

RULE-BASED WRITING

English for Non-Native Writers

Extract

2. updated edition

Guides

2.2 What is Contained in This Guide

2.2.1 Overview of the Contents

The core of this guide is the writing and phrasing rules that assist non-native authors while writing technical documents in English. The linguistic levels applicable to these rules are text, sentence and word as in the parallel guide for German technical communication. The organization of the rules alone shows that we have based this on the German guide. Wherever it made sense, we have taken the rules from the German guide and adapted them to English. Hence, some rules contain a note referencing the German guide. However, the English guide needs not be used in conjunction with the German guide.

In addition, this guide also includes a special focus on English texts written by non-native authors, which is taken into account on the one hand in the instructions and, on the other hand, leads to special rules.

Text rules (Chapter 3, pages 27 to 46) pertain to:

- Headings
- Index entries
- Cross references
- Glossaries

The notes on upper and lowercase in headlines, index entries and glossaries are especially applicable in English. The range of validity of the text rules is determined for each respective type of information.

Sentence rules (Chapter 4, pages 47 to 81) include:

- Rules for avoiding ambiguous constructions
- Rules for avoiding incomplete constructions
- Rules for avoiding complex constructions
- Stylistic rules
- Rules for word order and sequence of sentence elements
- Rules for punctuation
- Rules for tenses

These include rules that clearly derive from guidelines for other languages as well (for example, a portion of the rules for avoiding ambiguous constructions), but also some rules specific to English (for example, the rules for tenses).

Word rules (Chapter 5, pages 82 to 95) include:

- Spelling of words
- Articles
- Countability
- Problematic cases in English
- Prepositions
- Relative pronouns
- Abbreviations

The section on word rules contains the most rules specifically meant for writing documents in English.

2.2.2 Structure of the Rules

All rules are shown along with **examples** of incorrect phrasing as well as rephrasing options. On the one hand, these examples show the possible application of the rule and, on the other hand, suggest how to avoid the error.

In addition, all the rules include a note on the **potential for automatic checking**. This note indicates whether tools available for automatic support of the writing process can actually check this rule automatically. The possible status information is:

- **Available:** The rule is available by default in the commonly available checking tools.
- **Possible:** In principle, the rule has the potential for automatic checking, but is not available by default in the commonly available checking tools.
- **Possible with restrictions:** “With restrictions” means that: A rule can only be checked if certain conditions are met. For example, a rule for checking the maximum sentence length in main headings (EN_T 103): This rule can only be checked if the software receives the information that the sentence is a heading, for example, using style sheets or XML tags.
- **Not suitable:** The quality requirements of the rule cannot be checked automatically with the best available technology at present.

Number and title of the rule	EN_T 104	Avoid Subheadings that Are Very Long									
Main content of the rule	Rule	Phrase subheadings more briefly than main headings.									
Tips on what prerequisites must be met and how to use the rule practically (Not available for all rules)	Instructions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Break down long passages of text using subheadings. ▪ Define a maximum number of words for subheadings. Maximum recommended length for subheadings: four words. ▪ Standardize the phrasing of subheadings as far as possible (see Rule EN_T 110). 									
Examples of undesirable usage (negative example) and usage compliant with the rule (positive example)	<table border="1"> <thead> <tr> <th></th> <th>Negative Example</th> <th>Positive Example</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">1</td> <td>Information Concerning the Design and Assembly of the Lathe</td> <td>Design and Assembly Information</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">2</td> <td>Assembly of Pumps With Pressure Valves</td> <td>Pump Assembly</td> </tr> </tbody> </table>			Negative Example	Positive Example	1	Information Concerning the Design and Assembly of the Lathe	Design and Assembly Information	2	Assembly of Pumps With Pressure Valves	Pump Assembly
	Negative Example	Positive Example									
1	Information Concerning the Design and Assembly of the Lathe	Design and Assembly Information									
2	Assembly of Pumps With Pressure Valves	Pump Assembly									
Technical/linguistic background information These help you to decide whether the rule can be sensibly applied in your context and how you can adapt it for your purposes.	Decision Guidance Use subheadings to arrange the contents within a numbered chapter in printed documents or on a page in online documents. This way, you break down the content into information units that can be easily processed by the reader. In addition, you also help the so-called scanning. Using this technique, the reader quickly tries to find the content that is relevant for him/her without reading the entire text sentence by sentence. The subheadings therefore represent an important reference point.										
Notes on the behavior of language checking tools	Potential for Automatic Checking Possible. Prerequisite: Heading is characterized by tagging.										

