

# What should we be teaching Germans who have to write academic English?

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## Introduction

A recent cultural rhetoric study has questioned the correctness of advocating one global, Anglo-Saxon style for academic written English (Xu et al., 2016). Nevertheless, the currently accepted style remains heavily influenced by books written for an “average” international student with no particular cultural background, often one at an American or Australian university (e. g. Oshima/Hogue, 2006; Swales/Feak, 2004). Books specifically for the German market (e. g. Legler/Moore, 2001; Siepmann et al., 2008) cover specific difficulties Germans experience when writing academic English but tend to be grammar and vocabulary heavy. But, if student writing is to be in line with the standard Anglo-Saxon style, is there anything else apart from grammar or vocabulary that those teaching written academic English in Germany should be including in their work? Do other issues arise as a result of working in Germany with mainly German students?

As a first step to answering these questions, we compared the scientific writer guidelines provided by the European Association of Scientific Editors (EASE, 2013) with guidelines that might be used when teaching German as an academic language. We then discussed our findings with others teaching academic writing (mainly English) to non-native speakers (L2). Through this discussion, we also wished to enable an exchange of ideas and/or teaching methods for issues that arise when teaching English as an L2 academic language in Germany. Here is the report of what we did and what we found.

## The two-phase process

We took a two-phase approach to looking at the topic. Initially, one of this report’s authors, a teacher of German and English academic writing, analysed the “EASE Guidelines for Authors and Translators of Scientific Articles to be Published in English” provided by the European Association of Scientific Editors (EASE, 2013). Her task was to identify guidelines she considered she would not recommend for L2 writers of scientific German. As a DaF teacher (Deutsch als Fremdsprache – German as a foreign language) with experience of teaching academic German, her decisions were based on her knowledge of the content of her courses on academic written German. This analysis was not designed as a thorough investigation into differences between written academic English and German,

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which has been done to some extent elsewhere (e. g. Thielmann, 2009). It was originally intended as an aid for the other author of this report, allowing her to improve her teaching of academic written English, in particular for German native speakers.

We then used the results of this analysis (see Fig.1) in the next step, where we discussed our findings in a workshop with other teachers of L2 academic writing (mainly English). This discussion also consisted of two parts. In Part 1, the participants were asked whether they agreed with the results of our initial analysis and what other topics they considered important in their teaching. In Part 2, they were asked for best-practice ideas for teaching these topics. The workshop design is discussed in more detail below.

The workshop took place at the Third Annual Symposium on Supporting L2 Writing at German-Language Universities, organized by the Language Center of the Technische Universität München (April 2016). We entitled the workshop “Teaching written academic English to Germans: Wherein lies the difference?” The 90-minute workshop was attended by about 45 participants who taught L2 academic writing (mainly English).

**Figure 1**  
Identified differences between EASE Guidelines and recommendations when writing academic German (all page references from the EASE 2013 Guidelines)

Orthographical and Content Differences	Stylistic Differences
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Translating non-English texts (p.2 and p.3)</li><li>• Providing information on specific funding (p. 3)</li><li>• Getting copyrights (p. 3)</li><li>• Writing numerals (p. 3)</li><li>• Using technical terms (p. 4)</li><li>• Using decimal point, comma (p. 4)</li><li>• Using “I/we” (p. 5)</li><li>• Punctuation (p. 5)</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Subject-verb placement (p. 4)</li><li>• Use of parallelism (p. 4)</li><li>• Use of repetition (p. 9)</li></ul>

Workshop design

After a short introductory round (10 minutes), the participants were acquainted with the results of our analysis of the EASE Guidelines (see Fig.1). The focus was on informing them of the following three stylistic differences found between the EASE Guidelines and what would be included in courses on academic writing in German (10 minutes):

1. **Subject-verb:** “Sentences generally should not be very long. Their structure should be relatively simple, with the subject located close to its verb” (p. 4).  
DaF teacher’s comment: *Different in German.*
2. **Parallelism:** “In contrast to some other languages, English allows parallel constructions, as they facilitate understanding. For example, when comparing similar data, you

can write: 'It was high in A, medium in B, and low in C', rather than 'It was high in A, medium for B, and low in the case of C' (p. 4).

DaF teacher's comment: *Germans prefer variation.*

3. **Repetition:** "Repeat key words and phrases – do not use synonyms. In scientific writing, repetition sharpens the focus. Repetition especially helps the reader to connect ideas that are physically separated in your text. For example: Other investigators have shown that microbial activity can cause immobilization of labile soil phosphorus. Our results suggest that, indeed, microbial activity immobilizes the labile soil phosphorus" (p. 9).

DaF teacher's comment: *Do not repeat too often. Germans like variation. Synonyms are great but should be proper and common words.*

The participants were then asked to form small groups (about 4–5 people per group) with their neighbours and to discuss the following questions (20 minutes):

1. When you teach academic written English to German speakers, do you come across these stylistic differences?
2. Do you think there are other more pressing problems that German native speakers have to deal with when writing in English?

They were asked to record their discussion on cards that were then placed on a pin board and presented to all participants (15 minutes). Using the Metaplan technique in a plenum discussion, the cards were then grouped into related topics, and the 5 most interesting topics were identified (10 minutes). These topics were then placed as headers on 5 individual flipcharts, and the flipcharts were spread around the room.

