

Getting Started as a Translator:  
Gleanings from Honyaku

*On February 1, 1996, the following question was posted to the [Honyaku mailing list](#) from a person in the United States:*

Dear Honyakkers,

I am trying to get started as a part-time, freelance translator. I have never translated for money before but I feel confident in my abilities (at least for J>E). I have made several inquiries including letters to translation agencies in my town and trying to register with a couple of companies I've found on the World Wide Web. So far no reply. I even spoke to the owner of a translation agency here. When I told him that I had two years of college Japanese and lived in Japan for a year, he essentially told me "good luck" and hung up. It's beginning to look like one of those "need a job to get experience, but can't get a job without experience" Catch-22's that everyone hates....

In any case, I do have a couple of specific questions. First, do you recommend sending samples of my Japanese writings with my resume? Second, should I go ahead and buy translation tools such as technical dictionaries and name dictionaries before I find work? And third, does anyone know of any translation agency that will give a newcomer a chance to do freelance work?

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*The following are excerpts from some of the replies.*

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I realize that you would prefer to work freelance at home. But from my own experience, I recommend that you go to work in somebody's office somewhere as an in-house translator, preferably where there are more experienced translators who can help you along. Then, after a couple of years you can strike out on your own.

David Farnsworth

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I recommend that you go to work in-house for a company as a translator. It doesn't necessarily need to be in the translation business. I started out working for a Japanese automaker, and cut my teeth by interpreting in 8-hour business meetings in (literally) smoke-filled rooms and other abominable working conditions. The main reason for my recommendation, however, is the financial security it affords. Have you considered that [in the United States] you will be paying an extra 8% in social security taxes if you go

freelance? I've been freelancing for many years and maintain pretty good efficiency and productivity. Still, with taxes and business expenses (mostly books and computer-related items) I estimate I actually get to keep about 50 cents of every dollar I earn translating.

Being a freelancer does not mean coming and going at will, nor accepting work whenever you please. It means waiting days at a stretch for the phone to ring, pulling occasional all-nighters to get things done in time, and sometimes going 7 days straight with only an occasional nod to wife and family, who will become increasingly irate and begin to mutter disparagingly about your sanity. I suggest you work full-time at a language-related job and translate part-time on nights and weekends until you get established well enough to go out on your own.

If you insist on going freelance from the start, I suggest you ask agencies to send you a translation test. Most of the large agencies test their new translators anyway. Maybe you can convince them of your translating capability. You will also need a good fax machine, computer (with appropriate software) and modem to deliver the goods on time. You must present yourself as a businessperson, not a college student looking for a job.

I hope my words do not sound too harsh because that is not my intention. I just want you to go into this business with both eyes open and not expecting to turn a profit for some time.

John Stroman

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Roger Chriss has written about translation as a profession, and he offers many pointers for people considering getting into the profession. His report can be found [here](#).

I would also echo the advice of getting your start by working in house for a while.

That's the path I took myself. Also, even if your long-term goal is to live and work in some country other than Japan, you might consider working in Japan for several years as a translator. I would argue that when you are getting started in the profession, the enriched language environment that comes from living in Japan will make for more rapid progress. Also, many references you will want to use will be cheaper to buy here.

Translation is a subtle art. I started full of confidence and quickly realized how little I knew about Japanese (and English!). That's when you really start to learn. My *wan-pointo* advice: Learn to recognize when you don't know something. The thought, "That's probably right," is usually wrong.

Dan Kanagy

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I think this assessment is pretty good:

- > It's beginning to look like one of those "need a job
- > to get experience, but can't get a job without
- > experience" Catch-22's that everyone hates...

To a large degree, translation success depends more on "jitsuryoku" than on qualifications on paper. However, to get a chance to show off your "jitsuryoku", you need some kind of qualifications on paper. Two years of college Japanese certainly doesn't impress anybody that knows anything about either language learning or translation.

Several people have suggested the option of looking for an in-house translation job. I think this is probably a good idea. Depending on what your career goals are, another way to do it is to find a non-translation-related job and work on finding translation jobs on the side. This is the path I took. If your main goal is to be a full-time translator, it might not be the best path, but it has the advantages of providing a stable income to support you while you get started in translation, as well as providing (potentially) a solid background and depth of experience in some field (which may then be leveraged for your translation work).

As far as finding translation work, if you have decent skills, you should be able to leverage the "kone" you have already developed. You should have a decent relationship with your college instructors, which should already know (and hopefully be impressed with) your skill level and potential. You said you spent a year in Japan -- you should have people you know from that experience who are similarly impressed with you. My first non-coursework translation came as part of a different job (summer internships and part-time work developing Japanese language instruction software), and my first freelance work came from people I already knew -- instructors I had taught for, companies I had interviewed with, friends from school that now run their own Japan-related businesses, etc.

This mailing list is another good resource. If you are participating in the list, showing the translators here that you have good skills and something to contribute, you may be able to get some work through them.

This is a relatively slow way to get into translation, and will probably only be possible if you have some other means of support (like a day job). You need to have some way to survive while you're building up enough translation customers to support you.

It also is a difficult path, in some ways. While it takes away the pressure of having to find enough work to pay the rent, it also means that your time is very limited, since you already owe 8+ hours a day to your "real" job. In the feast-or-famine world of

translation, that means that you'll have to turn down some of the feast that you could otherwise be profiting from. If you're doing mostly agency work, too, that can really hamper things, since it probably doesn't take to many times turning down jobs before they take you off their list. If you find an agency that's small enough that they get to know you personally, and if they like your work, they'll be more forgiving.

- > In any case, I do have a couple of specific questions. First,
- > do you recommend sending samples of my Japanese
- > writings with my resume?

Only if they're good. :) I never have, but then I haven't done much "cold calling", that is, calling potential clients without an introduction or specific lead, either.

- > Second, should I go ahead and buy translation tools such
- > as technical dictionaries and name dictionaries before I
- > find work?

When I did my first job, I didn't even have Nelson's (though I did have a Rose-Innes... long story). However, I did have easy access to a well-stocked university library. It wouldn't hurt to get started on a core library, if you're really serious about translation. Depending on what field you want to work in, you can probably get started with just three or four good dictionaries (probably the big Kenkyusha's J-E, a good kan-wa, a good English dictionary, and one or two technical dictionaries for whatever your field of specialty is), and then add more as you get some income.

- > And third, does anyone know of any translation agency that
- > will give a newcomer a chance to do freelance work?

Watch this list for announcements of available jobs that pop up occasionally. That's a good place to start. Keep contacting agencies. Try to sell yourself on the basis of your skill rather than on your resume. Offer to do a test translation (most agencies probably have standard test translations that they can have you do). Use your "kone" from school and other associations. And good luck!

David Luke

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In addition to all the good advice that has been heard on getting started as a freelance translator (or any kind of translator, for that matter), I have this advice:

Learn about something other than the Japanese language, the English language, and how to translate between them isolated from subject matter.

