quiz](#) on the active and passive voice on the website of the Language Portal of Canada.

Try it!



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TIP 6: AIM FOR MID-LENGTH SENTENCES



Do you know the story of [Goldilocks and the Three Bears](#)? Remember how Goldilocks tried the porridge belonging to each bear but found the first bowl to be too hot, the second bowl to be too cold, and the third bowl to be *just right*? And then she lay in the bed of each bear but found the first bed to be too hard, the second bed to be too soft, and the third bed to be *just right*? Well in this case, you need to adopt Goldilocks' perspective and aim to write sentences that are neither too long (over 35 words)

nor too short (under seven words), but somewhere in the middle (around 15 to 25 words). **Just right!**

It's not hard to understand why long sentences might cause problems for translation. As a reader, it's easy to lose track of the intended meaning in a sentence that goes on and on and on... But why are short sentences problematic?

Short sentences can be confusing because the relationships between different elements in the sentence could be left implicit rather than being explicitly identified. When something is implicit, it means the reader (or translator or automatic translation tool) needs to figure it out. Since automatic translation tools don't have access to real-world knowledge or common sense, they might have trouble working out the intended meaning of a short sentence. For instance, the meaning of the short sentence "Filing errors cost" is something along the lines of "When you make a mistaking filing information, it costs the company a lot of money" (for example, in time and effort to find the missing information). And if the automatic translation tool cannot decipher the intended meaning, you could end up with a nonsense translation such as "Coût des erreurs de classement" instead of the intended translation "Les erreurs de classement coûtent cher".

Find out more

- The Insights by Language Tool website has more information on the topic [Sentence length: Why does it matter?](#)

Try it!



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TIP 7: USE PROPER PUNCTUATION

There's a well known example of a sentence that can be punctuated in different ways to produce very different meanings: *A woman without her man is nothing*. Consider the different interpretations that emerge when this sentence is punctuated.



- A woman, without her man, is nothing.
- A woman: without her, man is nothing.

Punctuation is not merely a decoration. Rather, it is used to help show the intended relationships between different elements in a sentence. If punctuation is missing or incorrect, the entire meaning of a sentence can change. If we are working quickly or not paying enough attention, it is easy to overlook punctuation. Fortunately, there are a number of tools available to help, such as the grammar checker built in to your word processor or text editor, or free online tools such as [Reverso](#) or [Grammarly](#). Be sure to run your text through a basic grammar checker before finalizing the text.

Find out more:

- For additional tips on punctuating texts correctly, check out the [Purdue OWL site on Punctuation exercises](#).
- To practice, you can also visit the Language Portal of Canada's [selection of quizzes on punctuation](#).

Now YOU try!



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TIP 8: AVOID SPECIAL SIGNS OR SYMBOLS WHEN POSSIBLE



In addition to using letters and numbers, some languages also include special symbols that can replace words. For example, many currencies also have special symbols, such as \$ for dollar or ¢ for cent. However, not all languages use the same character sets, so if someone uses an automatic translation tool to translate a text from one language to another, the special characters in the original text might not be part of the character set in the target language. This could cause the automatic translation tool to produce an

error code. Therefore, when possible, use words or letter-based options instead of symbols.

Try it!



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TIP 9: DON'T USE ALL CAPS FOR WORDS, HEADINGS OR WHOLE SENTENCES



Sometimes people write a word, a heading or even a whole sentence in all capital letters in order to add emphasis. However, proper capitalization can be useful for distinguishing between common and proper words, such as the word *polish* (for example, a special wax for your shoes) and *Polish* (the nationality). These would be translated differently into French – as *cirage* or *polonais* – depending on the intended meaning. But if the word is written in all caps as POLISH, then it is no longer possible for an automatic translation tool to use the initial letter as a clue to the word's intended meaning.

A previous tip recommended that you avoid using acronyms where possible. Acronyms are also written in all caps and could sometimes be confused with words (for example, AIDS/aids, CAT/cat).

Try it!



An interactive H5P element has been excluded from this version of the text. You can view it online here:

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TIP 10: AVOID UNNECESSARY LINE BREAKS



Most of the time, you probably take advantage of the automatic word wrap feature in your word processor or text editor. This option is usually switched on by default, and it means that when you are typing and your text reaches the margin on the right-hand side of the page, the word processor automatically moves the next word that you type down to the next line. In other words, you don't need to press the "Enter" or "Return" key to go to the next line—your tool takes you there automatically. However, sometimes you might press "Enter" to force the beginning of a new line, such as after a relatively short title

or heading. It's fine to use a line break at the end of a coherent idea, but avoid inserting a line break in the middle of a unit of meaning. For instance, you might be tempted to insert a line break partway through a title so that it centres on the page in a more appealing way, or you might insert a line break within a cell in a table so that the text aligns more pleasingly.

However, for the purposes of translation, a computer will treat the text that comes before the line break as one unit, while the text that comes after the line break will be treated as a separate unit. The two units will then be translated independently, which could lead to an error such as the following:

Presence of line break	Original text	Proposed French translation from Google Translate
Text <i>without</i> a forced line break	A liquid oxygen tank	Une bouteille d'oxygène liquide
Text <i>with</i> a forced line break	A liquid oxygen tank	Un liquide bouteille d'oxygène

CONCLUDING REMARKS

This OER has emphasized the “**garbage in, garbage out**” principle in relation to translation. Translation is not about translating individual words but about transferring the meaning or message of a text from one language to another. If that message is not clear in the original text, then it’s not likely to be clear in the translated text either. In fact, translation could end up making the situation worse! To maximize the chance of getting a good translation, you can start by preparing your original text in a translation friendly way. This is especially important if your text will be translated using an automatic translation tool such as [Google Translate](#), [DeepL Translator](#) or [Microsoft Translator](#). A professional translator can use their knowledge of language and of how the world works, or they can research additional information, in order to try to make sense of and compensate for an unclear text. But computers do not have any real-world knowledge, and they cannot understand the message—they only attempt to process what they receive using techniques such as pattern matching. If they receive problematic input, such as a confusing original text, they will most likely generate problematic output, such as a poor quality translation.

Even seemingly small issues, such as missing punctuation, sentences that are very short, or headings that are in all capital letters, can lead to big problems for an automatic translation tool. This OER has provided tips to help you write in a way that is more translation friendly so that your texts can be translated more easily by others. The list of tips is not comprehensive or foolproof, but it will get you started. Overall, the most important thing that you can do is to focus on writing clearly and expressing your message unambiguously. Your readers will thank you... in many languages!



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Other open access works:

- [*De-mystifying translation: Introducing translation to non-translators*](#)
- [*Translating for Canada, eh? \(v2\)*](#)
- [*Using game-based learning online: A cookbook of recipes.*](#)