Explanations on the most important technical terms used in this guide are given in a **glossary**. The **index** makes it possible to look up the rules based on a keyword.

The example above shows how the rules of this guide are structured and what information you can find in each section.

Each rule does not contain all sections. If the content in one or more sections of a rule is a repeat of content from other sections, or if the content does not add value, then the section in question has been omitted. It is thus possible that some rules do not have an “Instructions” or “Decision Guidance” section.

2.2.3 Status and Interaction of Rules

Relevance of the Rules for Your Documents

All the rules given in this guide are used on a daily basis in companies for editing work and have been tried and tested over many years. Nevertheless, as a language developer you must decide on each rule by yourself:

- Is the rule actually relevant for my application? This can be very different from one information product to another.
- What obligations should be associated with this rule in my style guide? That is: Which rules should I set as mandatory and which might qualify as recommendations?

Alternative Rules

The guide provides several rules to choose from for some aspects of language. This occurs when several technically and linguistically correct solutions are possible. Your task is to select the solution that is right for you.

You can identify alternative rules by the fact that they have the same number and an extra letter is used as a suffix for each alternative.

Example:

- EN_T 210a
- EN_T 210b

Rule Interactions

This guide is intentionally designed to define aspects of language in technical texts as individual, discrete rules. This is why you will find specifications in different rules for some aspects that are relevant in the same place in your information products.

Example: Relative clauses

Rule EN_S 205 states that relative clauses must be formed using relative pronouns. EN_W 706 refers to the proper use of relative pronouns. EN_S 601 and EN_S 602 are important for comma placement in relative clauses.

Rule interactions are also important in the following places:

- Text rules: The rules for headings intentionally deviate from the rules applicable to sentences because only some, not all, of the properties of sentences apply to headings.

- Sentence rules: These rules are applicable in order to make sentences understandable and translatable. They also include punctuation rules and rules for English tenses.
- Word rules: A word rule always applies automatically to all language aspects specified in the sentence rules and text rules.

2.2.4 Legal Classification

Legal requirements specify that certain sets of rules, for example IEC/EN 82079-1, must be implemented in instruction manuals. Instructions should be complete, clear and understandable. To achieve this, the language of technical communication must be standard. Rule sets provide general guidance here, but not detailed instructions. From this perspective, this guide is a state-of-the-art tool for the implementation of language standardization.

2.3 How to Use This Guide

Confidence in Writing

Our survey showed that many non-native writers want support in writing texts in English. These writers also often admit that they are unsure of the actual quality of their texts. No wonder — three-quarters of the respondents stated that they do not have access to a native proofreader.

Our guide can help in removing this uncertainty and lead to greater satisfaction with the results of one's work. It provides best practices and enables the writers to assess their work by themselves and to determine whether there is a need for objective improvement.

Compact Reference Book When in Doubt

When writing texts in English, situations arise time and again where one is uncertain. When should the nouns be written in upper case in English headings? Should one use "its" or "it's"? Should a comma be placed before an infinitive in English? Answers to these questions can hardly be found in a dictionary. Clarifying these doubts often means a bit of research effort.

This guide, "Rule-Based Writing – English for Non-Native Writers," provides such information compactly summarized in one place. Classification by text, sentence and word rules provides initial orientation towards finding the information you need. In addition, we have also ensured that the headings are formulated as descriptively as possible, so you can generally decide whether a rule deals with the question you have at present just by looking at the table of contents. The index provides you with alternative access to answers.

