



Center for
Civic Design

Quick Guide

Working with Translation Vendors in Elections

A language access quick guide to working with translation vendors, testing and distributing the translations.

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hello@civicdesign.org

civicdesign.org

@civicdesign

Introduction

Whether you are providing language access for the first time or adding a new language to your program, one of the first decisions you make will be how you manage the translation process.

Translation is more than just changing words from one language to another. Once you have planned your language access program ([you can find our guide here](#)) the next step is to work with a translation vendor.

This document covers:

- the questions you need to consider when working with a translation vendor, for best results
- how to ensure voters will understand the translated material.
- how to make sure you choose the right translator for your needs
- testing the translations
- making sure the translations reach the community.

Language Access

Working with Translation Vendors

- **Start by writing in plain language.** Plain language is easier to translate accurately. [Page 4](#)
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[Read more about our research and best practices for Language Access at **civicsdesign.org**](#)

Start by writing in plain language

Writing in plain language is a good start to ensure election materials communicate clearly with your voters. Plain language is easier for voters to follow. It helps everyone (but especially those who don't read well) avoid misunderstandings and builds trust between an election office and the public.

The simpler a text is in English, the easier it will be to adapt to simple text in another language. When you start with plain language text, you'll end up with a translation that's easier to understand.

Plain language also makes a translator's job easier because simple text in English is easier to adapt to simple text in another language and makes the resulting translation easier to understand.

Use these general plain language principles for your original text:

- Be positive - say what people can do, rather than what they can't do
- Use active rather than passive voice
- Address voters directly
- Use short words, short sentences, and short sections
- Use words voters are familiar with and avoid jargon

Resources for plain language

- Guidelines for plain language: [Plain Language is a Process](#)
- Field Guide No. 2. [Writing Instructions Voters Understand](#)
- Federal plain language guidelines: [Plainlanguage.gov/guidelines](https://www.plainlanguage.gov/guidelines)

Choose a translation vendor that fits your specific needs

Translation is a skill. It can be tempting to rely on translation software, like Google Translate as a solution. While computer-assisted translation is helpful in informal situations, it cannot replace a human translator who understands the nuances of language and civic concepts. An inaccurate computer-assisted translation could confuse voters, reduce trust in the same way that typos in English do, and even prevent them from voting through inadvertent misinformation.

Translation vendors have different qualifications and experiences. It's important to choose a vendor with experience in translating official information and one with expertise in the languages and dialects spoken in your community.

Assess your translation needs and communicate them to vendors

The more background information you give translators, the easier it is for them to produce quality translations that preserve the meaning of the original text. You can help translators by providing them with information about the audience, purpose of the document, and context.

When planning a translation process, answer these questions

- **What language - and dialects - do your voters speak?** What do you know about the language community's dialect? For example, is the Spanish from Mexico, Puerto Rico, or other parts of the Spanish speaking world?
- **Does your city or county have a language access resources or an immigrant and refugee affairs office?** These offices can offer advice on language access and how to proceed with translation in your community. Build relationships with them for guidance or to help you identify translation resources. When reaching out, a language access coordinator is the ideal person to contact, if there is one. If not, a general email will do.
- **Does your election office have a word bank of common election terms?** Word banks keep your translations consistent. Translation services will use your word bank for all of your materials and can also help you build your list. Using the same translated words across all your materials creates trust between a voter and the election office. If your office does not yet have a centralized word bank, this would be a good time to start building one!