Any translation that is worth paying for is about *something*--subject matter, the field you need to know to (1) understand the original and (2) write convincingly in the source language. There are people who say they do "general" translations only. I don't believe

that. I think they perhaps do what they call general translation out of modesty because they think (perhaps correctly) that they do not know enough about the fields they are translating in.

For many translators who come out of a language-learning situation isolated from real-world subject matter, getting good at translation will require study in fields that are (at least in the beginning, and perhaps forever) extremely boring to the translator. I suspect that situation results in some translators leaving translation for things that are more interesting to them.

Bill Lise

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Although my target was technical translation, I was desperate for any kind of hands-on experience in the US. There are two steps, initial step and current strategy, that were totally successful. The initial step was looking for volunteer opportunities. The next step was creating a WWW home page.

For the first step, what I did was looking for some Japanese language related organizations -- one I soon found was a student organization publishing an information magazine for Japanese students at the University of Oregon. These people had some articles written by English speakers, so they needed them to be translated but free or almost. Great, let me do that...

Then, what happened was that actually this organization brought other threads as well. Clients who put ads on this "Japanese" magazine are by nature interested in Japan and the Japanese market to some degree. Right on. I offered my work almost for free, and instead I earned credits enough to fill my resume or enough to make myself feel confident.

However my real target was technical/science translation. Next step which is my current strategy is to create a home page (ad) on the WWW. It's very much like fishing. Silent for awhile, and one day, a big fish may come. Actually a big fish came to me soon after (like three days after I registered my home page with most major search engines.

Because they found me through WWW, this client was computer literate, which meant exchanging files and all other conversational issues were all done by electrically. Also, when clients (including this big fish<g>) contacted me by Email, they had already known my expertise and weaknesses which were provided in my home page. No client through the WWW has asked me for sample work, although I sent a sample that best matches their needs anyway: They seem very happy seeing actual work related to their interest to a certain degree.

I started looking for volunteer opportunities July 95. Within 6 months effectively, I grabbed direct clients, and met opportunities other than translation (somewhat more attractive and more active) but related to Japanese language.

Sachiko Honda

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I got my first real translating job working for a semiconductor manufacturer last summer, and more than anything else, my Chemical Engineering background and past work helped me to get the job. While I only worked there for a summer, ever since then I have had several opportunities to do translation, and I was able to use my experience to give my claims of being able to translate Japanese some leverage.

Kevin M Koga

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I concur with other Honyaku guidance counselors: get a job, preferably with a Japanese company or subsidiary thereof, and preferably not with translating as your major function. Learn every aspect of the business, and how it's expressed in both languages, formally and colloquially. But mainly, absorb it physically, actually do the things you'll be translating, get your feet wet and your hands dirty. The translations will come along in the course of time.

Advantages of working in-house:

1. You can see the widget, fiddle with it, take it apart. (I wound up installing them in the field.)
2. You know the target audience, e.g., layman, company stockholder, technician, sales rep nado and you can tailor your translation accordingly.
3. For letters, nado, you can get filled in on the background, what transpired previously, and what this letter is supposed to accomplish. Such information is nearly impossible to acquire through an agency.

Advantages of working through an agency:

1. Anonymity: if you botch the translation, only the agency knows you're the screwup.
2. Broad range of subjects: You'll learn, albeit superficially, about almost any subject anybody would want translated.
3. Right of refusal: An in-house employer owns your ass, a direct end-user client effectively does. In the case of an agency, you can turn down a job if you're too busy, it's out of your bailiwick, or whatever. (But do so quickly so they have time to find somebody else. Don't leave the agency hanging in limbo for a week, then tell them you can't do it.)

Disadvantages of working through an agency:

1. Low pay.
2. If they find out you're any good, they'll foist off their worst cases on you. You end up with all the tuffies and effectively subsidize inept translators who get all the cushy jobs.
3. Difficult to consult the client. You're mostly on your own and have to figure out the jibberish for yourself.

Disadvantages of freelance translating:

1. Low pay.
2. Cycles of feast and famine. Sorta fun when you're single, not so enthralling when you're married with bills to pay and mouths to feed.
3. No freedom. In-house, you can rest on holidays, snooze it up. Freelancing, you're like the fireman, you work when there's a fire. Two fires, you work twice.
4. No respect. You're treated like a two-bit typist.

Sure you want to translate? I'm not trying to discourage you, but if you come up with a better way to make a living, go with that.

Joe Mann

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Joe Mann lists "Low pay" as a disadvantage to freelance translating. I have strong doubts about that. Was this compared to in-house translating? If so, even if the freelancer is working for agencies at low agency rates, a fairly prolific and professional translator will be able to make much more freelancing than it would be possible working in-house. The dynamics of the situation, as I have seen them work, are something like this.

A company with lots of translation work, a sense that they should train a good translator, and a sense that they don't like paying agency rates for translation will sometimes hire an in-house translator. However, in most cases, the amount of salary they are willing to pay has a ceiling to it, this ceiling being established more by emotion than by economics. It usually runs about 500-600 thousand yen. Beyond that, the wage goes to hell, because the salary of at least in-house foreign translators (along with other information like who they go to bed with <g>) is knowledge that many people in house feel a need and a right to know. I know quite a number of in-house (ex, mostly) translators who hit upon this rule of in-house translation salary dynamics and found it virtually unsurmountable.

Even at dirt cheap agency rates, a freelancer should be able to hit the million yen per month mark with dilligence and ability. That's only about 50, 000 yen per day (actually

a bit less) working weekdays only. Do the arithmetic. It's 25 pages at 2000 yen. But since people capable of doing finished translation would not really be willing to work for this rate, use 3500 yen (still lower than the rate paid by direct clients); that puts the page count per day at about 14 pages. Doesn't sound very tough to me, even for someone who is not that speedy. When you get to the point of asking for real money (market rates paid by the client--5000 to 10000 or more per page), the situation gets even easier.

So I really can't buy the statement that a disadvantage of freelancing is low pay unless (1) the above is completely off (I know from experience that it is not) or (2) companies have started paying in-house translators well over 2,000,000 yen per month, which is not at all difficult to make as a freelancer.

Bill Lise

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Bill Lise paints an enticing picture of potential earnings for freelance translators but I wonder if this is true for most of us. I now work mainly for one agency, spasmodically for a few others. I also work from Australia and visit Japan for a few weeks most years. My general rate for Japanese to English translation is Y3000 per page of English (about 1000-1200 bytes) which has not changed in the last 8 years (when the yen was cheap). Over the years, the rising yen has gradually raised my dollar income and I have not felt strongly motivated to raise my rates with existing clients who keep me more than fully employed. Some of you will possibly take the view that I am lowering the industry standard by working for low rates but I enjoy the work and I enjoy being busy.

Retirement sucks!

Some time ago, when my principal client had a lean period, he suggested I might discount my rates -- a move which I resisted -- but it has prompted me to try to expand my client base and, at the same time, upgrade my rates a bit. This is an extremely difficult thing to do from a distance.

