## Finding translation work

I was in a pretty bad situation a few years ago; I had no job or money, my long-term career plan was destroyed and I was going to Canada with no working visa in hand. This forced me to consider online-based work.

I'm glad that at that time I was presented with this challenge because my temporary solution has turned out to be a job I got great satisfaction out of. Since then my boat sails in another direction, where [I help other people to learn languages faster and speak confidently](https://www.fluentin3months.com/prem). But that is a story for another day, back to my translation job.

My initial approach to find work was rather clumsy! I basically wrote out my CV in all the languages I knew, and prepared a cover letter for each one too… and then copied and pasted the cover letter + CV to no less than two thousand emails! I found these emails by doing a search for translation companies directly on the yellow pages in [Spain](http://www.paginas-amarillas.es/) and [France](http://www.pagesjaunes.fr/) etc. Most of them ignored me, a lot of them just gave me a negative response, but one out of the two thousand called me back!

After not speaking in French for over two years (and learning two more languages since then, further confusing my French) I suddenly had a spontaneous interview in French on the phone while travelling in a noisy train in Italy. They gave me a trial period, proofread all of my translations for a month and finally took me on! That's the beauty of being freelancer, you work **with** people, not for them

However, I wouldn't recommend this approach for those in a similar situation. There are two good translator social networking websites; [Proz](http://www.proz.com/) and [translatorscafé](http://www.translatorscafe.com/), which have forums and many other features. But the most interesting part of these sites can be their job search boards. The translatorscafé one is free – I can't say much for that since I have never used it.

The Proz one has a free version and a paid version; the free version shows you the advertisements after several hours delay, in which time someone else is likely to take the offer. I signed up for a paid account and have found all my other clients (technically outsourcers who look for clients for me)through that site. I find that it works pretty well; especially since you can leave and read references, which is great for confirming that they will actually pay you.

**It is important to have a competitive price!** If you have no experience at all, then you should actually start working for next to nothing or for free (or as a volunteer) and have your documents proofread so that you can learn how to actually translate before you start trying it professionally. After my training period, I started off with a kind-of low rate because of my lack of experience and then I raised my price last after a while.

Many translators charge per word, which I much prefer to all my previous monthly wage jobs since I get paid for the actual work that I do. The current global economic situation seemed to have caught up with me that summer as I had no work at all for over a month. **I've reduced my price back to the previous one and have gotten a flood of work because of it.**

The actual price you charge depends on a lot of factors; those who translate novels, for example, may charge much more per word than I do (or would charge per page), but our hourly wage is about the same. As an [engineer](https://www.fluentin3months.com/engineer/), I was very familiar with the technical documents I translated and never needed to ponder over a more poetic way to say it (as a writer-translator would for example) so I could charge less but still earn the same because I would produce more words an hour.

Also, the **language combination is very important** – you may be able to charge more for a language that is more in demand, or need to be more competitive if you have a common language combination.

## The importance of a good background and specialisation

I usually like to say how my methods of learning a language are easy for everyone to apply. But becoming a translator definitely isn't for everyone! Translators do not get the credit they deserve; if you read poorly translated instructions on a cheap gadget from China it certainly doesn't help! But when you do read a translation (which happens more often than you might think!) and don't realize it, that's the sign of a good translator! Always an unsung hero, because it doesn't seem like it was ever even originally in a foreign language!

Translating a text isn't a simple task of writing over the words in a text document, which “anyone” with casual understanding of the source language and being a native in the target language can do. You need to understand the source language extremely well and at a professional level.

However, **you can't be a translator just because you speak another language**, even if you speak it really well. You need training and experience as a translator and complete familiarity with the subject you are translating.

Any translation work that I accepted was always just for my fields of speciality, mostly related to my studies in [Electronic Engineering](https://www.fluentin3months.com/engineer/). Thanks to my studies and work experience both in Ireland and abroad, when I translated a document I wrote as an engineer / computer scientist naturally would, and do so **only in English**.

No matter how many crazy 3-month language-learning missions I have, or even if I manage to speak like a native some day, I would still likely be lacking in some (especially written) subtleties in the language and without much more experience as an engineer in foreign languages, it would be very unprofessional of me (or anyone in my situation) to accept work translating to a non-native language. Those horrible translations I mentioned above are usually done by those who think that they master the language and rarely do. This is a very crucial thing to realize; **you should only ever translate to your mother tongue**!

