



# German medical writing: Navigating linguistic complexities

**G**erman is an official language in Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Luxembourg, Belgium, and Liechtenstein, and it represents the most widely spoken mother tongue in the European Union.<sup>1</sup> Medical writing in German presents unique challenges and opportunities compared to English, some of which are:

## Lengthy compound words

German is known for its complex, compound nouns. In theory, the concept is logical: multiple nouns are combined into one descriptive word to convey complex ideas. In practice, however, these words can become very lengthy. An example is the commonly used word “Nahrungsmittelunverträglichkeit” (food intolerance), which can be broken down into its components: “Nahrung” (food), “Mittel” (product/stuff), and “Unverträglichkeit” (intolerance). While using long compound words is standard in scientific or administrative documents, their inclusion in concise documents such as brochures or advertorials aimed at the public can pose a challenge for medical writers.

## Intricate sentence structure

German sentence structure is more flexible than English but also more complex. Creating subordinate clauses (sometimes multiple ones) is very common in German, and with their introduction, verb placement usually shifts to the end of the clause or sentence. This can lead to lengthy and intricate sentences. While such a complex structure allows for high precision and for packing extensive information into a single sentence, it can make it more difficult to follow the sentence and track the main action, especially for non-native speakers. Medical writers need to be particularly meticulous in maintaining logical flow and coherence. Translating such structures into English often demands restructuring to preserve the original meaning.

## Formal vs. informal tone

Unlike English, German differentiates between formal and informal tones. The formal tone is generally used in professional settings, but pharmaceutical companies increasingly address patients with an informal tone to create a more personal connection. Informal language can engage patients more directly and appears more modern, whereas formal language can seem stiff and impersonal. However, some patients, particularly older people, may feel disrespected when addressed informally. Therefore, medical writers must carefully consider the appropriate tone for each document and the expected audience while also aligning with the company’s preference.

## Writing in English as a German medical writer

Writing in English can be a rewarding experience for a native German-speaking medical writer, as the language’s more concise and direct sentence structure can make certain aspects of communication easier. Additionally, the lack of formal vs. informal distinction in English allows the writer to focus more on clarity and content without needing to consider the nuances of tone.

In summary, German medical writing involves navigating linguistic complexities that can impact clarity, tone, and coherence. Medical writers working in German must skillfully balance these elements to ensure the correctness and effectiveness of scientific or medical documents.

## References

1. Thiele M. German around the world. Deutschland.de. 2020 [cited 2024 Aug X]. Available from: <https://www.deutschland.de/en/topic/knowledge/mother-tongue-german-in-42-countries-around-the-world>.



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