From what I hear from other translators, the days of Y8000 or more per page are over and the reality is that translators who deal directly with end-user clients have to work much harder than I do, travelling, selling, negotiating, making tables, even layout and desktop publishing work -- all of which are done by the agencies I supply with English text. I don't begrudge my clients the profits they earn from my work.

Bearing in mind that high rates usually involve "administrative overheads" in addition to translation, Bill's casual remark that churning out 14 pages per day 5 days a week doesn't sound too tough may not be realistic. In my case, while "feast or famine" might be an overstatement, I find I am usually either frantically fighting tight deadlines or

twiddling my thumbs (writing letters such as this while I wait for it to be 10:00 a.m. in Tokyo when the fax will start ringing and some new and exciting project will arrive.)

Paul Gray

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Like many others, I started in-house at a translation company. I had had a little experience before that, but the experience of, as I have explained it to others, "interning at a major inner-city hospital" made me a better word doctor. There I got to see all kinds of patients, some savable and some not. I was under the pressure you need to develop the arrogance you need to be a translator. (NB: This does not mean arrogance toward the client or arrogance toward the word. It means the ability to decide what the text really means and how you are going to say it -- genuflecting toward the written words along the way -- and then to decide that it is *done* -- as good as it's going to get -- and it's time to move on to the next patient/text. Unlike in a classroom, real-life translators do not have the time, and should not have the inclination, to spend a lot of time on maybe it means this and maybe it means that. (Which is also why you should specialize and why your specialties should be fields you're interested in so you'll know enough to fill in the gaps and realize what it *means* and why it's phrased the way it is and how this is actually said in the field.)

On rates, I agree that working for direct, end-user clients pays better. Yes, you have to do more, but I would end up wanting to do that "more" anyway, and this way I get paid for it. (This is things like sometimes talking with the client-author and making tables look like tables.) On having to talk with the client, I assume that if you are working for an agency, the contact there is the client and you have to talk with that person just the same as I have to talk with my contacts at the end-user clients.

Further on rates, I would urge people to look at their lifestyles, decide how much they need, divide that by how many pages they feel comfortable doing, and then add another 20% or so (nestegg money) to get the per/page rate. Then adjust that by whatever makes you feel comfortable with it. If you are too busy at that per-page rate -- if you have more work than you are comfortable doing -- raise your rates. If you are in Japan, I would expect you to be pulling down Y5,000 per page for J-to-E, and I would not be surprised if you said you got up to twice that. This assumes, of course, that you know the languages, that you know the field, and that you are working for end-user clients and interacting with them in their source language.

Fred Uleman

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I've been enjoying this discussion of how a person should get started as a freelance translator. I notice that people seem to be advising based on their own backgrounds, that is, those who came to translation from hands-on work in technical fields recommend getting hands-on experience in a technical field, those who started out as in-house translators recommend starting out as an in-house translator, etc.

I would like to put in a good word for not having real-world experience, not working in-house, not having a specialty, etc. That's the way I started out ten years ago, and I've had no problem keeping busy--yes, sometimes too busy--since about the third month, and my rates are at the top of the levels that have been mentioned here.

The person who started this thread said he "had two years of college Japanese and lived in Japan for a year, " which is not too different from what I had when I started out (zero years of college Japanese and two-and-a-half years in Japan). So while I'm sure being an engineer, working in-house, etc., are all excellent preparation, they are by no means necessary. Find some work, even on a volunteer basis, do it well and on time, and find some more. There's a lot out there.

Tom Gally

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As many Honyakkers may remember, I posted a question about getting started back in the summer of 1994. I received many kind, supportive, and helpful personal e-mail messages (thanks again!), many of which offered advice along the lines of that posted here. Based on my own experience, I would have to say that one does not necessarily have to start out as a technical professional or an in-house professional.

During my academic days, I did a few minor translation projects, and I enjoyed them, because they allowed me to use my language skills at a level about that required to teach college students to say *Eki wa doko desu ka*. After leaving academia, I worked as a freelance editor, but I wanted to break into translation. This is the point at which Honyakkers first met me.

I began answering help-wanted ads posted on Honyaku and taking the translation tests offered by these potential clients. A few jobs came in. Once completed, they became part of the resume sent out to other potential clients. Fellow Honyakkers referred me for jobs they thought I might be good at. Now most of my work is in translation, and most of the editing is somehow connected with Japanese subject matter, such as a project in which I checked the completed graphs and charts in a translation of a QC book. (I found a number of switched labels and similar errors.)

As a result of getting repeat business from the same clients, I'm learning a couple of unfamiliar fields. When offered an unfamiliar field, I take a test and let the agency

decide whether I'm qualified or not. I've gotten good feedback on my ability to untangle nasty, convoluted sentences and to dig up correct terminology even in unfamiliar fields. My formal linguistic background is as follows: Cornell FALCON program (6 hours per day for 12 months of language instruction); Ph.D. in linguistics at Yale, with a concentration in the history of the language; a year of dissertation research at Ochanomizu Joshi Daigaku, and a few summers in the Old Country. The rest has been all self-study as I strive to compensate for my relatively short time of continuous residence in Japan. Those textbooks designed for foreign students on Monbusho fellowships are extremely helpful in increasing one's linguistic sophistication in a number of directions, as are novels, magazines, and rented videos. All in all, I'm happy as a translator. Now if only all agencies and direct clients could follow the sterling example of the one client who pays immediately upon receipt of the completed work...

Karen Sandness

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Tom Gally wrote that he had "zero years of college Japanese and two-and-a-half years in Japan" when he started translating.

I'm curious as to how people with little or no university education and only one or two years 'in country' acquire the skills to become profession translators. I'd also like to know what kinds of things you are translating. I am in no way trying to sound snotty or sarcastic, nor am I implying any lack of qualifications. I'm honestly just curious.

Ken Schwartz

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If twelve years of language teaching taught me anything, it was that neither classroom time nor time in Japan is an accurate predictor of how well a student will learn Japanese. The coverage and quality of Japanese curricula vary considerably from school to school. Some programs seem to spend most of their time on origami, sushi-making, and learning children's songs, while others are the linguistic equivalent of boot camp. If you're in Japan, you can spend your time lapping up the language and culture and seeking novelties associated with them, or you can spend your time moving in comfortable circles, content with what you need to "just get by." (I've met some long-term expatriates who would probably starve to death if they ever had to leave the gaijin ghetto.) Natural talent plays a huge role, as do motivation and just plain hard work. I've seen mediocre students wake up because of falling in love with a Japanese person or because of acquiring new friends who placed a priority on studying instead of drifting. Most people with two years of college Japanese and one year in Japan would not be ready to translate professionally, but I wouldn't rule out the possibility. In fact, I once

had a student with two years in Japan with no previous language instruction, and she was phenomenal.

I sent a private e-mail to the original inquirer suggesting that he tell employers exactly what he can do with Japanese--read shuukanshi with little use of a dictionary, understand NHK newscasts, etc.--rather than telling them about his academic record, the hint being that if he can't do things like this, maybe he's not ready.

