

An Inquiry of Inquiries

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Справка: inquiry, report, proof, certificate, etc.

Perestroika, sputnik, glasnost, silovik. These are loan words from Russian that have been adopted by English because the English language didn't have a close equivalent and everyone was tired of long, descriptive translations. But, I say, sputnik, shputnik! Why don't we adopt the wonderful word spravka?

Yeah, yeah. I know. Справка is not an "untranslatable" word. But in English you need dozens of words and phrases to translate that one little Russian word. If we had just one word for certificate, proof, report, inquiry, slip, background check, reference, etc., think of all the brain cells that would be freed up!

In very general terms, справка refers to a search for information or the information obtained in a search. The phrase наводить/навести справки means to make inquiries. But context determines how you might translate that phrase into English. For example, я навела справки о кондиционерах could mean: I did some research on air conditioners. But я

навела справки о нём might mean “I ran him through the system” if you were a cop, “I did a full background check on him” if you were a private detective, or “I asked around about him” if you were a potential date.

In officialdom, справка refers to a piece of paper, often with a signature and stamp, that certifies, verifies, confirms or proves something. In English, the translation depends on the context. Справка от врача could be simply a letter from your doctor. It might be a general health certificate/certification — proof that you are healthy enough to go scuba diving, or, to the contrary, a sick slip certifying that you were laid up with the flu and not playing hooky with the fish at the bottom of the Red Sea.

Академическая справка might be your academic record, official transcript or student certification letter. Справка о зарплате might be called proof of income, salary confirmation letter or salary verification letter/declaration. If you are getting married, you might be asked to produce справка об отсутствии преград к предстоящему браку, which can be translated as a certificate of no impediment, certificate of freedom to marry or single-status declaration/certificate. In all the above cases, the English usage depends on context, jurisdiction, level of legality and institutional convention.

Sometimes in Russia you get a piece of paper with the word Справка at the top. This is a document that certifies something, from the theft of your driver’s license to the fact of your residence at a particular address. I suspect that if you wanted one, you could get справка о цвете глаз (certification of eye color). My fingers usually hover over the keyboard for several minutes before settling on either Certificate (when the U.S. analogue would be called a certificate, such as for marital status, residence or a professional license) or Certification (when the document certifies some act, like theft, or some status, like having a bank account). In colloquial usage, English-speakers tend to just call this “a document.” It’s not a fancy word, but it implies something official.

In other contexts, справка can be a brief report, reference material or accounting. Историческая справка might be a historical note, brief or background report. Информационная справка might be a brief, briefing, summary or backgrounder.

In this справка о справках, I have used more than 30 translations of just one word. Can’t we just say spravka?

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