Practical Development of Knowledge

Addressing grammatical problems was requested several times in the survey. Naturally, the guide cannot replace a good grammar book. However, we have tried to explain the grammatical correlations as simply as possible and to show them in a practical context. A glossary provides information on important grammatical terms. Thus, you can read this guide to become familiar with the various grammatical and language concepts.

3 Text Rules

3.1 Headings

EN_T 101 Do Not Use Complete Sentences in Headings

Rule

Do not use complete sentences in headings.

Instructions

Headings should give a brief idea of the content that follows, structure the text and provide an indication to the reader whether the content is relevant for him. Complete sentences are not suitable for this purpose.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	This Is How to Install the Driver	Installing the Driver
2	How to Go About Checking the Safety Devices on the Machine	Inspecting the Machine's Safety Devices
3	This Is How the Operating Panel Is Structured	Structure of the Operating Panel

Decision Guidance

Headings in sentence form have two drawbacks:

- They are very long (see Rule EN_T 103).
- The keywords that are relevant to the reader are in the middle of the sentence and are hence not placed in a reader-friendly position (at the beginning or end of the heading).

Therefore, headings in form of sentences are generally not used for technical communication in the business-to-business segment. However, headings in the form of sentences may make sense in the business-to-consumer segment if the manual is intended for end users. If a target audience without a professional background is being addressed, then complete sentences in headings make sense. Example: "How do I clean the coffee machine quickly and thoroughly?"

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible. Prerequisite: Heading is characterized by appropriate tagging.

EN_T 102 Do Not Use Subordinate Clauses in Headings

Rule

Do not use subordinate clauses in headings.

Instructions

Headings should give a brief idea of the content that follows, structure the text and provide an indication to the reader whether the content is relevant for him.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	Cancelling an Order That Has Already Been Placed	Cancellation After Placing an Order
2	Replacing a Window That Has Been Damaged	Window Replacement
3	Interrupting a Production Process That Has Already Been Initiated	Interrupting Production

Decision Guidance

Subordinate clauses are not suitable for headings because the syntax is complex.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible. Prerequisite: Heading is characterized by tagging.

EN_T 103 Avoid Main Headings that Are Too Long**Rule**

Phrase main headings as briefly as possible.

Instructions

Maximum recommended length for main headings: six words

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	Maintenance of the Machine on a Weekly and Monthly Basis	Weekly and Monthly Machine Maintenance
2	Replacing the Rear Door at the Back End of the Machine	Rear Door Replacement
3	Description of Buttons and Fields in the Printer Assistant	Dialogue Elements in the Printer Assistant

Decision Guidance

Brief main headings are important for two reasons:

- **Comprehensibility:** The shorter a main heading is, the easier it is for the reader to understand. If a main heading is longer than six words, then it is most likely giving too much information all at once (see Rule EN_T 106).
- **Clarity:** The longer the main headings are, the more difficult it is for the reader to keep track. This applies to tables of contents in printed documents as well as to directory trees in online documents.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible. Prerequisite: Heading is characterized by appropriate tagging.

3.2 Index Entries

EN_T 201 Select the Keywords and Phrasing from the Reader's Perspective

Rule

Formulate the index entries such that they reflect the perspective of the reader about the information to be indexed.

Instructions

Use keywords and synonyms that are commonly used in the language of the target audience. Tip: Ask the members of the target audience which terms they consider important.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
	Index for the target audience "experts": The keywords experts search under are missing.	
1	Asian characters, Smooth curves	IME, Bézier curves
	Index for the target audience "laypersons": The index uses terminology in the keywords that laypersons may not be familiar with.	
2	IME, Bézier curves	Asian characters, Smooth curves

Decision Guidance

If you are creating an index, consider exactly the words that are used by your target audience and how you need to select the keywords in the main and sub-entries at a later time.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Not suitable.

EN_T 202 Formulate Index Entries without Redundancies

Rule

Avoid redundancies in the content of index entries.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	MIF file format – importing files – opening files – saving files	MIF files – importing – opening – saving

Decision Guidance

Index entries that focus on the content keep the index clear and ensure that the reader can quickly find the desired keywords.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Not suitable.