In the end, it's not how many swimming lessons you've had, but whether you can meet the times required for competition.

Karen Sandness

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Some people are disgustingly good at acquiring language without the benefit of formal training. I once worked with a Japanese man who was able to spot subtle infelicities in my English without ever having lived outside of Japan. I went through the academic mill, and I'd never have made it without that background. But there's no denying that some people (not many) have the combination of native linguistic ability and motivation to "pick it up" themselves. More power to them!

Laurie Berman

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I've studied seven foreign languages extensively. Six of these were as part of my formal education, and one (Japanese) I studied entirely without the "benefit" of any institution of learning. Yet Japanese is the only one I am fluent in. It is also the one on which both my profession and everyday social and family life are now based.

As for learning the fields of translation, this is an on-going process. When I graduated from university, the topics I now translate in (computing and telecommunications) barely resembled what they are today. LSIs, fiber optics, and microprocessors didn't even exist. I owe much more to a lifelong love of electronics and gadgetry than anything I learned in school.

Sorry if I appear to be scornful of education; that's not my purpose. University taught me how to think and do research, and put me alongside some very stimulating people from all over the world. But it sure didn't teach me how to do my job.

John De Hoog

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I didn't mean to imply that I didn't have a university education. What I said was that I had "zero years of college Japanese." My university degrees are in linguistics and mathematics, and the languages I studied were Russian (which I can still read) and Chinese (which I've long since forgotten). But what I studied in college and graduate

school has helped me only indirectly in my work as a translator, and has been of much less use than the things I have learned outside of academia.

I came to Japan at the age of 26 with no knowledge of the language at all, and I didn't acquire much for the first six months or so. Then, because my application for a work visa was rejected, I had to enroll full-time in a Japanese language school so that I wouldn't get thrown out of the country. The school I chose was the cheapest in Tokyo at the time; that's why I chose it. Some of the teachers at the school were good and a few were horrible (one of the latter was fired and is now a popular street palm-reader in Ginza). I got excited about learning Japanese and I spent almost all my non-English-teaching time for the next couple of years studying and reading Japanese. I graduated from the school and passed the Japanese Language Proficiency Exam (Level 1) at about the same time I started looking for work as a translator.

Though I made some blunders in my early translations (I make them still), I think I was ready to begin translating when I did. My brief post-university work experience in the U.S. had involved proofreading and copyediting, so I was confident of my ability to produce clean, readable English. I also had, and still have, a strong distaste for "translationese," those literal, unnatural translations that some translators produce. A lifetime spent reading hasn't hurt, either.

Among the jobs I've done over the past year: The history of an acting company for a theater program. A series of papers on the Japanese and world oil industry. Several PR video scripts. A project proposal for an oil refinery to be built in Taiwan. Advertising brochures for televisions, VCRs, stereos, and batteries. Several construction machinery catalogues. An instruction manual for a currency processing machine. Many business letters and reports. "The Kodansha Furigana English-Japanese Dictionary" (as editor/adaptor) and "Japanese Verbs at a Glance" (as translator). Aside from these last two, which did require some background in linguistics, none of these jobs used any knowledge that I had acquired at university.

Autodidacts of the world, unite!

You have nothing to lose but your resumes!

Tom Gally

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In the hope of pressing home the point that there are more ways than one to make a living as a translator, here's my experience. I was two years in Japan without any formal training in the language when I undertook my first translation for pay. After two years working in-house, I became a full-time freelancer, full-time meaning ten to fifteen hours a week. I now work for two (large) direct clients, both of whom have other translators

available, and one agency. For six to seven months out of the year, I'm quite busy in Tokyo. The rest of the year is spent on the road -- cycling, kayaking, or just bumming around. I usually carry a laptop and modem and a few EBs and will take on large jobs as they come up.

Although proximity has its virtues, today's technology makes it possible to translate from just about anywhere in the world. (Naturally, you need to establish a relationship with the client first.) I don't charge as much per page as some of the people on this list, but I've always considered that differential something of a "freedom tax." For me, this kind of freedom is the principal reason I do the work I do.

Chris Green

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Some of the posts on this topic seem to be equating good Japanese ability with good translating ability, but that is not necessarily the case. Although language skills are undoubtedly vital, they do not in themselves guarantee the ability to convey meaning from one language to another. Transfer skills are also necessary.

Secondly, although nearly everyone on this list (including myself) learnt how to translate through on-the-job training, nowadays there is another option available in the form of postgraduate courses in Japanese/English translation (e.g. the courses in Hawaii, Monterey and Brisbane). These are aimed at professional translation (nothing like any translation you may have done in your undergraduate Japanese courses), and they are a shortcut to acquiring some of the knowledge and experience that most of us have taken years to acquire. At the University of Queensland, we are also often able to introduce students to job opportunities that get them started out in the profession.

(Apologies for the plug!)

I myself learnt Japanese/English translation in three quite different ways. After formal studies in Japanese I worked in Japan as an in-house translator and then as a freelance translator for about nine years. Then I did a PhD on Japanese-English translation, and this provided a whole new perspective and depth to my practical experience. And now I teach J-E translation, and every day I learn enormously both from my students' problems and from their solutions to their problems.

Judy Wakabayashi

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I aquired my language skills through self-study. As in, several hours a day (basically, because I liked it). I spent nearly five years in Japan, the first two as an English conversation instructor.

After two years, I was able to find work as an in-house translator of magazine and newspaper articles about Japanese society, politics, economics, and other subjects of general interest. I was lucky: I applied at several companies for in-house translation jobs, and none of the companies cared as much about experience, academic background, etc., as they did about my ability to apply my alleged skills to *their* tests. The interview and testing process earned me a demanding and fulfilling job, where I stayed for nearly three years before returning to the United States and embarking on the freelance path. If pressed to explain how I learned enough Japanese in two years to become a translator, I would say 1) I am visually oriented, and readily took to kanji; and 2) I learned natural sentence patterns, and expanded my vocabulary, by supplementing textbooks with magazines and other material designed for native Japanese readers as soon as I was ready--maybe even before I was ready. I would listen to the radio and watch TV even when I was not yet able to understand one-tenth of what was being said, and in the same fashion I tackled magazines, manga, etc. (I also knew better than to try to force myself to slog through material in which I personally had no interest. Thus I inevitably chose manga or pop magazines over, say, the Nihon Keizai Shimbun.)

I now do work for various agencies and the occasional direct client. It has not been smooth sailing all the way, and it sounds as though some people on the list make more in a month than I make in a year! Then again, the cost of living here is lower, and I have been known to turn down work if it would cut too much into my leisure time. Thus far, I have managed to pay my bills and even put a bit of money away.

Most of my work as a freelancer has been in the area of corporate communications (promotional materials, etc.)--which I really enjoy. I've also translated a health-related book this past year.

In addition to translation, I also do checking and editing work. (Until I went to Japan, editing was my full-time profession.)