To identify best-practice ideas for these 5 topics, the participants were asked in a second part of the workshop to group themselves around the flipchart with the topic they found most interesting and to exchange information about methods/processes they used in the classroom (10 minutes). They were asked to record their name/contact details next to their ideas so that participants could directly contact them if they needed more clarification. The limited time during the workshop did not allow a further plenum analysis or grouping of the best-practice ideas, which would have been desirable. However, during a wrap-up session (15 minutes), the participants were encouraged to wander around the room to view other flipcharts and add their comments to the other topics. This period was also intensively used by the participants to discuss the best practice ideas in more detail.

## Workshop results

### Part 1 – Important issues when teaching L2 academic written English in Germany

The participants had been asked to discuss three stylistic differences that had been identified in an analysis of the EASE Guideline (emphasis on subject, verb, object; parallel constructions; repetition of words rather than using synonyms). Of those three topics, they considered the use of parallel constructions to be a major difficulty experienced by their students when learning academic written English. Additionally they identified the following topics as being important in their teaching:

- Supporting writer autonomy
- Paragraph structure (including beginning-/end-focus)
- The focus on the reader
- General language complexity (the need for simplification in English and how to achieve it (e. g. use of passive, level of formality, nominalisations, sentence density)).

Other issues that could not be discussed in detail during the rest of the workshop were

- Sentence structure – Subject-Verb-Object (discussed to some extent in the group on language complexity)
- Translations
- Collocations
- Maintaining relevance – conciseness, cohesion, clarity, coherence
- Other language issues – idioms, political correctness, focus on “good writing”, citing, meta-language, general language ability of writer.

### Part 2 – Best-practice ideas

In this part of the workshop, the participants grouped around one of the five flipcharts and wrote their suggestions for best practice teaching of that topic. The suggestions have been supplied verbatim in the list below. If time had allowed, a further plenum discussion and grouping of these suggestions would have been desirable.

#### 1) Parallelism

- See GMAT test. It tests parallel construction a lot
- Make sure all words in lists are words from the same word class – see OWL website, Purdue University
- “Simple” not a bad word
- Stick to the terms you have previously defined
- Focus particularly on verbs in a compound/complex sentence – all in the same form?

## 2) Supporting writer autonomy

- Corpus linguistics
- Online sources
- Workshops (with colleagues)
- Moodle – courses with a range of materials for mixed ability groups (only 3 in-class meetings, rest online)
- Healthy scepticism of “rules” and when they may be broken
- Create writing groups – positive feedback
- Have students perform needs analysis and set measurable goals for writing
- Students create their own writing/editing checklist
- Encourage peer review in English or writing class
- Self-discovery in writing as done with grammar classes
- Students choose role models/model texts of what they consider to be good writing
- Have students analyse own (corrected) writing to determine their strengths and weaknesses in individual tutorials, students have to tell the teacher their strengths and weaknesses and how they're going to try to fix their weaknesses (set individual goals), which the teacher checks up on later in the semester
- Students create their own writing/editing checklist.

## 3) Paragraph structure – Beginning- vs. End-focus

- Comparison of example paragraphs written by English and German speakers, explicit discussion of cultural differences, writing exercises, work on discourse structures such as topic sentences
- Planning, planning, planning – never a waste of time
- Creating structure before and after
- Genre and sub-genre structure.

## 4) Focus on reader

- Advice to student: Have someone read your paper that is not from your field. If they don't understand = bad
- Get peer feedback from colleagues AND people not related to your field at all
- If non-experts understand the paper, experts will understand it; but if only experts understand, non-experts may not
- Paper needs revising if it is not understood by non-experts
- Coherence checklist with individual coaching
- Focus on audience? Show students these features in different types of texts (ways used)
- Get yourself acquainted with articles from favourite journals
- Whose fault is it if text is incomprehensible? Readers? Able to hide poor logic in flowery prose.

### 5) Language complexity

- Explain to a non-expert
- After correcting – ask the authors if they would have understood this sentence themselves.
- Language complexity is different in English and German. In German you have lots of clauses, in English gerunds and participles prevail. What does this mean for style?
- Create a writing group (get peer feedback)
- Focus students on “real life” articles to highlight features that focus on audience
- Asking questions (author of the text should ask themselves questions which should be answered by the text). This helps to focus the text, and the author can then use appropriate vocabulary and sentence structure
- Students write a paragraph of sentences with only 5 words. Rewrite paragraph using sentences of only 9 words. Final rewrite paragraph using sentences of 15+ words. Compare and contrast quality of writing
- Focus on main points and form the sentence clearly
- Introduce the idea of register and associated vocabulary.

## What we learnt from the process

The process showed us, and hopefully others, the following:

1. That there are stylistic differences between what students of L2 German academic writing and students of L2 English academic writing should be taught.
2. That those teaching L2 English academic writing have numerous ideas for teaching these stylistic aspects and welcome opportunities to exchange information.
3. That providing a basis for discussion (here the EASE guidelines) and the structure for the discussions (here the group work with specific questions and the exchange of best practice ideas around a flipchart) will allow a lively exchange on a topic to the benefit of all involved.

## Further interesting questions

As with so many processes, we have found that we have raised as many questions as we answered, if not more. We consider the following questions to also be worthy of future work:

1. Do other DaF teachers agree with the results of the analysis of the EASE Guidelines?
2. Are there any German guidelines similar to the EASE guidelines that would be generally applicable for written academic German? If not, why not?

3. Would the results of the small group discussion have been different if the group participants had been considering individual scientific genres or only undergraduates or graduates?
4. In light of increasingly multicultural student groups, would it be possible to use this process to research stylistic differences for different native languages – perhaps starting with differences within Europe?
5. Could the results of such an analysis lead to a practical handout for those teaching English academic writing to multicultural classes?

Perhaps future workshops at national and international conferences would be a good place to start investigating answers to these questions.

## References

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