

Sprachenzentrum
Universität Stuttgart
Breitscheidstraße 2
70174 Stuttgart

www.sz.uni-stuttgart.de

Contact Us:
newsletter@sz.uni-
stuttgart.de

English Revisited:

Tips, Tidbits & Tutorials

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Glossary

resolution: a decision to
achieve a goal

earnest: keen, motivated,
serious

odd: (here) occasional

pitfall: trap

Editorial

A new year has begun and many of us have made New Year's resolutions. Sticking to these goals is certainly easier said than done.

Some of you earnest language learners might be planning to improve your English writing skills this year. If so, you should take a close look at this issue of our newsletter, which focuses on writing letters of recommendation and key phrases you would need for them as well as using discourse markers to improve the flow of your academic writing. These articles will, should, could or

just may prove useful. Reading them is not a must, though.

Ah, modal verbs! While seemingly similar to German, they do present the odd pitfall. In our first article on modal verbs, we will focus on these common mistakes.

John Nixon

University Glossary
Need to know the English term for *Scheinklausur* or for *Abteilung für...*? Then be on the lookout for the updated version of our University Glossary to be released in May.

Upcoming Issues :

- reported speech
- proverbs and sayings
- intercultural communication



Comments

Do you have any ideas for future issues?
Please contact us.



Subscription

Currently on Offer

If you are interested in any of the following, please **contact us**.

English Workshops for Teaching Staff and Researchers (up to June 2017)

Registration online [here](#)

Free Lunchtime English for University Employees: Lunch & Learn

Are you interested in practising your English in an informal setting over lunch? Then join us for our second lunchtime get-together on **Wednesday, March 15 from 12:30 to 13:30** in the University Library in **Vaihingen** (*Videokonferenzraum*). Everyone should bring his or her own lunch. We will provide a brief input on word choice and prepositions and the rest of the time will be spent speaking English in a relaxed and enjoyable environment.

RSVP [here](#)

- **Editing Service and Coaching:** Do you have a paper, abstract or other document that needs to be looked over by a native English speaker before it is published? If so, we can help.

Grammar

Modal Verbs (1): Seven Reminders

Modal verbs (can, could, will, might, shall, must, should, would) are particularly useful in academic writing for defining limitations or requirements, showing possibilities, making predictions, offering recommendations, and hedging (softening claims). The important distinctions between German and English usage are often overlooked.

1) *must* versus *have to*

In English it is uncommon to use the word 'must' in informal contexts. In fact, it would sound quite mechanical and stiff to say, "I must arrive at work by 8" when talking to a group of friends. In a casual context, "have to" would be more appropriate. In academic writing, however, 'must' is essential, especially when defining requirements and parameters. It would be too casual to write, "The height of the support beam has got to be 50cm." Academic writing requires more formal wording, such as, "The height of the beam *must* measure 50 cm."

2) *must not* versus *nicht müssen*

One important distinction between German and English is that in English 'must' deals with requirement, and 'must not' means that something is forbidden. By contrast, in German '*nicht müssen*' signifies that something is optional.

Safety equipment must be removed when exiting the lab. The equipment must not be worn home because it may carry hazardous materials.

In this example, employees are **forbidden** from wearing the equipment home.

The better translation for 'muss nicht' would be 'not required to' or 'need not' as in 'The workers *are not required to* wear safety equipment in the lab' or 'The workers *need not* wear safety equipment in the lab.'

3) Confusion between *wollen* and *will*

Will in English indicates a future action, not a want.

German	English	Incorrect
Er <i>will</i> die Antworten finden.	✓ He wants to find the answers.	* He <i>will</i> find the answers.

4) Unlike in German, some modal verbs in English cannot be conjugated in the past tense.

German	English	Incorrect
Sie <i>musste</i> gestern noch weitere Untersuchungen machen.	✓ She had to conduct further investigations yesterday.	* She <i>must</i> conduct further investigations yesterday.
Sie <i>sollten</i> letzte Woche die Hausarbeit abgeben.	✓ You were supposed to hand in your assignment last week.	* You <i>should</i> hand in your assignment last week.