And **specialisation** should not be taken lightly either! When I was training to be a translator, it was extremely frustrating that I would get documents from a wide range of topics, none of which I was familiar with. I tried to translate wine cultivation techniques, legal and medical documents, corporate presentations etc. and it was always a disaster! Luckily all of my work was proofread and completely corrected each time before actually being used.

I am not a lawyer or a doctor or a wine-lover so I simply can't write about these topics in English, let alone understand them in a foreign language! This means that I should have never translated them of course. I do not have a degree in translation, but I actually found it easier to get work than some people that I have talked with who do, because I focused on a very narrow selection of documents to translate that I could write very naturally.

**Being more flexible in your translation topics does not necessarily make you more employable** since you may have little or no familiarity or authority in that field. Someone who has studied translation in university needs to somehow **also** become an expert in any fields they wish to translate. Luckily for me, my specialisation and [language learning](https://www.fluentin3months.com/prem) and training as a translator has been enough to help me to produce good translations.

## Doing the work

So when you've got the translation, you just open up the Word document and replace the original text, right? Some translators may work like that, but it is horribly inefficient and cumbersome for the kinds of documents I translated! We have [Computer Aided Translation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Computer-aided%20translation) (CAT) tools (not to be confused with [Machine Translation](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Automatic%20translation)!) that help us translate more efficiently and are especially useful in translations with recurring vocabulary (legal, technical etc.).

These tools can produce a file called a [Translation Memory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Translation%20memory) (TM), which lets you or other translators work with the same theme later and not lose consistency in terminology, and you can even translate faster as it points out and automatically replaces repetitions.

For those interested in starting off with this, I recommend installing the free Open Source CAT tool [OmegaT](http://www.omegat.org/en/omegat.html) (along with the free [Open Office](http://download.openoffice.org/) suite). Unfortunately, many outsourcers much prefer to work with the TMs produced by [Trados](http://www.trados.com/), which is quite expensive.

I used to work with [Wordfast](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wordfast), which I also quite liked. If you'd like to buy these programs, you should actually do it through the [Proz](http://www.proz.com/) website, since they have huge group-paying reductions for all the major CAT tools, cycling through each one regularly. There is quite a learning curve with these programs, so it's definitely better to start with the free version and you may never need to change!

So I translated the document by the proposed deadline and sent the result (and TM file(s) if requested) and added that quotation to an invoice that I sent at the end of the month. They normally pay 30 days later. The annoying thing about this is that you won't actually have the money for any work you do the first week of the month for about 2 months! This aspect of freelancing takes some getting used to!

Note that a VAT number for your resident country (which can be applied for easily enough) is **essential** in order to get serious clients and for legal reasons.

## Making it location-independent

As you can see in the post about [not needing to be rich to travel](https://www.fluentin3months.com/do-you-need-to-be-rich-to-travel-the-world/), I took this work with me no matter where I was. Once you can work from home, why can't that home be on the other side of the planet? Since my clients transferred payments to my bank account, I could take it out of an ATM in any country and use it there.

I rented a [Skype](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Skype) telephone number so that I didn't have to bother my clients with new number changes as I traveled. I actually had the same fixed phone number for the last few years that forwards any calls to whatever mobile number that I happen to have at the time.

Emails require immediate responses, so when I don't have work on some particular day I can still leave the house but I have my iPhone [push new emails](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tK5Mfg54Gpk#t=105) to me and notify me of them. There have been some time-zone issues (California is one of the worst places I've lived in for synchronising with European times, with midnight to 8am responsiveness needed…), but I've found work-arounds and have comfortably traveled with this job.

I can't emphasise enough that this job is definitely **not** for everyone! I get contacted so many times from people with intermediate (or less) in languages who think that if Google Translate can do it, then surely they can too! No. In fact, my in-house translation work was by far the worst job I've ever had (and I've had a LOT!!) that made me extremely reluctant to try working in this field again.

And if it wasn't for that training I wouldn't be able to do it either, since getting trained to learn about the important subtelties involved in translation really is necessary. Nevertheless, I hope this post at least explains a little about how I worked for those curious!  Any other translators out there with a different story and point of view, please do share in the comments below!

You can also check out this blog from a translator who is much more experienced than me: [Musings from an overworked translator](http://translationmusings.com/). There is even an [online comic strip](http://mox.ingenierotraductor.com/) about translators! If you have any questions, feel free to ask them in the comments!

If these tips are at all useful to you, then share it with your friends, they might benefit from it too!