

# The pricing puzzle

## Per word or by the hour? How to price for a translation job is a tricky issue, writes Megan Onions, as she assesses the pros and cons of each method



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Money: it's a big issue. In a profession where we can often feel at the mercy of market forces and client budgets, it is imperative to put ourselves in the best possible position in order to receive fair payment for our services, but what is the best way to go about it?

Much has been written about the translator's position in relation to other service-based industries. Tales of insufficient recognition and low rates have plagued our profession for some time (if not forever), but it is up to the individual to decide how to price his or her services. So far, there has been little change in the established norm but, over the past year or so, a growing trend has emerged among some colleagues to move away from the conventional per-word pricing method in favour of charging by the hour.

Both options have advantages and drawbacks, depending on the circumstances (and the client). Let's examine the options available to freelance translators, working mainly with direct clients. I have read cases of colleagues forming partnerships with agencies on a per-hour basis, but this is fairly unusual for the moment, so I won't focus on this.

### Per (source) word

The most widespread method of pricing translation services is the per-word method. The majority of agencies will request your rates per source word (or 1,000 words) on registration, and many translators also quote per word when dealing with direct clients. It's a straightforward method, but is it

the best one for the supplier?

### Pros for translators:

- Simple to explain – no need to use (and explain) jargon when sending the client a quote. If the French document has 2,000 words, the base rate is multiplied by 2,000.

- For more specialised (read: faster) translators, and those more familiar with CAT tools, per word pricing presents an opportunity to produce more work, and invoice for more projects, in a week.

### Pros for clients:

- The client knows exactly how much the translation will cost (to the last penny) before embarking on the project. There are no nasty surprises when they open the invoice.

### Cons:

- Reducing translation work to a matter of churning out a set amount of words does little to shake the commodity tag that is perpetuated by certain online marketplaces. Arguably, this pricing method invites clients to quibble over seemingly unnecessary words – have you heard the one about the client who asked whether all the conjunctions needed to be translated?

- The focus on words as simple units can result in translators shunning thorough research, as they are restricted to charging only for the words that are being translated. As we all know, some projects can require extensive or time-consuming research, which it is only fair to invoice as part of the project.

### Per hour

Charging by the hour is growing in popularity, but not yet very common.

The common motivation is that hourly rates would bring translation in line with other service professionals, such as lawyers and accountants, in terms of recognition for our skills and qualifications, and the simple fact is that direct clients are used to paying in this way for such services.

### Pros for translators:

- More thorough researchers will find their considered approach rewarded with hourly pricing.

- Pricing in the same way as consulting-type services could foster better recognition of translation as more than just a commodity.

### Pros for clients:

- The fact that direct clients are familiar with this kind of pricing avoids any explanation of how translation works, etc. Most of the time, a direct client wants an expert, who delivers great results without much explanation, not someone who reports every nuance of the translation process.

### Cons:

- The client may not be prepared to go ahead with a project without confirmation of exactly how much cash they will have to part with.
- Hourly pricing brings up the issue of what you can actually charge for. You may well want to add your research time to the invoice, but what about revisions, correspondence, even phone calls? Where do you draw the line?

The tide may be turning in terms of current pricing conventions, but hourly rates are not without their problems. Perhaps a workable solution would be to itemise invoices, stating a translation price (calculated on a per word basis) and charges for any additional services, such as research time, formatting, etc. This combines elements of both approaches to produce a per-project price. I know that this is how some of my colleagues like to work, and maybe more of us should consider it in future.