

RULE-BASED WRITING

English for Non-Native Writers

excerpt

2. updated edition

Guides

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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.

EN_T 104 Avoid Subheadings that Are Very Long**Rule**

Phrase subheadings more briefly than main headings.

Instructions

- 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).

	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

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.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible. Prerequisite: Heading is characterized by tagging.

EN_T 105 Avoid Redundancies in Headings**Rule**

Avoid redundancies in the content of headings.

Instructions

Avoid redundant content in headings, as this makes the headings long and unclear.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	1. Operation 1.1 Operation Parameters 1.2 Operation Programming 1.3 Linking Operation Libraries	1. Operation 1.1 Parameters 1.2 Programming 1.3 Linking Libraries

Decision Guidance

Redundancies make headings unnecessarily long and unclear. Repetitions are tiresome and distract the reader from the relevant keywords.

Analyze the entire content of the documentation, the output media and the usual scanning strategy of the reader. If the same subheadings appear several times under different main headings, and readers use full-text search in online formats, then non-redundant subheadings often provide too little information for quick orientation. While phrasing headings with redundancies, take note of EN_T 107.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Not suitable.

EN_T 106 Restrict Headings to One Thematic Aspect

Rule

Restrict headings to one topic.

Instructions

Select the main topic for the heading if the text contains several topics. Alternatively, select a phrase that summarizes the various topics of the text in a generic term.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	Checking the Propulsion Unit Using the Standard Inspection Checklist	Inspecting the Propulsion Unit

Decision Guidance

The need for accuracy often results in writers including too much information in the heading. This excessive amount of information is counterproductive, especially in headings. Headings are intended to provide the reader quick access to the contents of a document. The more concise and clear the statement of a heading, the better it fulfills this function. Rule EN_T 108 provides assistance for headings where several thematic aspects must be addressed.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Not suitable.

EN_T 107 Place the Specific Aspect at the Beginning of the Heading

Rule

Place the aspect of content that is relevant to the reader and logical from the point of view of the content layout at the beginning of the heading.

Instructions

Place that aspect of the heading that is most relevant and most specific for layout and orientation at the beginning of the heading.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	1.1 Class R117 Parameters 1.1.1 Settings in the "General" Tab 1.1.2 Settings in the "System Behavior" Tab 1.1.3 Settings in the "Visualization" Tab	1.1 Class R117 Parameters 1.1.1 "General" Tab 1.1.2 "System Behavior" Tab 1.1.3 "Visualization" Tab
2	3.4 Startup Modes 3.4.1 Starting up in Safe Mode 3.4.2 Starting up in Normal Mode 3.4.3 Starting up in Advanced Mode	3.4 Startup Modes 3.4.1 Safe Mode 3.4.2 Normal Mode 3.4.3 Advanced Mode

Decision Guidance

This rule does not make sense if the headings are to appear in a list of search query results as chapters that belong together will, in this case, be separated when they are sorted alphabetically.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Not suitable.

EN_T 108

Structure Comprehensive Headings Clearly Using Colons and Parentheses

Rule

Use colons or parentheses to structure headings containing a lot of information clearly.

Instructions

- Use colons and parentheses sparingly.
- Check if you can reduce the content of the headings to an extent where you can avoid using colons or parentheses (see Rule EN_T 106).
- Place parentheses only at the end of a heading.
- Do not use parentheses to specify synonyms in headings.
- Check whether it is better to provide content within parentheses in the form of index entries (see Rule EN_T 206).
- Do not use colons and parentheses simultaneously in headings.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	Setting the Parameters for a Class R117 Object	Setting Parameters (Class R117)
2	Overview-Style Depiction of the Entire Production Process	Overview: Entire Production Process
3	Optional Tool Magazine	Tool Magazine (Optional)
4	Configuring the Connection (Port)	Configuring the Connection

Decision Guidance

Check in advance whether these two processes can be implemented in your documents. However, note the following aspects:

- Suitability for the target audience: Can your readers properly link the information inside and outside the parentheses?
- Technical handling process: Are the parentheses displayed correctly in the target media?
- Conflict with automatically generated parentheses: The production process of online help is partly configured such that parentheses are automatically placed at the end of entries in tables of contents or indexes. If you also use parentheses in the headings from the editing perspective, then two parentheses are placed at the end of the headings in the online help. This duplication of parentheses is confusing.
- If your translation memory system uses colons for segmentation, then segmentation mechanisms must be changed for headings with colons.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Not suitable.

