
2 key questions to ask when publishing outside your native language



Nowadays, English is the primary language of academic publishing for many topics of international interest. Nevertheless, English is not the preferred language for some topics (e.g., French is still an important language for mathematical analysis, and Russian-language articles on cybersecurity are sometimes at the forefront of research), and many national and regional journals and conferences publish articles in languages other than English. Because of this, all researchers may want to publish outside of their native language at some time in their careers.

As translators and editors in English, Japanese, and other languages, we're often asked by non-English native researchers who want to publish in English,

“Which language should I write up my research in, my native language or English?”

It's a very pertinent question. In this article, we'll answer

2 key questions and discuss the different factors to consider when making the decision. We'll focus on Japanese researchers wanting to write in English, but the discussion applies equally to other language pairs.

1. **Should I write in my native language (e.g., Japanese) or the target language (e.g., English) first?**
2. **How do I know whether my skills in the target language are good enough to write directly in the target language, instead of having it translated?**

The answers to these questions depend strongly on the characteristics of the languages as well as the researcher's language skills and time available to write.

1) Should I write in my native language (e.g., Japanese) or the target language (e.g., English) first?

Writing in Japanese for translation to English

The differences between Japanese and English go deeper than simply having different words and grammar. Let's take one example: logical flow.

The logical flow of conventional argumentation in Japanese is different than that of English. A native Japanese speaker will naturally write using the logical flow that is suitable for Japanese. This means tending to state individual points and facts first, and later connecting them clearly together at the ends of your paragraphs.

In contrast, a native-English speaker typically starts paragraphs with a topic sentence (or focus sentence) that describes the theme of the message for that paragraph and then connects additional sentences that add evidence supporting or refuting the topic statement.

Because of this difference, if the Japanese logical flow is kept intact during translation to English, the resulting structure is likely to confuse English readers: they will have to guess at how the sentences ultimately connect together, without a clear guide at the start of the paragraph. The final summary sentence will act as a sort of “surprise,” and English readers are not accustomed to seeing such surprises in standard research writing.

Of course, neither format is inherently superior. It is simply a matter of which one the reader is accustomed to. This means that even those Japanese researchers who are fluent in English are less likely to notice the difference between their own writing and that of native-English speakers. English-native researchers writing in Japanese have the same problem with a mismatch between the structure of what is written and what native-Japanese speakers expect.

What does this mean for translation?

Using a translation team: If you use a translation team that understands the difference in logical flow and the many other differences between the two languages, then they can change this text to a more natural style of wording and adjust the logical flow to match the target language. If you have such a team, then there is no problem with writing in your native language from the start.

However, many translators do not adjust the flow of the text to more natural structures in English. This is the job of an editor. At ThinkSCIENCE, specialist translators first translate the text to the target language without adjusting the logical structure. Specialist editors then adjust the logical structure and other aspects to match the academic writing style of the target language. If you are engaging [translation services](#), be sure to inquire whether it is translation only or combined translation and editing.

Translating yourself: If you write first in Japanese and then do the translation yourself, you will need to make these editorial changes or ask an editor to comprehensively edit (or rewrite) the text to ensure that the result is natural for the target language.

Because the conventions of writing differ not only from language to language but also among research fields, we recommend asking a specialist editor, as general editors will not necessarily know the writing conventions of your field.

(2) How do I know whether my skills in the target language are good enough to write directly in that language, instead of having it translated?

Writing in English from the outset

It is good for non-native English speakers to write in English from the outset if they are proficient enough in English to express the relations between parts of sentences **and** they have enough time to do this. They will be more likely to use English logical flow when writing and will also include fewer direct “translations” from their native language.

See our previous Featured Article for more [information and tips on the actual process of writing naturally in English](#).

Do I need English editing before submitting my manuscript?

If your grammar is good enough to express the relations between concepts/things both within sentences and between sentences, then your message should be understandable. When you check through your English manuscript and finish self-editing, you may decide that your message will be understood by the reviewers: If they can quickly and easily understand your main message and supporting evidence, even with some grammar mistakes in your writing, then you might decide to submit.

If the journal editor can understand your paper clearly even with some mistakes, the paper will usually enter peer review. Peer reviewers, as long as they can clearly understand your scientific content, will review the paper. They may then ask you to fix the English errors before resubmission. The key here is that no-one should have to do a lot of work to understand your message.

So, the point is **whether the reviewers will be able to understand your English easily**. If they might not understand, then consider asking a colleague who is good at English or a specialist native editor to help you improve the clarity of your paper before submission.

If you are asked to revise your paper based on the reviewers' comments, then be prepared to produce English at least as good after revision as it was before it. So, when checking your revised paper, you should ask yourself again whether you need English editing. You might need to ask for help from an English-speaking colleague or a specialist native editor.

Another consideration is whether the journal offers copy-editing of accepted papers, to fix English errors and follow a house style. Some journals, such as PLOS ONE, do not perform any copy-editing. For those journals, we recommend that you have either [comprehensive editing or proofreading](#) performed before you submit your revised paper.

Last but not least, we want to mention the time available for writing. Even good writers can produce work with errors in it when they are rushed. This can be magnified when writing outside their native language.

If you are short on time, think about the trade-off between writing quickly, but maybe not clearly, in English and writing quickly in Japanese and explaining your scientific message accurately and clearly. This is for you to judge whether you'll need English editing (or not) or Japanese-to-English translation.

Our team can often complete highly technical work very quickly, with our **EXPRESS** services. So, if you're not sure what to do, please do talk to us and we'd be happy to help you decide what's best in the circumstances.

Using both strategies: writing in your native language and in the target language

There may be times when you want to combine the strategies of writing in your native language (e.g., Japanese) and writing in the target language (e.g., English). We're happy to support you in this through providing both translation and editing services in a "mixed project."

Example 1: You had your English paper edited before submission and now you are in a hurry to write your revised paper. You can write the new parts of your manuscript in Japanese and we can translate them and make them fit coherently and consistently with the original text.

Example 2: You are writing a new paper for submission in English and find you are running out of time. You complete the paper in Japanese. We'll comprehensively edit or proofread the English text, depending on the level of editing you need, and translate the Japanese text, linking them together coherently and consistently.

Summary/Conclusion

Even those writing in their own language can benefit from having another person look at their work before submission. For those writing in a foreign language, this is a crucial step. Whether to write in your own native language and have the paper translated or write in a foreign language and then have the work carefully checked is a personal choice, but the above considerations can help you to make the best decision in light of your own language skill and your target publication.

If you'd like personalized advice about this or any other publication topic, please [contact us](#). We're always happy to help.