

**TRANSLATING DIVISION  
OFFICE OF LANGUAGE SERVICES (LS)  
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF STATE**

**GUIDANCE ON: PREPARING FOR THE LS TRANSLATION TEST**

Here are some things you should know about the LS Translation Testing Program:

- You will have up to four hours to complete your test (per language combination). Please budget your time wisely, and remember to save plenty of time for self-review;
- You will be given three source texts to translate, roughly 250-300 words each: (a) one text dealing with some general aspect of international relations; (b) one text consisting of legal, administrative, economic, or business content, or some mixture thereof; and (c) one text discussing some aspect of science or technology of current interest in foreign affairs.
- Test passages cannot mirror every text type and topic LS translators in your language combination can be expected to encounter. Rather, they are designed to examine your ability to handle a broad range of the ever-changing text types and topics handled by LS.
- **Your translations must be word processed on our computer. No Internet connection or outside CD-ROM glossaries are allowed. Outside dictionaries are allowed. LS has an impressive collection of dictionaries, which you are welcome to use. Please check with the Translation Testing Coordinator well in advance to discuss word processing and dictionary needs. Requests to handwrite the test will not be granted.**
- You must sign a statement before your test waiving your right “to challenge, appeal, or receive feedback about my application, this test, my qualifications, or the assessment criteria, policies, and procedures of the Office of Language Services.”
- You must bear any travel, lodging, or incidental expenses associated with your test.

Here are some specific things you can do to prepare for your translation:

- Take the Language Services Sample Test from English into a Foreign Language
- Read the attached description of Error Categories.
- Improve your own self-reviewing skills.
- Spend time reading the following websites:
  - The US Department of State: [www.state.gov](http://www.state.gov)
  - The United Nations: [www.un.org](http://www.un.org)
  - The Foreign Ministry of the country of your source or target language(s).Pay attention to the style and register of the texts these sites contain, and to the terminology they use.
- Translators working with one of the six official UN languages or 23 official EU languages may wish to download several short official UN or EU texts in one language (e.g. a UN Resolution), translate them, and then download the official UN or EU translations to check their work. This can make a very good practice test.
- Remember the plausibility test: if something sounds implausible in the target language, check and check again the source language...are you sure you have understood it correctly?

Much is expected of the LS contract translator, and the LS contract translation test is not an easy one. Prepare yourself well...and good luck!

## **Error Categories**

The error categories listed below are areas in which translators may make mistakes. In addition to being thoroughly familiar with the typical areas of difficulty (i.e., pitfalls) encountered when translating in your particular language combination, it would be worthwhile for you to be aware of these error categories as well, and to prepare yourself accordingly for your translation test at Language Services. During your test evaluation, reviewers may mark errors on your test as major or minor, depending on how severely these errors affect units of meaning in your translation. You would be encouraged to do the following:

- Bring along specialized dictionaries in the areas of socio-political, economic, and legal terminology. Dictionaries of idioms or collocations (such as “The BBI Dictionary of English Word Combinations”) and of the false cognates of your language pair are also recommended.
  - Plan on taking advantage of the full four hours allotted for the test. Many promising but unsuccessful test candidates fail because they do not spend time reading the source text before they begin translating and/or because they do not review their work when they are finished.
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### **Mistranslation**

Inaccurately translating from the source language (SL) into the target language (TL).

### **Addition**

Adding to the target translation (i.e., superfluous information or meaning that is not found in the source language).

### **Omission**

The failure to include all units of meaning found in the SL text. This includes failing to translate a word or phrase, providing instead the annotation, “Not in the dictionary”.

### **Too Literal**

The tendency to translate the SL text (esp. idiomatic expressions) by following the word order of the SL text too closely, thereby compromising the integrity of the TL text by stripping it of meaning, obscuring the meaning, or producing a grammatically awkward or incorrect TL text.

### **Global Error**

The recurrence of one or more errors in a TL text.

### **Ambiguity**

Ambiguity occurs when an idea, clearly expressed in the source language, is rendered in an unnecessarily obscure, vague, or imprecise manner in the target language or lends itself to more than one interpretation.

### **Grammar**

The failure to use idiomatic sentence structure and the failure to apply the rules of grammar. Includes word order, tense, agreement of subject, verb, noun, and pronoun, proper gender, etc.

**Punctuation**

The failure to use punctuation correctly and consistently.

**Spelling**

Self-explanatory.

**Style**

Correct and idiomatic usage of the target language, including usage and register. In particular, candidates are expected to use definite and indefinite articles and prepositions correctly and idiomatically, to reproduce the register of the SL text (i.e., to use appropriate language and to capture the tone of the SL text), and to avoid anachronistic or culturally inappropriate expressions. If the SL text is characterized by a distinctive manner of expression (flowery, staccato, pedantic, conversational, etc.), this should be reflected in the translation, insofar as this is possible in the target language. Awkward renderings that obscure the meaning may be penalized.

**Terminology**

The failure to choose the proper term required by the context. Inclusion of more than one option would be considered a minor error, provided none of the options distorts substantially the meaning of the original.

**Inconsistency**

The failure to use the same word or term in the target language to translate one that is used repeatedly and uniformly throughout the SL text, particularly when the word or term in question is part of a title. Inconsistency also means a lack of uniformity in the target language text that is unwarranted or that leads to confusion, ambiguity, or obscurity.

**Format**

The failure to follow simple formatting instructions.

Based on our observations, test candidates would also benefit from paying particular attention to the following areas:

- Prepositions and prepositional phrases (esp., idiomatic expressions)
- Tenses
- The proper use of definite and indefinite articles (also, knowing when to leave out an article)
- Word order (i.e., avoid translating literally, without taking the context of the passage into consideration, and refrain from translating merely on the word level or translating words in isolation to the meaning of a sentence)
- Comparatives/superlatives
- Upper/lower case
- Subject/verb agreement and parallel verb structures
- Modal auxiliaries (particularly “shall”, “may”, “must”, “will”, as well as “are to”)
- Official and professional titles
- Proper transliteration from one language to another as in “Gorbachev” in English vs. “Gorbatschow” in German

- Terms that are specific to one cultural system only (e.g., the American “high school” is not the equivalent of the German “Hochschule”); other areas to watch out for besides education are government, social policies, and systems of measurement [e.g., miles/kilometers).
- Well-known acronyms, treaties, and international organizations (i.e., familiarity with these will help one avoid blunders such as writing “UNO” instead of “UN” or “European Copartnership” instead of “European Community”)
- False cognates (i.e., words in two languages that are the same or similar in spelling but have different meanings)
- Foreign terms (i.e., an acceptable French or Latin term in an English source text may not be acceptable in a target text)
- Terms that should not be translated (e.g., titles of publications)
- Words in the source text that are very close in spelling (e.g., “Verminderung”/ “Vermeidung” in German, or “reduction” / “avoidance” respectively). Errors here are often more a problem of incorrectly comprehending the source text than merely visually mistaking one word for another.
- Homophones (e.g., “their, there, they’re” or “your, you’re”)