Jenny Nazak

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I had the good fortune to be able to learn Japanese under the direction of some first-rate literary translators at the University of Michigan, and I remember one telling me that "understanding the Japanese is the easy part; expressing it in English is the hard part." I've since found that to be true for myself. The limiting factor on my skill as a Japanese-to-English translator is not my Japanese, it's my English.

Paul Seward

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Here's my story.

Born in Hawaii, I was exposed to anime and tokusatsu in the early '70s, when I was about six years old. I fell in love, and they've been a part of my life ever since. When I was ten, my family moved to the mainland (the SF Bay Area), and I was stuck with dubs for about eight years. Then I had the opportunity to get my hands on real anime, and by this point manga as well, unedited and untranslated. I decided to start studying Japanese so I could read and watch what I was collecting in its original form. My first formal courses were night classes once a week at a community college where I lived, in my senior year of high school. As an aside, I also aced four years of German in high school, but I hardly remember any of it.

I also began attempting my first anime/manga translations at this time. You can imagine what they were like. I wasn't satisfied myself, both with my own work as well as what I was seeing around me, amateur and pro alike, and kept working at it, determined to improve. Back then the fans were pretty receptive to someone making an effort to give them something they couldn't get elsewhere, and this made for a pretty safe place in which to start honing my skills. Essentially, I began studying Japanese and translation for personal satisfaction. I think having a personal interest of some sort makes for much better motivation than simply earning classroom credits.

Speaking of which, about this time I was going to college (UC Santa Cruz), where I ended up taking another two years or so of Japanese studies. I did get value out of my coursework, because it helped me get the basics of grammar, pronunciation, and writing. But eventually I hit a wall, and to get over it I started reading novels as well as manga, trying to resort to dictionaries as little as possible. As a result, I can now read a 250-300 page bunkoban novel in about a week, if I'm reading nothing else (a rare occurrence).

In 1989 a computer software designer was advertising on Usenet for translators for a new anime subtitling company he was forming. I heard about it from a friend, contacted the person in question (he was in New York while I was in California), and that was how I broke into professional translation--through the side door. I was fortunate in that the other person to answer the ad was a native Japanese speaker with English as a second language (born in Japan, his family moved to the States when he was a small child). Thus, we complemented each other very nicely. My years at AnimEigo would be an intense, yet still relatively risk-free, training ground.

In 1991, AnimEigo brought some of its operations to Tokyo, and sent for me to take over subtitling as well as translation. I didn't have a college degree (still don't), and didn't have enough documentable experience to qualify for a working visa on that basis. So I began attending Japanese school. After two years of that, I took and passed the

Mombusho Japanese Proficiency Exam Level 1 twice, and passed it both times with better than 80%. All the while, I was living in Japan basically on my own, and had to learn day-to-day conversation just to survive.

About a year ago, not long after I finally got my working visa, Gainax, an anime/multimedia production company, recruited me just as I was coming to the end of the road with AnimEigo. Now I do a variety of translation work in-house, and work on freelancing opportunities within the industry. I've turned a hobby into an occupation, and most of it has been flukes so far. Now I'm starting to exercise some personal initiative, as I look for a publisher for a couple of book translations, among other things. Here's to whatever comes next...

Michael House

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My training was more or less conventional -- a year in Japan during college, and then completed the Naganuma advanced modern Japanese program -- but the first person I worked for was a one-man agency who had started as an editor in Japan with no formal language training; he pasted a Touyou Kanji chart to his office wall, started at the top, and memorized his way down. By the time he hired me part-time, he was very successful as a translator, doing mostly computer and equipment manuals. (He let me start on less technical stuff that was too much trouble for him to do.) His spoken Japanese was pretty bad, but his clients (including some end users) loved him -- he did good work, liked to go out drinking with them, and was generally seen as a good fellow. So there are lots of different methods for getting started.

Lee Seaman

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I've always noticed a conspicuous lack of translators among those I studied Japanese with in university. Maybe a lot of my contemporaries regarded the study of the Japanese language as a stepping stone rather than a goal?

Steve Harris

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*Here are some comments from December 1998:*

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The standard piece of advice for aspiring translators (at least, it's the standard for me) is that finding a suitable subject matter specialty is at least as important as learning the foreign language. Most people who think that they might like translating as an occupation fail to realize that their clients will be paying them to translate specific

documents, and this will require the translator to know something (often a lot) about a specific area of human endeavor.

Are you very knowledgeable about a certain area of science or technology? A branch of industry? Financial business? Law? If not, you will probably have a hard time getting much work.

Also, unless you are a phenomenal language learner, I doubt that you can learn enough Japanese by self-study to become a professional translator. It's a damn hard language for English speakers (and vice versa). Assuming that you have at least one of the aforementioned subject areas lined up, I would advise you to spend a few years in Japan, studying the language from professional teachers and acquiring familiarity with the culture.

Once you have satisfied these requirements, we can begin discussing how to find clients. Good luck!

Jon Johanning

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In many ways anime/manga/game translations are even *more* challenging than technical material due to the often-esoteric subject matter and abundant use of colloquialisms. I was raised on a steady diet of Japanese anime myself (go ahead, ask me anything about Gundam :), but I realized how "blind" a translator of pop-culture materials is when I first sat down to do an actual translation of the text of a video game a year or so ago. There simply aren't any reliable study guides or dictionaries available for up-to-the-minute slang and "street talk." It's a "you know it or you don't" sort of thing, and there's no way around the fact that living in Japan is the best way to pick up that knowledge.

Matthew Alt

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- > I think that most people outside the field seriously
- > underestimate the level of language skill needed
- > for translation.

That's funny: I've noticed that many people *in* the field seriously underestimate the level of language skill needed for translation.

Ryan Ginstrom

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I don't know any other translator who said they started out *wanting* to be a translator. Not that there aren't people who do become a translator because it was a long-time goal. But in the case for Japanese, I think it takes at least five to six years of relevant experience and training (learning) to become proficient at any level of translation above

the very very low value-added end. I graduated from one of the major Japanese national universities with a major in economics, did all my course work in Japanese, and it's only been in the past four years or so that I have felt comfortable enough to call myself a 'translator'. For Japanese, anyway, it just takes a lot of commitment and dedication to set your sights that far ahead - which is why most JPN-ENG translators sort of fall into the field.

I also never really set out to be a translator - my interest was economics and finance, and that's what I was doing when I sort of backed into translation. Of course, the intense field work from previous jobs was a major help. Other people have suggested it and implied it, I will say very directly - if you don't have a solid background in a particular field or hobby (a friend of mine makes a very good living in Europe translating from French to Japanese material on chess, an old hobby of ours from university days - he'd starve to death in the States), it is almost impossible to become a translator. Obviously, having a broad, general and diverse background of Japanese (being exposed to a variety of fields and experiences) will help you diversity across fields, which may help if demand in one particular field suddenly dries up - but ultimately, you need English knowledge of the work you're doing to be a good translator - knowing the Japanese is useless if you don't know how to make it sound natural in English. Just ask any other translators - even the best of them will struggle outside a field they feel comfortable in (myself included, and I'm not even one of the best of them).