5) *Soll* is sometime confused with *shall*.

German	English	Incorrect
Alle Schüler <i>sollen</i> eine Fremdsprache lernen.	✓ All students <i>should</i> study a foreign language.	* All students <i>shall</i> study a foreign language.

Note that *shall* is used only as an alternative to *will* in the 1st person singular or plural (i.e. I or we), e.g. *I am planning a change, but I shall keep it a secret for the time being.*

6) Confusion over word order

Modal verbs in the negative follow the pattern subject + modal verb + not + verb + object

We should not heat the solution above 50 degrees.

7) No helping verb (i.e. *do*) in questions

✓ *Can you provide me with official documentation?*
* *Do you can provide me with official documentation?*

Glossary

overlook: not see (not to be confused with oversee = monitor, supervise)

parameter: note that the word stress is on the second syllable and the first /e/ is a schwa and not the same vowel as in millimeter.



beam: a horizontal support structure usually in a building and usually made of wood or metal

for the time being: for now

Dr. Lucy Blaney-Laible



Exercises

Intercultural Communication

Writing Letters of Recommendation

As educators and mentors, teaching staff are often asked to write letters of recommendation for students. There are two types of letters: open and closed. An open letter is passed on directly to the student for him or her to forward to potential employers or schools. A closed letter is sent directly to the school or company to which the student is applying. Since the student does not see a closed letter before it is passed on, they are felt to be more reliable and honest. Whether the letter is open or closed, both follow the letter writing conventions discussed below.

In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, it is expected that letters of reference are only written by an advisor who can write a positive, knowledgeable reference. The letter writer should know the student well, and be able to provide specific examples of the student's work. If you are unable to offer a positive reference for a person, you should encourage him or her to obtain a reference elsewhere, rather than accept the task and write a negative or neutral one.

Style

Letters of recommendation follow the style of a business letter. They are usually half a page to one page long. It is the student's responsibility to provide contact information as well as requirements for the letter writer, such as whether a ranking or grades are required. It is best if they can be addressed directly to a recipient rather than a generic audience. They should also follow the conventions of American or British English (see our newsletter article on opening/closing business correspondence from February 2014 by Cheryl Stenzel for a review of these). It is customary for references to be listed on a resume or CV, rather than being sent with the application. The company, institute or organization may contact the reference directly. In that case, the reference may be given verbally or via email.

When a reference is requested in writing, it follows a particular structure. First, the referee introduces him- or herself and describes the relationship to the candidate. Next the candidate's skills and successes are presented. It is beneficial to give concrete examples of work completed by the candidate. In some cases, the grades awarded may be provided, with written permission of the candidate. This is followed by an evaluation of those skills and successes related to the position or internship in question. In addition, particularly positive aspects of the candidate's character

should be demonstrated. It is also acceptable to smooth over weaknesses in the candidate's resume by presenting circumstances which may explain the difficulties, for example if the student in question had a difficult family situation to deal with during a semester. Finally, end the letter on a positive note and provide your contact information for further communication with the application committee. It is important to read your letter through before you send it. A poorly written letter not only leaves a bad impression of the candidate, but also reflects badly on the referee.

Contents

One form of best practice for assessing a student's strengths is a private meeting with the student, during which they present documentation of their coursework and other work as well as a description of the position they are applying for. This requires the student to do some legwork before you begin the writing process. The written documentation provided should include a complete resume, cover letter or letter of application; a written description of the program or job; and an example of their work from your course. When meeting with the student in person, you can assure them that you are able to provide them with a positive and knowledgeable reference.

References

<http://isites.harvard.edu/fs/html/icb.topic58474/Verba-recs.html>

<http://www.dailywritingtips.com/writing-a-reference-letter-with-examples/>

Key Phrases and Collocations

Key Phrases and Words in a Reference Letter
(click [here](#))

Practice Key Phrases and Words in a Reference Letter
(click [here](#))

Gretchen Chojnacki-Herbers

Glossary

letters of recommendation:
also called reference letters

recipient:
person who receives sth.

generic: not specific

resume: (US English for CV) also spelled *résumé* or *résumé*

referee: the person who provides the reference

smooth over weaknesses: make weaknesses less serious

legwork: Zuarbeit or Kleinarbeit



Courtesy of Google Images

Vocabulary

Writing Clearly for Academic Purposes

Along with the rise of globalization in the last 30 years, sharing ideas clearly in the global language of English has become a vital part of professional success in any field imaginable. To express and exchange ideas between international universities and academics, academic English has thus become ever more important.