Questions to ask a translator before working with one:

- **What is the translator's experience with civic translation?**
There are different translation specialties, such as legal, medical, literary, or business. Find out if the translation vendor has experience working with civic translation and ask to see past examples of similar work. There are likely a good number of translators in your area who have this experience, and the expertise will make a significant difference to the quality of the translation.
- **Is the translator familiar with the intended audience language community?** Language is complex. We know that in the United States alone, dialects of English vary from state to state and sometimes even from city to city. Other languages work the same way. One Spanish speaker's word for "ballot" might be different from another Spanish speaker, depending on the dialect. Find out if your vendor has experience with your audience's language dialect.
- **How fast can a translator provide translations and what will the rush service cost?** First drafts are rarely final drafts. The translation process usually takes multiple rounds of revisions. After you receive your translation from the translator, you'll have to get feedback on the translation either from in-house staff, community organization, or outside individuals. While each project is different, you should budget to spend at least one week on small projects (1-2 pages of text) or 2-3 weeks on bigger projects (4-5 pages of texts). Find out your translator's timeline and account for possible edit time to the process. If you are on a tight deadline, some vendors offer rush service for a higher quote.

Test your translated material

Testing your translated material is especially important for a new language access program, when you are creating your first collection of translated materials, or when you are working on information about a complex or potentially confusing part of voting.

Usability testing goes beyond assessing the accuracy of each translated word to assessing whether people can understand what the information means, what a form is meant to do and how to use these materials as voters.

Resources for usability testing:

- Field Guide No. 3 [Testing ballots for usability](#)
- The [Usability Testing Kit](#) on ElectionTools

When testing translating materials, ask these questions:

- **Who will run the testing?** Ideally, this will be someone who knows both the languages being tested and has experience working with elections.
- **Who will be the testers?** This is a good opportunity to work with community organizations to invite people to be part of testing the new translations.
- **Where will you do the testing?** Consider a government services center, library, or community center as a convenient location. They can be good places to reach different language communities.

Include proofreading in your translation process

Finalizing a translation is like finalizing any other official document. It's always good practice to get another pair of eyes on the final translation, especially from someone familiar with the language and intended audience. You can reach out to community organizations, libraries, or community leaders for help with this phase of the process.

When planning for proofreading, consider these questions:

- **Who is responsible for the final proofreading?** This person should be a fluent, preferably native speaker of the language.
- **Have you included translation tasks in staff responsibilities?** If you expect multilingual staff to do proofreading and other tasks, is this work officially part of their duties?
- **Are you compensating people outside of your office?** Community organizations and individuals might get a lot of requests to check translations. Consider paying or donating to their organization as a thank you.

Make sure the translations reach the community

Once your translation is finished, proofed, and approved, let voters know the material is available! Consider distributing materials at a community event hosted by well-known, trusted groups, like community organizations, churches, and advocacy groups. Another option for distributing material is to work with other government departments like the public school system or libraries.

Checklist

Working With Election Translation Vendors

Write material in English in plain language.

- Have you used short words, short sentences and short sections?
- Are you addressing voters directly?
- Do you use active voice?

Assess your translation needs.

- Have you asked what language – and dialects – your voters speak?
- Have you consulted with your city or county's language access resources (such as an immigrant or refugee affairs office?)
- Have you made plans to build a word bank for your election office?

Choose a translation vendor that fits your needs.

- Does your translation vendor have experience in translating official information?
- Does your translation vendor have expertise in the language and dialects spoken in your community?

Ask translation vendors questions before working with one.

- Have you confirmed the vendor has experience with civic translation?
- Have you confirmed the vendor is familiar with the intended audience language community?
- Have you asked how quickly a translation can provide translation and what will the rush service cost?

Include proofreading in your translation process.

- Have you determined who is responsible for the final proofreading?
- Have you included translation tasks in staff responsibilities?
- Have you budgeted compensation for external translation services?

Test your translated materials.

- Have you decided who will run the testing?
- Have you decided who will be the testers?
- Have you determined where the testing will take place?

Make sure the translations reach the community.

- Have you established a plan to distribute the translation materials once they are complete?

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

[Translating for elections](#)

Our guide on translating for elections focuses on ensuring translations are accurate for an election context. We cover:

- Understand the language used by your intended audience
- How to gather internal and external translation materials
- Why plain language (in any language) makes the translation process easier
- How to test your translations



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hello@civicdesign.org

civicdesign.org

[@civicdesign](https://www.instagram.com/civicdesign)