I would also say that game software, anime, and other such areas are indeed very difficult areas to master for a translator, but if they are an interest of yours, than by all means let that be your road to translation - there is a market for work in those fields, and particularly for game software. No one says everyone has to translate patents and annual reports. I personally would much rather translate something I find interesting; translating a piece of boring or uninteresting material can be about as much fun as watching paint dry.

Scott Urista

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There are very few people in this world who can translate a complex Japanese phrase into a natural-English sentence *well*. There is a tremendous amount of work to be done however that demands such skills.

I am on my 5th year of living in Japan (not consecutive years) and I feel that I am far from being able to translate without a safety net. But in the environment that I work (I kind of have an in-house HONYAKU list over here), the skills that I have are valued and in my opinion, fairly well compensated.

Howard Joseph Jackson

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Though several people have suggested specializing in a particular field, that is not the only choice. I and at least a few other people on this list do not have a readily definable field of specialization. Some types of work in which source-language comprehension and target-language eloquence are more important than field-specific knowledge are advertising and public relations; speeches, scripts, and other texts for spoken delivery; newspaper and magazine articles; and, for those who don't mind penury, literature. If you have many interests and have trouble choosing a specialty, then don't be afraid to become a translator first and a specialist later or never.

Since I started studying Japanese only after I came to Japan, I can't quite imagine what it's like to try to achieve fluency in the language without being here. But until you have a chance to come to Japan (and afterwards as well), one of the best ways to prepare yourself linguistically to be a translator is to read a lot of Japanese. Read novels, magazines, newspapers, video game manuals, manga--whatever you're interested in. Read a lot, and keep reading even if you don't understand everything. If you find yourself losing interest because it takes too long to look up unfamiliar words in dictionaries, then separate your reading from your vocabulary building: read and read and read without a dictionary, and study vocabulary using word lists and textbooks. Finally, one advantage of translation as a profession is that it allows relatively easy transition to and from other professions. As others have noted, most translators start out doing something else before becoming translators. What is less often mentioned here is that people also leave translation to take up other careers, including teaching, editing, writing, research, and running their own businesses. Many people, including myself, wear multiple hats simultaneously. In each case, the experience gained in one profession pays off in the others.

Tom Gally

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Basically you can be a specialist, or not, it depends on your own priorities, interests, and favorite skills.

This is divided into two sections: Reading and Parachuting.

Reading

I started translating after I found I could keep reading a book or magazine in Japanese with little frustration, even after the batteries in my Canon WordTank had died<g>. I'll just say I studied for a Lot of Hours to be able to do that--and I have always found

second language acquisition to be Really Easy and Enjoyable, relative to most of my peers.

My study of reading and vocabulary was almost entirely self-directed and I never went to a Japanese language school, except for a very short time. What I did do was regularly participate in a language exchange arrangement focused on spoken communication. Also, throughout this time, I was living in Japan and using the language for practical purposes on a daily basis.

Parachuting

I recommend that you (and most people) read Richard Bolles' book, *What Color is Your Parachute?*, and do the exercises found therein for clearly identifying your core interests and areas of genius. Identifying those things that you can both do well, and love doing, is very difficult, for most people. That's why going through a systematic exploratory process to figure them out is very important, for most people. Bolles' book offers a great process for identifying both your favorite skills (What you want to do) and your favorite fields of knowledge or endeavor (Where you want to it).

Konrad Godleske

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To get started, you might enjoy translating something that you've read and enjoyed, regardless of the field it's in. My first (unpaid) translation was a short story that I liked and wanted my non-Japanese-reading parents to read. Learning to translate with good quality partly depends on the quantity of translation work you've already done (because the work, whether or not its paid, gives you opportunity to meet first hand, and experience tackling, the various problems involved in translation), so it couldn't hurt to get started.

David Shinozuka

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A method that I adopted years ago during the intense language-acquisition phase was to make up my mind before starting to read whether or not I would be reading simply for general comprehension or as a grammar-skills and vocabulary building exercise. That resolved up front the occasionally agonizing dilemma of whether to interrupt the reading process to make sure I could account for everything that was happening in the text, or to keep on trucking, mindful that we all have acquired much of our understanding of our native languages through intensive, long-term exposure, not necessarily via grammar books.

Tom Coffey

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*From July 1994:*

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I can attest from my personal experience that you do not need to have some sort of advanced degree to be a professional translator. Most of the time, my clients couldn't care a whit that I never even finished a BA or BS degree. I guess that makes me *kousotsu* in the vernacular. I support myself quite nicely as a full-time technical translator. Of course, I already have 8 years experience in the business and clients care much more about experience than anything else.

I started out translating in-house at a Tokyo sci-tech magazine publisher. They were quite lenient about deadlines (it was only a quarterly) and the editors would point out my mistakes quite carefully.

Even though I did not have a degree, I had studied university physics for two years and was quite interested in the physical sciences in general, having read many science magazines religiously (Scientific American, etc.).

If you have a particular field that you are interested in, you might try making that your "specialty" by getting and reading as many dictionaries and English publications you can on that specific field. If you can demonstrate a reasonable familiarity with the terminology for one specific field, airlines, for example, then you can tell the translation agencies that this is your specialty. Then, when they come across something in that field and their regular translators are hiking the Himalayas, your name will stick out and they will call you.

The problem with going the freelance route is that you pretty much have to call and fax and bother and pester the agencies for at least six months before you will get any reasonable response at all. Once they are used to hearing your name, they will call you, but that first six months of no income can be a killer.

Alan Siegrist

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*From March 2001:*

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As a generalist, I don't think it is necessary to specialize, except in learning Japanese and learning to translate. Another thing: degrees aren't worth much. Get past it.

However you can get a foot in the door, go for it. Answer a call for translators that gets posted on Honyaku, for example, do a few trial translations... You need the tools, the intellectual capacity and the motivation/work ethic, but it won't work to fool anyone about your level of Japanese. Be honest about where you are, get taken under someone's

wing, and study up while on the job for the first two to three years. (Actually it's an ongoing learning process. :-)

Translation is the school of hard knocks. You learn from doing. There is no single "getting the job." Jobs (hopefully) come one after another. Building good working relationships is the goal. You like to work with someone; they like to work with you and like your work. The pay is acceptable. It may take time at first, but you get faster and better with experience. Then your skills are worth more, you can ask for more, you can handle more. When you can work twice as fast, the same page rate starts looking quite good. But you have to start somewhere. That's why some people suggested working in-house. You don't have to start that way. I didn't. But you do have to start somewhere.

(Yes, get thee to the Land of the Rising Sun...)

The well-worn marketing phrase applies:

Just do it.

Richard Sadowsky

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You can certainly become a Japanese translator with no experience of living in Japan. You just can't become a *good* one.

Many people have stated that this does not hold true for scientific/technical translation, but I don't even think this is the case. Why?

