

David Burkhart

Stylistic traps in technical English – and how to avoid them

Stilistische Fallen im Technischen Englisch –
und wie man sie umgeht



Ein Ratgeber aus der Praxis für die Praxis

2., überarbeitete Auflage

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Für fehlerhafte Angaben wird keine Haftung übernommen. Das Werk einschließlich aller seiner Teile ist urheberrechtlich geschützt. Jede Verwendung außerhalb der engen Grenzen des Urheberrechtsgesetzes ist ohne Zustimmung des Verlegers und Herausgebers unzulässig und strafbar. Das gilt insbesondere für Vervielfältigungen, Übersetzungen, Mikroverfilmungen und die Einspeicherung und Verarbeitung in elektronischen Systemen. Gedruckt auf säurefreiem und alterungsbeständigem Werkdruckpapier.

Introduction

This book is based on the author's professional experience as a technical writer, editor and translator. As an editor for texts written in English by German developers, I soon discovered that the authors tended to make many of the same mistakes. Some of these involved fairly trivial errors, such as using the wrong word (e.g. "actual" for "aktuell"). However, other problems went much deeper, involving issues of style. The fundamental question is always: How can complicated technical matters be expressed adequately in English that is simple, direct and easy to understand? This is not a trivial task, especially when the author's thoughts are expressed in German sentences which are long, complicated and overly abstract.

It occurred to me that German developers could be offered a focused crash course on technical writing in English. Wouldn't that be more efficient – and less expensive – than correcting the same mistakes time and time again?

This book is the result of my work in creating such a course. It has been my privilege to give the course a number of times, as a compact seminar. Based on this experience, the material presented here has evolved – and hopefully improved. Due to time constraints, it is often necessary to cut corners in the seminar and leave some material out. This book provides the full extent of the material.

The objective in all of technical writing is to explain complex topics in simple, direct language. It is the aim of this work to give the reader a toolbox of stylistic techniques, enabling him or her to perform this challenging task in English. Germans will have to reflect on communication styles which are typical of their native language but which may cause problems when applied to English. Ideally, the reader will be able to write like a native speaker of English – a significant professional qualification for many people. Even a casual reader will probably be able to recognize basic stylistic minefields, and can – hopefully – tiptoe around them.

Please note that this is a work on questions of style. In the interest of brevity and focus, it will be assumed throughout that sources of German/English technical terminology are readily available, and that the terminology used here is correct.

Examples are given throughout the book, in order to demonstrate how the stylistic recommendations can be applied. The exercises at the end of each chapter allow the reader to investigate the material in a practical way. The reader is strongly recommended to do these exercises.

The final section of the book provides a suggested solution for each exercise. In many cases comments are added, because the reader's solution could be quite different than mine. Some of these comments also point out various stylistic traps in the exercises which the reader might not have noticed.

The text often uses a German sentence as the starting point. In such cases, the exploration begins with a statement in German, followed by a poor translation and discussion. In other cases, I begin a topic with an example sentence in English which I then analyze. Please note that this varies, without warning.

This book is structured around a number of stylistic “traps”, as follows:

Chapter	For German text which ...	The trap is ...
1	uses German technical jargon	translating directly, literally
2	is substantival	writing substantival English
3	uses long sentences	writing long sentences in English
4	uses the passive voice inappropriately	using the passive voice in English, too
5	makes several statements in one sentence	expressing all of the statements in one long English sentence
6	expresses technical processes in substantival incomplete sentences	translating literally
7	makes a vague statement, when it should be telling people what to do	writing an equally vague statement in English
8	uses nonstandard word order for emphasis	violating the English rules for word order
9	includes words which are not saying anything	translating uncritically
10	uses typographical shortcuts	translating literally
11	makes a general statement, instead of telling people what to do	translating literally
12	uses noun-verb combinations	translating with a noun-verb combination
13	conveys much information before the noun	translating literally

Chapter	For German text which ...	The trap is ...
14	uses complicated verbs	using a complicated verb in English – probably the wrong one
15	does not clearly identify and differentiate cause and effect	translating uncritically
16	deals with practical things in abstract or vague language	translating into abstract, vague English
17	packs too much information into one sentence	expressing all of the information in one English sentence
18	includes commas	violating the English rules for commas
19	includes hyphens	violating the English rules for hyphens

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3 Use “...-ing” for complex thoughts

The English language has a grammatical device, the gerund, which allows us to express complex ideas very simply.

Examples

- More and more electronic circuits are being built into vehicles, and the demands made of testers are increasing.
- More and more electronic circuits are being built into vehicles. The demands made of testers are increasing.

Problem:

This is choppy and difficult to read.

Recommendation:

Use the pattern ... -ing for complex thoughts.

Applying the recommendation:

More and more electronic circuits are being built into vehicles, increasing the demands made of testers.

This is easy to read, easy to understand, and allows the sentence to flow.

Example

Der äußerst robuste und schwere Verladekopf drückt die speziell entwickelte Kunststoffdichtung optimal in die Tanköffnung und sorgt somit für eine staubfreie Verladung.

The following translation reads well:

The extremely robust and heavy loading nozzle presses the specially developed plastic seal optimally into the tank opening, ensuring dust-free loading.

Do not write:

The extremely robust and heavy loading nozzle presses the specially developed plastic seal optimally into the tank opening and ensures dust-free loading.

Example

*Benutzt man statt Gleichstrom Wechselstrom, so bezeichnet man den im Wechselstromkreis gegebenen Widerstand mit Z **und** erhält für die obige Grundformel ...*

The following translation reads well:

If AC current is used instead of DC, then the resistance in the AC circuit is designated as Z, resulting in the following for the above basic equation ...

Do not write:

If AC current is used instead of DC, then the resistance in the AC circuit is designated as Z, and results in the following for the above basic equation ...

Exercises

- 1. Yachting Excellence is revolutionizing the boating industry and opens up new worlds of experience to spoiled yacht lovers.*
- 2. Check the cable before you check the electrodes.*
- 3. The light sensors are in the shadows, that makes measurement easier.*
- 4. Die Umstellung der Bordspannung auf 24 V verursacht weitere Probleme.*

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Technical texts translated from German into English often contain awkward wordings, because the original sentences are long, complicated and overly abstract. How can complicated technical matters be expressed adequately in English that is simple, direct and easy to understand?

The author presents a series of recommendations on how to deal with difficult stylistic issues frequently encountered in technical documents. Examples are provided throughout the book; each chapter includes exercises, with suggested solutions at the end of the book.

This book is a stylistic toolbox for writers and translators of technical texts.

Das Buch lenkt die Sprachaufmerksamkeit durch abwechslungsreiche Übungen, es enthält alle Lösungen sowie den grundlegenden Wortschatz.



David Burkhart ist in Florida, USA, geboren und aufgewachsen, lebt aber seit 35 Jahren in Deutschland, die meiste Zeit in München. In den USA studierte er zunächst Grundschulpädagogik und anschließend Elektrotechnik und schloss beide Studiengänge an der Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida, ab. Seit etwa 30 Jahren arbeitet er in der Erwachsenenbildung, vorrangig in den Bereichen Deutsch als Fremdsprache, Englisch für Umschüler, EDV, Technisches Englisch und IT-Englisch. Zum Thema Technisches Englisch gibt er bundesweit Workshops. Sein Schwerpunkt „Technical Writing in English“ basiert auf eigenen vergleichenden Analysen des im technischen Englisch üblichen Schreibstils mit dem Stil, der im technischen Deutsch verwendet wird. Das Ergebnis dieser Analysen ist im vorliegenden Buch niedergeschrieben.

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