4 Sentence Rules

4.1 Avoiding Ambiguous Constructions

EN_S 101 Avoid Pronoun References beyond Sentence Boundaries

Rule

Avoid pronoun references beyond sentence boundaries.

Instructions

“Noun instead of pronoun”: Repeat the reference word instead of using a pronoun.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	Your new SCENIC speakers are active speakers that include an amplifier. They make your SCENIC PC a perfect multimedia device.	Your new SCENIC speakers are active speakers that include an amplifier. The speakers make your SCENIC PC a perfect multimedia device.
2	Turn off the server. In order to completely disconnect it from the power source, pull out all the power plugs.	Turn off the server. In order to completely disconnect the server from the power source, pull out all the power plugs.
3	To close the program, follow the recommended steps. These are listed in the user guide.	To close the program, follow the recommended steps. The steps are listed in the user guide.

Decision Guidance

Pronoun references beyond sentence boundaries make it difficult to understand and are a problem for the translation process, especially when translation memory systems are used. If only individual segments are translated, then the translator does not have the necessary context needed to understand the reference.

Note: On the other hand, if the reference word is constantly repeated, then short sentences do not “read” very well. Pronoun references can be allowed beyond sentence boundaries in such exceptional cases.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Available.

EN_S 102 Use Unique Pronoun References

Rule

Avoid pronouns that allow several options for resolution.

Instructions

Repeat the noun instead of using a pronoun. Avoid pronouns if the reference word cannot be identified clearly. The problem is with the

pronouns “it,” “its,” “they,” “them” or “their.” Do not use “this,” “that,” “these” or “those” as a pronoun.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	To connect a client with an application, enter not only its name but also a password.	To connect a client with an application, enter not only the name of the client but also a password.
2	If an IF-ELSE control structure contains a statement, then exactly one of its blocks is executed.	If an IF-ELSE control structure contains a statement, then exactly one of the structure’s blocks is executed.

Decision Guidance

A formal reference ambiguity that has been introduced can sometimes be quite clear. Nevertheless, repeating the reference word makes it easy to understand and ensures that the statement is clear. This approach is also advantageous in the subsequent translation process, as the text is clear for the translator.

Note: Readers of technical communication are usually not as familiar as the writer with the subject matter. What is obvious to the writer need not always be obvious to the reader.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Available.

EN_S 103 Formulate the Reference of Attributes Clearly in the Case of Noun Clusters

Rule

Avoid attributes whose reference may be unclear.

Instructions

If an attribute is present for a noun cluster, check whether it is clear which noun the attribute refers to.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	This is a recipe that was developed by an English cookie company.	This is a recipe that was developed by a cookie company from England.
2	This is a recipe that was developed by an English cookie company.	This is a recipe that was developed by a company that produces English cookies.
3	The man repaired the broken machine’s rotor.	The man repaired the machine’s broken rotor.

Decision Guidance

Noun clusters shorten the sentence. However, this easily gives rise to ambiguities. Hence, pay particular attention to any ambiguities that may be introduced.

5 Word Rules

5.1 Language Variant and Style

EN_W 101 Use Either British or American Spelling

Rule

Use British or American spelling consistently.

Instructions

Be consistent in usage. Do not mix the spellings.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	Organise your e-mails with color codes	Organize your e-mails with color codes <i>(AE)</i> Organise your e-mails with colour codes <i>(BE)</i>

Decision Guidance

Choose the British spelling if writing for the European market and the American spelling if writing for the international market. Use this choice consistently.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Available.

EN_W 102 Use Either British or American Terms

Rule

Use British or American terms consistently.

Instructions

Be consistent while using the terms. Do not mix them.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	Using a 4 mm box spanner, remove the two bolts. Make sure that you hold the wrench parallel to the connector.	Using a 4 mm box wrench, remove the two bolts. Make sure that you hold the wrench parallel to the connector. <i>(AE)</i>
2	Depending on the car model, the battery is located under the bonnet or in the trunk.	Depending on the car model, the battery is located under the hood or in the trunk. <i>(AE)</i> Depending on the car model, the battery is located under the bonnet or in the boot. <i>(BE)</i>

Decision Guidance

Choose the British terms if writing for the European market and the American terms if writing for the international market. Use this choice consistently.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible.

