



Center for
Civic Design

Quick Guide

Translating for Elections

**A language access quick guide to
translating material for elections.**

September 2022

hello@civicdesign.org

civicdesign.org

@civicdesign

Introduction

There are many ways to translate a document into another language. Some election offices work with local translation vendors. In other cases, election offices use internal bilingual staff to handle translations. While an internal translation practice is convenient and cost-effective for the elections office, it does come with some challenges.

For many bilingual speakers, translation is an everyday activity with low and high stakes. Stakes are low when we translate at the grocery store. Stakes are high when we translate medical information for a loved one.

In translation for official election materials, the translator is the intermediary between the civic process and a language community. The translator must be accurate and consistent across all election materials. It is a high-stakes task. The translator's task is to communicate civic concepts and language and, in turn, create trust between an elections office and voters.

Read on for a few best practices to consider in an internal civic translation process.

Language Access

Translating for Elections

- **Get to know the language used in your community.** How to make sure you are translating for the right audience. [Page 4](#)
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[Read more about our research and best practices for Language Access at **civicdesign.org**](#)

Get to know the language used in your community

As you're preparing to translate a document, think about the intended audience for the document. Is your language dialect different or the same as the intended audience? We recommend reaching out to local organizations that work with the language community if you don't know. Dialects are plentiful, so it's important to make sure that your dialect matches the intended language community.

Gather external and internal translation resources

There are plenty of translation resources available on the internet. We always recommend the [EAC Translation Glossary](#) for any election-related translation. The glossary contains about 1,300 civic terms and comes in 20 different languages.

Chances are you'll have to translate some language and concepts not included in the EAC translation glossary. In these cases, we always recommend reaching out to surrounding institutions (nearby election offices, schools, hospitals, etc.) to ask about their translation resources. Since you're reaching out to another local institution, they may already have an appropriate translation for your community.

Some election offices have internal word banks for common election terms. But if you're the first person to speak the language or translate anything in the office, we recommend starting a word bank for yourself and future translators. Word banks are an excellent way to create consistency throughout your material both within your own office and in your state. We recommend word banks in our language access planning workshops. Here's an example of one:

ENGLISH	SPANISH
Absentee Application	Solicitud de papeleta de voto en ausencia
Absentee Voter	Votante en ausencia
Ballot	Papeleta
Ballot Drop Box	Buzón electoral
Ballot Envelope	Sobre de papeleta de votación
Candidate	Candidato
Certify	Certificar

Translation software: helpful for informal situations but not critical information

Translation software, like Google Translate, can be an excellent resource for a responsible translator. Some professional translators use software as a thesaurus to identify different options for a word in a sentence. However, it is bad practice to depend solely on software to translate an important document. Translation software does not account for dialect, syntax, style, and tone. Sometimes this type of translation might be downright nonsensical.

You're handling important information that could make the difference between a voter engaging with the elections office and being confused by a translation that doesn't make sense, and deciding that they are not being acknowledged in the outreach effort.

Translate for meaning

Civic translators translate for meaning. Unlike a word-for-word translation, the civic translator's task is to take a concept from one culture and language into another.

As you're working through the translation, remember that civics and the voting process have varied connotations throughout the world. Choosing which word to go with or how to communicate a specific concept will depend on your intended audience.

Write in plain language (in any language)

Writing in plain language clearly communicates information to all voters. As you're working on your translation, consider these plain language principles for your work:

- Write in the positive
- Use active rather than passive voice
- Address the voters directly
- Use short words, short sentences, and short sections
- Use the words voters will be looking for, and avoid jargon

Test your translation

We always recommend testing your work with the intended audience. What you thought to be the perfect translation might not make any sense to the intended audience. We've seen election offices test materials with community organizations and people who speak the targeted language.

Consider that community organizations and people might receive this type of request often. Offer a small stipend or donation for their work.

Here's a guide to usability testing in elections: [How to Test for Voter Usability](#)

Other Considerations for Translators

Translation requires a lot of unseen work. If you are the only translator in the office, consider how translation impacts your other responsibilities and whether the rest of the staff understands that.

Civic translation is a big responsibility. It requires time and resources to produce a document that creates trust between voters and the elections office. The likelihood of the translation being perfect by every standard is never certain; with careful considerations and best practices, you are better equipped to learn about your local community and to improve language access with direct, immediate actions and helpful feedback. All the while, you might find messages that truly resonate with your audience by catching mistranslations early in your translation process.

Checklist

Translating for Elections

Gather internal and external resources

- Refer to the [EAC Translation Glossary](#) for any election-related translation
- Reach out to surrounding institutions if needed
- Create a language word bank

Write in plain language (in any language)

- Is the text written in the positive rather than the negative?
- Are you using active rather than passive voice?
- Are you addressing voters directly?
- Are you using short words, short sentences and short sections?
- Are you using words voters will be looking for and avoiding jargon?

Test your translation

- Have you tested your translation with the intended audience?
- Have you considered community organizations to reach out to for testing?
- Have you determined a budget for translation testing?

Other language access quick guides

[Hiring a language access coordinator](#)

This language access guide offers a step-by-step approach to hiring a language access coordinator for the first time. It covers:

- Approaches to recruiting
- How to evaluate your language access needs
- What you can consider including in a job description

[Working with translation vendors](#)

In our guide to working with translation vendors, we cover some of the best practices to keep in mind whether you are providing language access for the first time or adding a new language to your program.

- How to find a civic translator
- Questions to ask before hiring a translator
- Timelines to keep for working on projects



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