EN_T 109 Use a Consistent Concept for Noun and Verb Phrases in Headings**Rule**

Use a consistent concept for headings with nominal or verbal structure.

Instructions

Use a concept that can be easily understood by the reader as the basis for formulating headings using nouns or verbs. Formulate headings consistently based on this concept.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	1. Operation 1.1 Overview of the Production Process 1.2 Operational Control 1.3 Start of Production 1.3.1 Machine Start 1.3.1.1 Conditions 1.3.1.2 Operating Sequence 1.3.2 Program Selection 1.4 Interrupting Production	1. Operation 1.1 Overview of the Production Process 1.2 Operational Control 1.3 Starting Production 1.3.1 Starting the Machine 1.3.1.1 Conditions 1.3.1.2 Operating Sequence 1.3.2 Selecting a Program 1.4 Interrupting Production

Decision Guidance

With this differentiation, you help the reader in classifying the content quickly using the headings and in assessing their relevance. The positive example represents a recommendation that is often used in this form. You can naturally adapt the concept to suit your needs. What is important here is that:

- Your concept is consistent.
- Your reader can easily understand the concept.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible. Prerequisite: Heading is characterized by appropriate tagging.

EN_T 110 Use Identically Worded Headings for Similar Content**Rule**

Always use the same heading for similar content.

Instructions

Do not use different words for headings with similar content. Instead, select the same names for identical content.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	Data Copying, Copying Data, Making Data Copies	Copying Data
2	Important Tips, General Considerations	Information
3	Consequence, Outcome, Result	Result

Decision Guidance

This similarity of headlines is an important prerequisite to ensure that your readers find their direction quickly and reliably in the document.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Not suitable.

EN_T 111 Define the Capitalization Style in Headings**Rule**

Define the capitalization style that should be used for headings.

Instructions

Possible capitalization styles:

- Sentence style: Capitalize the first word and proper nouns.
- Headline style (also called Heading style or Title style): Capitalize almost all words.

Define the style you want to use. Also, define the headings and titles to which the selected style must be applied: Chapter headings, subheadings, titles of tables and figures. Once you decide on the headline style, define the writing rules for this style as well. See Rule EN_T 112.

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	<i>Sentence style:</i> Clamping A Workpiece In a quasi-liquid Medium	Clamping a workpiece in a quasi-liquid medium

	Negative Example	Positive Example
2	<i>Headline style:</i> Front View of the measuring Instrument	Front View of the Measuring Instrument

Decision Guidance

The sentence style is simpler and less error-prone, as the writer must not follow any special rules. Also, see Rules EN_W 503 and EN_W 504 for further explanations on capitalization of proper nouns. There are several writing rules for the headline style, which is why you need to define your rules for this style. See Rule EN_T 112.

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible. Prerequisite: Heading is characterized by tagging.

EN_T 112 Define the Writing Rules for Capitalization in Headings**Rule**

Once you decide to use the headline style in headings based on Rule EN_T 111, define the words that need to be written in upper case and in lower case.

Instructions

A comprehensive rule set is as follows.

Write the following words in upper case:

- The first word
- Nouns
- Verbs (except all the forms of “to be”)
- Adverbs
- Adjectives
- Pronouns

Write the following words in lower case:

- Articles
- Conjunctions
- Prepositions
- “to” in infinitives

	Negative Example	Positive Example
1	Installation And Deinstallation	Installation and Deinstallation
2	Recommissioning the Machine After Emergency Stops	Recommissioning the Machine after Emergency Stops
3	Version Information dialog box	Version Information Dialog Box
4	Range And Number of remote Users	Range and Number of Remote Users

Potential for Automatic Checking

Possible. Prerequisite: Heading is characterized by appropriate tagging.