

# How a German Background Might Influence Written Academic English

Here you can learn about

- **the influence German could have on how you write in English.**

This information sheet is connected to *Information Sheet 17: Recognizing cultural influences on writing*. An associated worksheet is available.

To make this topic easier to understand, the information below contains several generalizations, which may not be valid for all areas of science. You can use the information to reflect on texts from your research area.

## Specific English/German Differences

Much research into specific English/German differences in texts stems from the last century, and it is not clear whether those results are pertinent today. Here are some of the factors that could be negatively affecting how German-speakers write academic English texts.

It is your job as a writer to make the text as easy to understand as possible.

- 1) Responsibility for text comprehension: Two different approaches to the understandability of academic texts have been identified: Reader-responsible texts and writer-responsible texts. In the past, German scientists generally fell into the category of those who considered it a reader's responsibility to understand a text (reader-responsible). By comparison, English scientific writers consider it their responsibility to ensure the text is comprehensible by as many as possible (writer-responsible). Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages, e.g., English texts can sometimes suffer from over-simplification.

Consider repeating a noun rather than searching for a synonym

- 2) Use of noun synonyms: In English academic texts, you are allowed to repeat nouns more often than you would in a German text. The repetition helps to improve text cohesion (see *Information Sheet 7: Improving Cohesion in Your Text*).

Don't place inessential information in your text.

- 3) Use of digressions: Native-speaker English writers tend to digress (move off the point) less often than native-speaker Germans. Native-speaker English writers are more restrictive in what they consider essential to understanding. For example, their texts often have fewer footnotes.



Make it clear to your reader how your text progresses

- 4) Use of meta-text: Meta-text guides a reader through a text. An example of meta-text is the paragraph at the end of an Introduction telling the reader about the paper structure. Especially in the natural and engineering sciences, a text by a native English speaker will tend to have more meta-text guiding the reader than a comparable text written in German.

Do not worry too much about starting sentences in the same way.

- 5) Structure of sentences: Academic written English does not lend itself to complex sentence structures; the topics themselves are often complex enough. On the whole, readers prefer sentences to have the structure Subject-Verb-Object, with the subject as close to the front of the sentence as possible. Repeating this structure is not considered a sign of poor English; it is considered a sign of reader-friendliness and good science writing. See information sheets 9 and 9a on structuring sentences.

Be aware of the length of your paragraphs and the visual impression your text makes

- 6) Length of paragraphs: The ideal paragraph in written academic English is on one topic (see Information Sheet 10: Paragraphs). Generally speaking, the longer the paragraph the more the reader perceives the topic as complex. If paragraphs are too long, readers might feel defeated before even starting to read. If they are too short, readers might think the texts are not scientific enough. On the whole, readers of English texts are expecting paragraphs to be about the same length because they would like them to be of similar difficulty. The average length can vary depending on the section of a paper and the scientific area you are writing for.

- 7) Symmetry in a text (parallelism). English readers expect a strong degree of repetition and similarity in the texts they read – exemplified in the need for similar paragraph length (6), simple sentence structures (5), and fewer noun synonyms (2). This need is also visible in lists and parts of texts with more than one item. For example, when using the phrases “both ... and ...” or “(n)either ... (n)or ...”, the word that comes behind the conjunctions should be the same type of word, e.g., don’t write “*The research should involve methods **both from** quantitative and qualitative analysis*”. Write “*The research should involve methods **from both** quantitative and qualitative analysis*”.

## Final Comments/Tips

- Writing is influenced not only by cultural background but also by educational background, e.g., a linguist’s paper will have a structure different to that written by a natural scientist.

