How to get started in literary translation

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Breaking into the world of literary translation can seem daunting, both because practical issues may not have featured much in your programme of study but also because literary translation is a freelance career – often combined with another career or income stream – and the pathways into it are not always obvious. This companion resource to Literary Translation aims to provide some practical advice on getting started in the business. Its focus is primarily on the English-speaking world and more specifically on the UK, but Anglophone publishing is transnational and many of the tips and pointers here will be applicable across borders. If you know of a resource which is not listed here and should be, or of information that needs updating, please let the author know (C.M.Wright@warwick.ac.uk).

First steps

If you have never translated a book-length work before, a nice way of dipping your toe in the water is to submit a prose extract, a short story or a few poems to a literary journal or a translation competition. If your submission is successful, this will give you a good calling card for future dealings with publishers and even if it is not successful, practice makes perfect and you may well receive some feedback on how the translation could be improved.

PEN America maintains a useful list of journals seeking work in translation; the majority are based in North America, but many are online or complement their print edition with an online presence. The journal Poets and Writers maintains online listings both of literary magazines accepting submissions and of literary contests, alongside other useful information. Modern Poetry in Translation, founded in 1965 by Daniel Weissbort and Ted Hughes, is not included on the PEN list but deserves its own mention.

There are a number of annual translation competitions for unpublished work that are open to emerging and established translators alike. The John Dryden Translation Competition, co-sponsored by the British Comparative Literature Association and the British Centre for Literary Translation, is open to unpublished translations of poetry, prose or drama from any language into English. The Stephen Spender Prize is for a translation of an individual poem with commentary; multiple entries are possible and there are various age categories. The Cliff Becker Book Prize in Translation is for an unpublished collection of translated poetry. In recent years publisher Harvill Secker (part of the Penguin Group) has run a competition for young translators, focusing on a different source language each year. The biennial Joseph Brodsky/Stephen Spender Prize is for the translation of Russian poetry into English.

And while not a prize, the PEN/Heim Translation Fund Grants are open to both emerging and established translators of any nationality and offer between $2000 and $4000 per project to support the translation of book-length works of fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry or drama that have not previously appeared in English in print or have appeared only in an outdated or otherwise flawed translation.

National and regional cultural institutions such as the Goethe Institut also frequently run language-specific translation competitions such as the Goethe Institut Award for New Translation. Check with the

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national and regional cultural institution(s) relevant to your source language(s) for opportunities of this nature.

**Mentoring and networking opportunities**

One of the best ways to get to know the business is to meet and talk to other literary translators and there are a number of ways of doing this beyond reaching out on social media. The [London Book Fair](https://www.londonbookfair.co.uk) is one such occasion. In recent years it has operated a dedicated Literary Translation Centre with a social space and a podium for panel discussions and this seems set to continue. The Literary Translation Centre is a friendly space in which you can mingle with fellow translators, approach translation-friendly publishers and generally feel part of the wider literary translation community.

There are a number of formal and informal mentoring schemes for emerging literary translators. The Emerging Translators Network now operates on both sides of the Atlantic, in the [UK](https://www.theliterarypeace.org) and the [USA](https://www.altaonline.org); it holds regular events and has an e-mail discussion list. The [American Literary Translators Association (ALTA)](https://www.altaonline.org) has an annual mentorship programme, offering mentorship in different source languages each year. ALTA also offers [travel fellowships](https://www.altaonline.org) to facilitate travel by emerging (unpublished or minimally published) translators to its annual conference – another golden networking opportunity.

The UK currently has two summer schools in literary translation: [Translate in the City](https://www.cityuniversity.ac.uk/translateinthecity) at City University London, for which partial bursaries are available, some of them language-specific; and the [International Literary Translation and Creative Writing Summer School](https://www.literature-across-frontiers.org) delivered by the British Centre for Literary Translation at the University of East Anglia in partnership with Writers’ Centre Norwich. [Arvon](https://www.arvon.org) also offers an annual week-long course in literary translation.