In a study about Polish academics and their style of writing, in both Polish and English, it stated that 65% of research articles from Poland in 1975 were published in Polish. By 2000 the number was already down to 10%,¹ providing further proof that English is the global language of academic publications. However, the study, as well as others², also analyzed the legibility of the academic English written by non-natives, and the researchers found that the writing was less reader-friendly and digressed more from the topic at hand, i.e. seemed less linear.

So, how can digressions be avoided and clarity attained in our writing? First, let us explore some characteristics of written academic English that make it so suitable for academia, and then look at how we can express ourselves successfully in English in an academic context.

One of the first rules of academic writing we often hear and read about is the use of the passive sentence structure, e.g. *The study was conducted*, as opposed to *We conducted the study*. We know that we can use this form in order to avoid using personal pronouns, such as *I* or *we*, and to make our writing more objective. However, the (over-) awareness of this basic rule has led to its overuse, and many authors are unintentionally making their already complex texts into rigid, tedious literature. Yet, we cannot ignore this sentence form completely and write only in the active voice. We need to find a balance between both forms so that our writing can be interesting, objective, as well as clear to the reader. To find out more as to why it is so important to find a balance between active and passive sentences in academic writing, as well as other factors in good writing style, check out linguist Steven Pinker's entertaining talk [here](#).

Another essential of academic writing is structure and cohesion, that is, making sure our writing is linear and reader-friendly. One way we can do this is by using discourse markers. Also known as "linking words", these words or phrases help us convey new information and our ideas in a logical way. Words like *despite* and *however* help us introduce contrasting ideas, while

moreover adds supporting evidence and *therefore* introduces an effect we would like to explain. Misuse, overuse, and simple misunderstanding of these discourse markers leads to choppy, confusing texts that can be difficult for the reader to follow. Sometimes English learners mistake *therefore* to mean *for it (dafür)* and *moreover* to mean *as a result*. To make our writing reader-friendly, it is important to remember to use these markers only when really necessary, and not as a simple way to make our writing "sound" more academic.

In addition to making sure we have structure and cohesion within and between our sentences, our texts also need to flow in their entirety and we can do this by improving our use of paragraphs. The significant characteristic of written academic English here is the focus. By writing paragraphs that transport one main idea each, we can help guide the reader one step at a time through each section of our academic papers and avoid confusing them with fewer digressions from our main point. Providing focus throughout the Introduction, Results, and Discussion sections is important for giving not only our text structure at the paragraph-level, but also our whole paper a strong foundation for our research and ideas to stand on.

Remember: Most of the time we are already dealing with complex topics in our papers, so we should not confuse our readers any further with unclear, unstructured writing. Take the time to review and edit your writing for a balance of active and passive structures, correct use of discourse markers, and focus within paragraphs.

¹Smakman, D. & Duda-Osiewacz, A. (2014). A contrastive rhetoric analysis of scholarly publications by Polish and Anglophone Authors. *The Journal of Language Teaching and Learning*, 2, 29-47

²Clyne, M. (1987). Cultural differences in the organization of academic texts. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 11, 211-247. & Goleboiwski, Z. (1998). Rhetorical approaches to scientific writing: an English-Polish contrastive study. *Text*, 18, 67-102.

Agatha Chojnacki

Glossary

vital:
very important

ever more: even more

legibility: can be read easily

digress: go off topic

at hand: within easy reach; (here, however) what one is dealing with now

convey: communicate, get across

choppy: not smooth, does not flow well

in its/their entirety: als Ganzes

Overview of Discourse Markers

Here you will find a helpful table listing the most common discourse markers or linking words and their use.