For one thing, you will still have to converse with Japanese clients on the phone, and your spoken Japanese will have to be good enough to give them confidence in your abilities. Unless you are some kind of prodigy, your spoken Japanese is likely to sound stilted and unnatural without at least a year of living in Japan. And no hanging out with mostly foreigners, either (he says wagging his finger).

Further, even "technical" translation is hardly ever 100% technical. There are always words or phrases that you must have a handle on the language as a living thing to understand.

On a different note, I would agree that acquiring knowledge in a specific area is going to be much more useful than studying the craft of translation itself in some structured way. Translation itself you can -- must, really -- learn by doing.

Zachary Braverman

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Even "technical texts" are seldom *entirely* technical -- they are written by people in a certain culture (in this case, Japanese culture) for readers in that culture, and it is surprising how often authors of "technical" texts assume that the reader has a knowledge of some aspect of the culture. Therefore, the translator, who always has to

start by reading the text, must also have that knowledge, and the more experience the translator has had living in a Japanese environment (i.e., in Japan), the better off she/he will be. Certainly it may be difficult for someone who has financial problems to get to and live in Japan, but I think every effort should be made to do it for at least a couple of years, if one aspires to be a Japanese translator.

Jon Johanning

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On the question of living in Japan, I believe that it is essential for learning to speak and understand real spoken Japanese, with a few very rare exceptions, such as a young man I met at a language school in Beijing ten years ago.

And the ability to speak Japanese is very handy when discussing terms and the like with Japanese clients on the phone. At this point, about 3/4 of my clients are based in Japan, so I receive or make three or four phone calls in Japanese every week.

I also agree with the people who said that experience living in Japan is necessary for understanding the little details of everyday life and how people express intangible concepts.

For example, I just finished an article that had a lot to do with food and restaurants. I had to figure out what those vague terms about flavors and ambiances referred to in the real world, which I could do, because I've patronized a lot of restaurants in Japan. Then I had to rewrite them in a way that would make sense to English-speakers.

If you're translating patents or other highly technical texts, you may be able to get by merely with an ability to untangle long sentences, but even that ability is greatly aided by the experience of *listening* to long sentences (well, not as long as the sentences in patents, but still pretty long [g]) and training your brain to understand them on the spot.

Karen Sandness

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At the very least, you need to be knowledgeable enough in the field of each particular job so that you understand what the author is saying (including what the author is not saying and why) and are able to say it the way somebody in the field would say it in the target language. And that means specialization.

But do you need a degree in the specialty? Probably not. Like being a translator, you just need to be good. In most fields.

However, there are fields in which having a degree or other qualification can make you "more real." If you are doing patent work for filing and are yourself a patent attorney, you will probably be able to get more money for the work because it will be obvious

that you are adding more value. Likewise with a lawyer doing law. Or a doctor doing medical things.

However, the specialized knowledge (and the degree that represents it) is only *part* of the total translation package. So rather than worrying about the degree requirement, I would worry about specializing in fields of particular interest and spending a lot of time getting good.

You don't need a degree in translation. You don't need a degree in English. You don't need a degree in Japanese. Forget the degrees and medals and all and concentrate on getting good.

Fred Uleman

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Start now, at the bottom of an economic cycle. By the time it eventually hits a peak (don't even ask at what level that will be) you will be experienced enough to take care of yourself when budgets are cut.

Breaking into the market as a freelance translator may be difficult, so try the old strategy of starting off working in-house somewhere to develop skills. If you can pick up a little work on the side, without a conflict of interest, that is OK.

Develop superior skills in the target language. Do this by deliberate study and careful reading, books on rhetoric, for example. Expand your vocabulary so you don't fall into the amateurish trap of falling back on the first word in Nelson's and letting it go because it somehow fits (e.g., *sekkyokuteki* ---> aggressive, eager).

For much work, you don't have to be an expert in the target field, but you have to be able to understand what the experts are writing.

Develop an understanding for social limitations to the quality of the original Japanese that you are given. I used to refer to a translation company I ran for a few years as the Silk Purse Manufacturing Co.

Buy books and get magazines in your target field and output language, if you can afford them. Second-hand is good enough sometimes. College textbooks in your field are good to have. They will give information in context; scanning (not necessarily studying) them will position you to understand material. Develop a feeling for how people who are native English speakers/writers (or a reasonable equivalent) write for native English speakers (with support of style books, editors, etc.) in your field.

If you become highly specialized, consider joining professional organizations in that field.

Learn how to appraise client needs, client perceptions of the original, the work required, and the desired output. Put effort into developing client relationships for two-way

benefits. Know when to decline a job offer because (you need not say it to anyone) it is too tough. Know when to accept a job that is too tough to give you a profit (= decent return on your time) because it is important for relationship-building.

I would add that it pays to subscribe to a few magazines in one's special field and target language, to stay familiar with what is going on. For experienced translators, skimming this kind of material is enough to get a feeling for the terminology, usage patterns, etc. Scavenge the used book dealers for basic references even if out of date. For one, you may get some older material to translate, and, further, it is usually simple to judge if content is dated. Sometimes older books have better explanations than newer ones. The best basic reference on statistics that I have is from the 1940s.

Work hard always at CRM (Client Relationship Management) so that when there are problems in the original you can explain them and get a go-ahead for judgmental treatment, or clarification, as well as access to information.

Learn to subsist on low income for a number of years. Wear hand-me-down clothing. You only need one suit, one shirt and one tie to visit clients.

Avoid my own field.

Aaron M Cohen

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*From November 2003, in reply to a question from a student of Japanese:*

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You might want to read the information provided in the following publications:

Morry Sofer, *The Translator's Handbook*, Schreiber Publishing (4th Revised Edition, 2002)

John Glenn, *Glenn's Guide to Translation Agencies* (no longer in print, but perhaps available online or from other translators)

These books will explain the ABCs of getting into the industry, securing work as a freelancer, and so on.

One thing that has come up here in past discussions of entering the industry, and that is probably the most important point to emphasize to you: Knowing Japanese or any other foreign language well is not enough. You will need to develop extensive knowledge of a technical field or two if you hope to make a living as a professional translator.

Specialties vary across a wide range, and include fields like chemistry, pharmaceuticals, finance, engineering, telecommunications and so on, but it is important that you develop a grounding in at least one of these fields. One good way to do so is to work for a time for a Japanese company as an in-house translator so that you can develop some

expertise and hone your skills.

John Marchioro

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John is exaggerating when he says you need to have a specialty "if you hope to make a living as a translator". I agree that it is beneficial to have a specialty, and I enjoy the medical and biotech translation that I do, *but* there are plenty of people who make a living as generalists. It's a matter of needs and temperament (and knowledge).

Zachary Braverman

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Zachary is right. I do not have any particular technical specialty myself, since my own background is in the social sciences and it has been of little help for most of the translation work I do (the occasional academic paper aside). I regularly lament the fact that I took so few natural sciences courses as an undergrad.