If you are enrolled in a higher education institution in Canada, the United States or Mexico, then you are eligible to apply to the [Banff International Literary Translation Centre](https://www.banffcentre.ca) as a student translator, without the need to fulfil the normal criterion of having published a book-length translation.

It is well worth considering becoming a member of a professional organization, such as the [Translators Association](https://www.translatorsassociation.org) (a subsidiary group of the UK’s Society of Authors), the [American Literary Translators Association](https://www.altaonline.org), the [Literary Translators’ Association of Canada/Association des traducteurs et traductrices littéraires du Canada](https://www.lit-transcan.org) or the [Australian Association for Literary Translation](https://www.aalet.org). Some professional organisations, such as the British TA, require prospective members to have at least one full-length translation under their belt before applying for membership. Benefits of joining the TA include a contract vetting service, inclusion in the online database of members, discounts on book purchases at selected bookshops and discounted entry to the London Book Fair. Support for translators is also offered by regional and national cultural institutions such as [Ireland Literature Exchange](https://www.irelandliteratureexchange.com), [Wales Literature Exchange](https://www.literaturewales.org), the [British Centre for Literary Translation](https://www.literature-across-frontiers.org), [Literature Across Frontiers](https://www.literature-across-frontiers.org), and the [San Francisco-based Centre for the Art of Translation](https://www.finedditions.org).

Keep yourself informed about the opportunities offered by the national or regional cultural institution(s) that represent your source language. Institutions such as the [Goethe Institut](https://www.goethe.de), the [Institut Ramon Llull](https://www.institutramonllull.cat), [Finnish Literature Exchange](https://www.lit-ex.fi), the [Polish Cultural Institute](https://www.polishculturalinstitute.org) and [Lontar](https://www.lontar.org), to name but a few, often put on events specifically for translators such as workshops, and they also offer grants and residencies and host cultural events.

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Pitching a translation to a publisher

- Find your project

Find something to translate that you feel passionately about. For emerging translators, particularly of prose, this is likely to be a previously untranslated work. If you are in need of ideas, then there are several language-specific publications/websites that spotlight new titles, for example: [New Books in German](#), [French Book News](#), [New Spanish Books](#), [Books in Italy](#) and [Rossica](#). Book reviews in the national or regional press associated with your language(s) will also be helpful, and a good old-fashioned browse of the bookshop shelves whenever you find yourself in “your” source country is always highly recommended. If the title you wish to translate has been published before, you should have a good sense of why you want to re-translate it/why a re-translation is necessary and you will still need to follow the procedure outlined below, unless the work is out of copyright.

Check to see if the English-language (or relevant language) rights to the title are still available, i.e. that the title hasn’t already sold to an Anglophone (or relevant other) publisher and isn’t in the process of being translated. The foreign publisher, who will generally also be the rights-holder, will be in possession of this information and you can enquire about this with its foreign rights department. A short e-mail explaining who you are and what your interest in the title is, and asking if the publisher would be happy for you to try and find an English-language (or relevant other) publisher for the title normally does the trick, although you may need to be persistent and follow up unanswered enquiries with a further e-mail or by phone. Publishers are normally happy for translators to try and place one of their titles on the understanding that translators undertake this on their own initiative and won’t be paid for their efforts. If the rights to a title have already sold, then it is unlikely that you will proceed further, but if they are available, then you can begin to put together materials for a pitch.

