How to Plan a Bilingual Website from the Start

Start with the right strategy for an Arabic and English website

Building a bilingual website that serves both Arabic and English readers takes more than just translating pages. The structure, design, and technical setup all need to work together from the beginning. Reworking a site later to add a second language can cause broken layouts, duplicate content issues, and a poor experience for visitors switching between languages. Here is a practical guide to planning a bilingual site the right way, with a focus on what to watch at each step.

Step 1: Choose your URL structure

One of the first decisions is how to organise the URLs for each language version. There are three common approaches: separate domains (example.com for English and example.ae for Arabic), subdirectories (example.com/en/ and example.com/ar/), or subdomains (en.example.com and ar.example.com). Subdirectories are usually the simplest to set up and maintain. They keep all content under one domain, which can help with SEO. Separate URLs for each language make it clear to both users and search engines which version to show. The key is to decide early, because changing the structure later means redirects and lost rankings.

Step 2: Design for right-to-left and left-to-right layouts

Arabic is a right-to-left (RTL) language, while English runs left-to-right. The layout must adapt when a visitor switches languages. The navigation bar, text alignment, and even the order of columns need to flip. A common mistake is to design the English version first and then force Arabic content into the same layout. That often leads to cramped text or misaligned elements. Instead, plan a responsive layout that works in both directions. Test the design with real Arabic text early. A layout that looks clean with short English words can break with longer Arabic phrases or connected calligraphy.

Step 3: Set up the language switcher carefully

The language switcher is a small element with a big job. It must be easy to find and consistent across every page. Place it in the same spot on all devices, usually the top right corner or the navigation bar. Use clear labels such as "العربية" and "English" rather than flags or ambiguous icons. A flag can confuse readers because many countries speak multiple languages. The switcher should remember the user's choice and keep them on the same page, not send them to the homepage. Test the switcher on mobile, where screen space is tighter. A hidden or hard-to-reach switcher frustrates users and increases bounce rate.



Step 4: Handle Arabic typography and font selection

Arabic typography has different rules from Latin scripts. The letters connect, and their shape changes depending on position in a word. Many standard fonts do not support Arabic well, or they render it poorly. Choose a typeface that includes full Arabic character sets and proper diacritics. Test the font at different sizes and on various browsers. Some web fonts that work fine in English look thin or broken in Arabic. Also consider line height and spacing. Arabic text often needs more vertical space than English to avoid overlapping letters. A well-chosen Arabic font makes the site feel native, not like a translation.

Step 5: Plan the translation workflow early

Translation is not a one-time task. Content changes over time, and every new page or update needs to appear in both languages. Set up a translation workflow that fits your team. Some businesses use professional translators, others rely on bilingual staff, and some use a mix of machine translation and human review. Whichever route you take, decide how to handle updates. If you modify an English page, who translates the changes into Arabic? How do you avoid publishing one language version while the other is still outdated? A simple content management system with a language field per page can help. Keep a shared glossary of terms so that brand names, technical words, and phrases like "Web Design Company Dubai | NetSoft" stay consistent across both languages.

Step 6: Implement hreflang tags for SEO

Search engines need to know which language version of a page to show in each region. Hreflang tags tell Google and other search engines that the English page at one URL and the

Arabic page at another URL are equivalent. Without these tags, search engines may treat the pages as duplicate content, hurting rankings. Add hreflang tags to the head of every page. Also include a self-referencing tag on each language version. Test the implementation with a tool or by inspecting the source code. A missing or wrong hreflang tag can confuse search engines and reduce the visibility of your site in both languages.

Step 7: Watch for content localization, not just translation

Translation alone does not make a site feel local. Content localization means adapting the message, examples, and cultural references for each audience. An English page might reference a holiday or a local event that has no meaning in an Arabic context. Similarly, images, colours, and icons can carry different associations. Review every visual element and piece of copy for cultural fit. A green button might be fine in English but signal a different meaning in some Arabic-speaking regions. Localization also covers date formats, currency symbols, and address layouts. A professional approach to bilingual web design considers these details from the start, not as an afterthought.

Step 8: Test both versions on real devices

Once the site is built, test it thoroughly in both languages. Check every page on desktop, tablet, and mobile. Look for text that overflows its container, buttons that shift out of place, and menus that do not flip direction. Test the language switcher on every page. Verify that the Arabic version loads at the correct URL and that the English version does not redirect to Arabic by mistake. Use browser tools to simulate right-to-left text. Also test with screen readers to ensure accessibility. A site that works well in English but breaks in Arabic will lose credibility with half your audience.



Step 9: Maintain consistency with a style guide

As the site grows, keeping a consistent voice and layout across both languages becomes harder. Create a simple style guide that covers tone, formatting, and visual rules for each language. Include examples of how to handle numbers, dates, and phone numbers in Arabic and English. Decide whether to use formal or conversational Arabic. Document the approved fonts, heading sizes, and button styles for both scripts. Share the guide with any writers, translators, or developers who work on the site. Consistency builds trust and makes the site feel professional in both languages. When planning a bilingual website, a style guide saves time and prevents small errors from piling up.

If you are evaluating agencies to help with this process, a firm such as Web Design Company Dubai | NetSoft can offer guidance on structuring a bilingual site that serves both audiences well. The right partner will understand the technical and cultural nuances involved. A well-planned bilingual website does more than translate content. It respects the reader's language, layout, and expectations. By following these steps and watching for the common pitfalls at each stage, you can build a site that works for everyone.