Some Tips for Writing in a Foreign Language

Writing well is difficult enough without the added stress of having to use a foreign language. However, written proficiency in another language is crucial to many professions and fields of study. The following is a list of general tips, meant to help you devise coherent, solid essays, and avoid committing some of the most common errors, when writing in a foreign language.

Try to compose in the foreign language

Although it may be tempting to write your essay in English (or your native language), and then translate it into the other language, it is much better to compose directly in the intended language. Many phrases, idioms, figures of speech and colloquialisms do not translate directly, and often things like sentence structure, prepositions and pronouns are not the same from language to language. When you sit down to write, try to think in the language — if you were a native speaker, what kinds of words would you use and how would you formulate your argument? Watching a foreign movie or conversing with a friend in the language before you begin to write might help get you into the right mindset.

When you do need to translate, use a dictionary and do the grunt work yourself

Websites like Freetranslation.com are helpful for single-word translations and getting the gist of texts in other languages, but they should not be used to translate large blocks of text. It is better to have simple sentences that you have written yourself and know are correct, than complex — but seriously flawed — syntax that you copy-pasted from a translation engine. Your professor will know what you have done, and will not be impressed!
Proof read, proof read, proof read!

Everybody makes typos and silly mistakes when they write, and those mistakes are often multiplied when writing in a foreign language. Many languages have much more complicated protocols for gender, plurals and verb conjugation than English does, and it is important to keep those protocols in mind throughout the writing process. As you write, pay close attention to agreement and grammar — after writing a particularly complex sentence, go over it slowly and confirm each word. Read over your essay carefully and often, and don’t be afraid to read aloud. If your word processor has a languages tool, try setting the dictionary to the other language. Sometimes it is helpful to ask a friend, FLRC tutor, or Oldenburg language resident to look over your writing. However, before seeking help from another person, be sure you are not setting yourself up to plagiarize, and make sure you understand your professor’s policy and expectations on academic integrity.

Write clearly and confidently

Even if you are unsure of your ability to write in the other language, try to behave as confidently as possible. Take the time to formulate a strong thesis and prepare an outline beforehand. When you write, refer back to the outline regularly to make sure you are on topic. Try to stay true to your voice as a writer, and don’t do anything you wouldn’t feel comfortable doing in your native language. Resist the urge to pad your essay with complicated, flowery prose, or to use vocabulary you do not know. Unless you have a very good handle on the language, it could make your essay seem convoluted and incongruent. Clarity, conciseness and flow are key — when in doubt, get to the point and get out.