- Find your publisher

During a panel discussion at the 2014 London Book Fair, one established publisher stated that she would not work with a translator whom she did not already know and trust and hence would not accept a speculative “brown envelope” submission (she also shook her head at the idea that a translator might send a submission by snail mail in the digital age); another, younger publisher said that he would be more than happy to receive a sample translation from an unknown translator, even by post, and that it was the quality of the submission that counted. This demonstrates the importance of identifying the right publisher and submission method for your translation pitch: there is no sense in sending poetry to a publisher of literary non-fiction, to give a crude example, or in sending materials to a publisher that clearly states on its website that it is currently not accepting speculative submissions. Publishers’ websites will normally include guidelines on how to submit projects, although you should bear in mind that these guidelines will be primarily aimed at creative writers rather than translators. Familiarising yourself with a publisher’s “list”, i.e. the books that they have published in the last few years, will help you to ascertain whether yours is the type of project that they might take on. Note that although translators may produce samples for literary agents, they will not typically be taken on as clients in the same way that creative writers would. There are many excellent publishers who have made translations their primary focus: [Pushkin Press](#), [MacLehose Press](#), [Peirene](#), [Europa editions](#), [Dalkey Archive Press](#), [Open Letter Books](#), [Bitter Lemon Press](#), among others. Amazon also has its own translation imprint,
Amazon Crossing. The Writers and Artists Yearbook, updated annually, is a compendium of publishers and an excellent resource for translators looking to identify a home for their translation project. There is also a Children’s Writers and Artists Yearbook.

- Pitch your project

Follow the publisher’s submissions guidelines closely, but if the guidelines are vague or non-existent, then it’s advisable to submit a sample translation, a plot synopsis (where applicable), along with a short cover e-mail/letter. The sample translation will probably be around 10-15 pages of typescript and the prose extract or poems included should be carefully selected to portray the project in the best possible light. The sample should be thoroughly edited and look polished, i.e. no typos, spelling mistakes, grammatical infelicities, formatting errors, notes to self, etc. The synopsis will generally not be longer than two pages, but the shorter the better. Synopses tend to sound ridiculous – don’t worry about this too much. The cover e-mail/letter will need to sell the project, telling the publisher what’s special about it, why you think it would be a good fit for their list and perhaps comparing it to similar books that have already been published. It should include any information you might have on sales figures in the original language and critical acclaim in the source culture. You should also include a few lines about yourself and let the publisher know which foreign publisher owns the rights, making sure to include both sets of contact details. You can choose to submit the project one publisher at a time, bearing in mind that it may take several months until you receive a response, or in the interests of efficiency you can make a multiple submission. It’s always preferable to send your submission to a named editor if at all possible as this increases the chances of it making it on to somebody’s desk for consideration. If a publisher is interested in the project, they may request a further translation sample which you should provide as swiftly as possible. They may also commission a reader’s report from a third party in order to get a second opinion. Beware, however, of translating an entire text for free; this is a large temporal and emotional investment with no guarantee of a contract at the end of it all.

- Your first translation contract

If you are successful in placing a project, you should receive a translation contract. Read this carefully. If you are a member of an organization that vets contracts on your behalf, you should take advantage of this service. Otherwise solicit advice on terms and conditions from fellow translators with whom you are in contact. Professional organisations are cagey about recommending translation rates because of regulations on price-fixing, but the useful phrase “in our experience publishers are willing to pay in the region of” is a good way around this. In the UK, see the Translators Association website for current “in our experience” rates. Each country has a different system for calculating the cost of translations, e.g. per 1000 words, per standard manuscript page, per project, and it’s best to inform yourself about this before quoting the publisher a rate and signing a contract. Pay attention, also, to the type of rights that you will retain or sign over to the publisher.

The free handbook Translation in Practice is an excellent practical guide to the process of seeing a project through from start to finish, beginning with how editors choose translators right through to the editorial process and cultivating professional relationships post-project.
Literary translation and “being a literary translator”

There are many other ways of participating in the world of literary translation beyond the actual translation of texts. Producing readers’ reports for specialist publications like New Books in German, blogging and writing book reviews (see Katy Derbyshire’s love german books for an excellent example of a translator’s blog) and editing are all activities that will get you involved and lead to further work. “Being a literary translator” can be very much what you make it. Good luck!

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