Writing for localization

You will find my favorite resource for this topic in the Resources section. It’s a comprehensive and well written book by John R. Kohl. on this topic. For this week, I give you just a few pointers and worked examples of basics to keep in mind when writing for localization.

Keep sentences short

- Text expansion creates problems
- Screen or page real estate. Plan for expansion.

*English:* Check the document for errors.

*German:* Bitte überprüfen Sie das Dokument, falls es Fehler gibt!

- Don’t put hard returns in a sentence.

Avoid passive/complex sentences

- Standard English word order is most understandable
  - Subject > verb > object
- Put modifiers in the correct location
- Use imperatives instead of passive/gerunds

*Passive:* The software is to be updated regularly.

*Active:* Update the software regularly.

*Complex:* With this tool, assembling the system is easy.

*Simple:* You can easily assemble the system with this tool.

- Avoid noun strings, especially improperly hyphenated strings
  - Omitted elements cause confusion
  - Reader has to infer the relationship

*No:* Scanner head motion control arm

*Yes:* Arm for controlling the motion of the scanner head

*No:* Efficiency monitoring of material recycling industries

*Yes:* Monitoring the efficiency of industries that recycle materials
Avoid complex verbs
- “Empty” verbs require a noun
- “Phrasal” verbs sound like phrases
  - Easily misunderstood
  - Extra words not needed

No: The company will carry out an assessment of the situation.
Yes: The company will assess the situation.

No: The Board made a decision to switch systems.
Yes: The Board decided to switch systems.

No: “Users can run into problems.”
Yes: “Users can experience problems.”

Avoid contractions
- Indicates a casual tone
- May be too casual in the target language
- May cause confusion/unrecognized

No: Hang on, we’re almost there.
Yes: Be patient. The process is almost complete.

No: You shouldn’t store the device outside.
Yes: Do not store the device outside.

Avoid specialized jargon
- Use standard industry terms
- Clarify at the outset
- Cuts down research time
  - e.g. Touchpad vs. Clickpad vs. SmartPad
  - e.g. Stylus vs. Pen vs. Stick

Use terminology consistently
- Translator does not question terms in two parts of the document
• Helps cut costs with translation memory
e.g. Package, pack, packet, set, kit
e.g. Computer, CPU, desktop, tower, machine

Avoid acronyms & abbreviations
• Define them at the start of the document
• Provide a glossary of them
  
  **First use:** Central Operations Center (COC)
  **Second use:** COC

  **First use:** Coordinated Universal Time (UTC)
  **Second use:** UTC

• Avoid humor, regionalisms, slang, and culture-based analogies
  • Humor rarely translates well
  • Puns and wordplay are impossible
  • At best it is not understood
  • At worst it can be offensive

  **No:** “Some people are straight, black coffee drinkers.”
  **Yes:** “Some people prefer to drink their coffee with nothing in it.”

  **No:** “With our new system, the sky is the limit.”
  **Yes:** “The number of possibilities is limitless with our new system.”

  **No:** “We hit a real home run”.
  **Yes:** “We made an outstanding contribution”.

Use relative pronouns/Be explicit
• Frequently omitted
• Extra clarity for the translator

  **No:** Cars running on diesel get better mileage.
  **Yes:** Cars that run on diesel fuel are more fuel efficient.

  **No:** “The software licensed is about to expire and won’t reactivate until the bill is paid.”
  **Yes:** “The software that the company licensed is about to expire, and the software will not reactivate until the company pays the bill.”
Consider multiple copies
It may be worth your while to have “neutral” base copy for localization and a US English version for release.

This is just a tiny sample of principles you can keep in mind as you write for localization. My parting thought is this. How long did it take you to create this copy? Remember that translators need time to do their work too.