But I do think this bit of advice is solid for someone in the early stages of contemplating a career in translation. Having such a specialty will certainly make your life easier (if less eventful) since you will be translating copy in the same familiar field every day. And you will likely be faster and consequently make more money at it over the long haul as well should you work as a freelancer.

John Marchioro

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The absolute best thing you can do for yourself is to go to Japan to live for a few years. Although just going to Japan is no guarantee of becoming fluent, I can say with confidence that it is *very* hard to get truly skilled at Japanese without living in Japan. Not to mention that you need to have a good understanding of Japanese culture to hope to be a good translator.

I would also do as much reading in Japanese as I could. In my case, when I first when to Japan I found some computer magazines that I was interested in and read those a lot. Since I was interested in the subject, it wasn't a chore, and I also found that I learned a lot of vocabulary etc that came in handy years later when translating. You can start this now by finding Japanese web pages about subjects you are interested in and reading them.

I also agree that having some kind of specialty is a good thing. It doesn't necessarily have to be something complicated -- even if you just have an interest in computers or video games, you may be able to put your knowledge in that field to good use as a translator. If you are still in school and relatively sure you want to be a translator, it would probably serve you to take a variety of courses in fields that are likely to be in demand in translation.

Evan Emswiler

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Translations are *not* just about foreign languages at all. A huge part of the job is research, and also you need creativity and understanding of your native language more than you need knowledge of the foreign language. To me, translating a language and teaching a language are totally different. But I mainly do E to J, so it could be different from J to E.

Yuko Kubota

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No, I think it's just the same (and probably the same with any language pair). BTW, I'm not sure I would say a translator needs *more* creativity and understanding of one's native language than of the foreign language (assuming one is translating into one's native language, as is usually the case), but being able to write one's native language well is certainly quite important, and is often taken for granted, though it shouldn't be. After all, your translation is what the client will see.

"Research" in the broad sense *is* a huge part of the translator's job, and reducing this part is one of the main reasons for having a speciality or two to concentrate one's work in. Which subjects will have the most demand is somewhat tricky to determine, and changes over time, but if you are not interested in any fields that enjoy large demands for translation (e.g., if you are fascinated with medieval Japanese poetry, but not much else), it stands to reason that you will not make a very good living translating.

Jon Johanning

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When I started translation I thought I would learn a lot about Japanese, which I did, but I also ended up learning as much or more about English, which I didn't expect.

Any time spent now mastering good writing skills will be well worth your while. For example, can you distinguish between hyphens, en dashes, and em dashes, and do you know when to use which? Attention to such detail is one of the things that distinguish professional caliber translations.

Dan Kanagy

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*From April 1999:*

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I just struck me that many of the translators that I have met have asked me "What did you do before." The assumption seems to be that whatever I did before has some relevance to what I translate. I have also seen only one person who actually graduated from a school with a translation related degree.

This would seem to indicate that most translators start off somewhere else and then sort of fall into translation.

Paul Flint

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If anyone sends me a resume seeking work, I almost always ask a question like "What did you do before?" (unless they answered it in the resume, of course). I don't think most people fall into translation from somewhere else, but I am interested in knowing what fields of human knowledge the person is familiar with *outside* of the skill of translation. There are a lot of people who are native English speakers, who have learned Japanese as a second language, and who can translate superbly, but who unfortunately know absolutely nothing about anything outside English grammar and Japanese 4-character kanji sayings. That's great if you are translating a letter home to Mom, but if the job at hand is a technical piece, I want to know what sort of technical background a translator has before farming out the job.

Edward Lipsett

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There might be generalists who argue that they can and must translate everything. I would go along with the "must" part in some markets, but seriously doubt the "can" part in many cases. That position is backed up by questions asked on this list. It is much easier to know how badly you are doing in field B when you have a field A, in which you do good work, to use as a quality/pain benchmark. Without a field A, everything is (or should be) painfully difficult, and this sometimes leads to misconceptions about quality and qualifications.

Bill Lise

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We *all* did something else before we became translators. And if we are lucky, the stuff we are translating relates to our non-translation interests, in which case there is a likelihood we *may* have done some of that before or while becoming translators.

Fred Uleman

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I have an "academic translation related degree", but without about 6 years practice within the patent department of a chemical maker, I think, I could not call myself a translator.

Anyway there are a lot of befores, and it is good if one can make use of them...

Uwe Hirayama

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My pseudo-thesis (the exact nature of the work defies explication) project was on "Career Paths for Translators" and done back in 1997 for my M.A. in Japanese Business Communication at Monash University. JAT and Honyaku people *greatly* assisted in performing the research for this paper. It was a small sample (under 100) of JAT members and Honyaku people.

Select quotes....

"In terms of age, in-house translators tend to be younger than translators in other categories [the two other categories being "freelance" and "self-employed/self-incorporated"], and this could indicate that these translators are in the beginning stages of their careers. A high percentage of in-house translators responded that they are planning to work exclusively on a freelance or self-employed basis in the future. Given that many have less than 10 years' experience, this could indicate that in-house translation is regarded as a career starting point by many translators....."

And in another part...

"Close to 90 percent of the translators surveyed indicated that they have college or university degrees. The majority of freelance and in-house translators have undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications in the social sciences (84 percent and 44 percent respectively), and more than half (60 percent) of the self-employed translators surveyed have degrees in the sciences.... Almost a fifth of the freelance and in-house translators indicated that they have completed a formal course in translation, however, none of the self-employed translators had completed such courses."

[Note: Demographically, the self-employed translators who were surveyed tended to be older, have more experience in terms of years, and be overwhelmingly male compared

to the freelance and in-house translators surveyed. More than half of the self-employed translators had a formal background in the sciences and said that they translate in very specific, narrow areas. In comparison, most freelance and in-house translators had a social sciences/humanities background or an "other" background. Judy Wakabayashi may have more information on this, but at least in Australia and Europe, T/I courses only came into vogue approximately 20 years ago, and at their inception, overwhelmingly favoured the European languages....]

Last quote from my paper:

"The small percentage of freelance or in-house translators who indicating completion of a formal course in translation indicates that these courses may not be required for their current employment. Cordero ["The role of the university in the professionalization of the translator" in Deanna L. Hammond, Ed. *Professional Issues for Translators and Interpreters*, Volume VII, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam, 1994, p. 117] stated that 'one of the reasons why the role of the university in translator training ... is so controversial is the fact that there are a great number of translators, among them highly qualified ones, who have had no specialized training as translators at an institution of higher learning."

There we have it: the market (and perhaps even the culture of the market) probably dictates the qualifications.

Leslie M. Tkach

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I see translation as a means to exercise both my engineering background and my second language. Both required pretty much equal levels of effort to acquire, and I wanted a career that put equal weight on both. Translation was not a matter of "falling into" but of conscious, considered choice. (By the way, I acquired my most recent engineering degrees *after* I learned Japanese.)

David J. Littleboy

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> This would seem to indicate that most translators  
> start off somewhere else and then sort of fall  
> into translation.

I prefer to think of it as *ascending* into translation.

Tom Gally