EN_W 103 Avoid Colloquial Notations**Rule**

Do not use colloquial notations.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	Our service agents are available Monday thru Friday.	Our service agents are available Monday through Friday.
2	Flip through the user handbook before using the device.	Read the user handbook before using the device.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible.

EN_W 104 Avoid Colloquialisms**Rule**

Use formally correct phrasing of the standard language. Avoid colloquialisms.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	This instruction step is kind of like the one listed above.	This instruction step is similar to the one listed above.
2	The machine has got a steel shuttle.	This machine has a steel shuttle.
3	The assembly steps are gonna take about 30 minutes.	The assembly steps take about 30 minutes.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible.

5.2 Numbers and Units**EN_W 201 Define the Unit System****Rule**

Define the unit system that you are going to use.

Instructions

Use one unit system consistently. Do not mix units of the Anglo-American system with the metric units.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	The thermometer is 8 inches long. The highest temperature it shows is 50 °C.	The thermometer is 20.3 cm long. The highest temperature it shows is 50 °C.

Decision Guidance

Define as mandatory the unit system that must be used.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible.

EN_W 202 Represent Numbers Correctly**Rule**

Represent the numbers correctly.

Instructions

Use a period as the decimal separator and a comma as the thousands separator in English.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	6,5 cm	6.5 cm
2	1,5 GB	1.5 GB
3	1.500 l	1,500 l
4	250.000 operation hours	250,000 operation hours

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible, with restrictions.

EN_W 203 Write Numbers and Units Correctly**Rule**

Write numbers and units correctly.

Instructions

Use the established SI unit or the correct unit from the unit system that you have decided to use. Insert a non-breaking space between the number and the unit. Do not place a period after the unit. Do not use a hyphen between number and unit.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	Install the controller approximately 2.5m from the sensor.	Install the controller approximately 2.5 m from the sensor.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
2	Install the controller approximately 2.5-m from the sensor.	Install the controller approximately 2.5 m from the sensor.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible.

5.3 Hyphens in Adjective Compounds

EN_W 301 Write Attributive Adjective Compounds Consisting of More Than Two Words Using a Hyphen**Rule**

Always write attributive adjective compounds consisting of more than two words using a hyphen.

Instructions

If the adjective compound consists of four or more words, place the hyphen so that the related adjectives are joined and the adjective compound is sensibly structured (see Example 4).

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	on the fly solution	on-the-fly solution
2	step by step instructions	step-by-step instructions
3	state of the art power electronics	state-of-the-art power electronics
4	low voltage drop out regulator low-voltage-drop-out regulator	low-voltage drop-out regulator

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible, with restrictions.

EN_W 302 Write Attributive Adjective Compounds Consisting of Two Words Using a Hyphen**Rule**

Always write attributive adjective compounds consisting of two words using a hyphen.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	self locking nut	self-locking nut
2	single use gloves	single-use gloves
3	life threatening hazard	life-threatening hazard

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible, with restrictions.

5.4 Verb Forms**EN_W 401 Use the Long Form of Auxiliary Verbs****Rule**

Always use the long form of auxiliary verbs.

Instructions

Avoid contracted forms.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	In this case, the displayed values aren't correct.	In this case, the displayed values are not correct.
2	Don't use abrasive cleaners.	Do not use abrasive cleaners.
3	They're positioned underneath the battery compartment.	They are positioned underneath the battery compartment.
4	If the unit isn't functioning, then check the contacts.	If the unit is not functioning, then check the contacts.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Available.

EN_W 402 Use the Long Form of Modal Verbs**Rule**

Always use the long form of modal verbs.

Instructions

Avoid contracted forms.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	The adjustment knob can't be turned during use.	The adjustment knob cannot be turned during use.
2	The cables musn't be removed from the unit.	The cables must not be removed from the unit.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Available.

7 Index

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