



Translation Ethics

Illustrations by Alex Mathers

Pre-Lesson Warm Up

These questions are designed to get you thinking about the subject at hand: Translation ethics

Which of the following best describes you?

- I only translate into my native language.
- I translate in both directions between my native language and other languages I am fluent in.
- I only translate from my native language into other languages I am fluent in.

You just started work on a job from a blue-chip company. What do you do?

- I put it on my resume.
- I tell my friends and family.
- I don't tell a soul.

You see a job involving a complex legal contract. What do you do?

- I never touch those jobs. I leave them to the experts.
- I check the job to see whether it uses boilerplate language I can work out using dictionaries and other resources.
- I know that if I don't take the job, another non-expert will take it, so I go ahead and grab it.

Gengo Translator Guild



1. Guild Charter



2. Penalties



3. Integrity as a Craftsperson



1. Guild Charter

The basic rules we expect translators to follow.

Know your identity

Rule 1: Translate into your native language — and only into your native language.

As a translator, your greatest skill is not your ability to understand a foreign language — that is only a prerequisite. What you bring to the table is an expert command of the source language's tone, diction, and expressive nuance.



Are you really ambidextrous?

A native understanding comes of years of reading, writing, and appreciating the subtleties of good legalese, good copy, and good prose — and understanding what distinguishes them.

Though you may speak another language fluently, “native” means writing ability and long-term cultural immersion (where you grew up) as well. Even bilinguals have a major and minor language, so know your “handedness” and stick with it.



Stick to your craft

Rule 2: When in doubt, avoid highly sensitive projects.

Unless you have relevant expertise, think twice before taking on a translation for a legal contract, medical manual, or financial records.

Remember lives, reputations, and finances are at stake.

Strike while the iron is hot

Rule 3: Start work immediately.

Your next job is not due for several months. Now is your chance to kick back with some ale and enjoy the freedom that a steady contract brings? Wrong!

The client's assumption is that work is well underway. Do not violate that trust by coming in just on deadline.





2. Penalties

Breaking the rules can have serious consequences.

Honor thy guild

Although the Gengo Translator Guild only exists in principle, breaking the rules can have very real consequences.

Violating our guild charter besmirches our name and makes clients reluctant to work with us again.

A major breach of ethics may even see you stripped of membership or worse—cause [irreparable damage](#).

Proceed with caution!



3. Integrity as a Craftsperson

Strong personal and professional ethics are the translator's stock-in-trade.

Work behind the scenes

- Confidentiality is a given: your discretion is your reputation. Translators are second only to attorneys in this respect.
- If something should go wrong, stay calm and humble. It is not for you to educate clients. Take the work back to the guildhall and confer with your guild leaders to negotiate a fix.





Think like a craftsperson

- In other trades, the goods can be late if the work speaks for itself. By contrast, the translation service is built on timely accuracy. A virtuoso translation of a freight receipt is useless if it's a day late.
- Like the seamstress and the humble baker, consistent method and reliable technique is your forte. Find glory in the everyday.

Practice what you've learned

Well, do you think you have what it takes to join the Gengo Translator Guild?



Download Exercise

To talk about the lesson or ask questions, join our discussion in the [Translator Forums](#).