

Language style guide for software developers

This style guide is designed to help software developers with the language aspects of screen design. It is not comprehensive, but it does cover the most common problems.

For comprehensive style guidelines for documentation see the Microsoft Manual of Style for Technical Publications.

TechScribe is based in the UK, and although we produce documentation for both the US and the UK markets, we have used British English in this guide. The document can be printed on both US Letter and A4 size paper.

Language guidelines

For instructions, use statements, rather than questions or conditionals (if ...):

- ✓ Select the <items> for this <option>
- ✗ Which <items> do you want for this <option>?
- ✓ Type the number of <items>
- ✗ How many <items> are there?
- ✓ Choose OK to accept these values
- ✗ If you choose OK, these values will be accepted

For presenting information and asking questions use the present tense:

- ✓ The <event> starts on <date>
- ✗ The <event> will start on <date>
- ✓ Are you sure you want to delete the <item>?

Keep the text short. If text doesn't aid clarity, don't use it (obviously, context is important):

- ✓ Select the <item>
- ✗ Select the <item> you want to create

Use terms that the users understand. (If your software is for technicians, then use the technical terms, otherwise, keep it simple):

- ✓ Type a number between 1 and 10
- ✗ Type an integer between 1 and 10

Be specific:

- ✓ Type a number between 1 and 10
- ✗ Type a number

Use abbreviations for negated verbs:

- ✓ can't, don't
- ✗ cannot, do not

Use parallel constructions wherever possible:

- ✓ The <event> starts on <date>; The <event> ends on <date>
- ✓ The <event> start date is <date>; The <event> end date is <date>
- ✗ The <event> starts on <date>; The <event> end date is <date>
- ✓ log on / log off
- ✓ log in / log out
- ✗ log in / log off

To express necessity, use “must”. To express ability use “can”:

You must define at least one <item type> before you can create an <item instance>

Avoid these words:

could, may, might, should, shall, wish

Common problem words

Should you use “login” or “log in”, “layout” or “lay out” and so on? Well, that depends on whether you are using them as verbs or as nouns.

For our purposes, these *very simplistic* definitions are sufficient:

- A noun represents a thing (an object, a concept), for example, “password”, “computer”, “database integrity”.
- A verb represents the performance of an action, for example, “to open”, “opening”.

Here’s a simple test that tells you whether or not you should use the verb or the noun. If you can:

1. Split the word when you say it, then use the verb.
2. Use the word with “to” or “ing”, then use the verb.
3. Use the words “a”, “an”, or “the” with the word, then use the noun.

Background to the problem

In English, some words can be used as both a noun and a verb. Examples:

Mark the item	(“mark” used as a verb)
To mark the item	(“mark” used as a verb)
A mark next to the item indicates ...	(“mark” used as a noun)

Some nouns and verbs are composed of more than a single word on the printed page. Examples:

database integrity (noun)
lay out (verb)

Some words that sound the same when spoken are written differently. Examples:

lay out (verb)
layout (noun)

Examples of correct usage

The logon fails if you enter your password incorrectly.
(See rule 3.)

Log on using the system administrator password.
(See rule 1. You could say, “Log yourself on ...”, although this is clumsy.)

The licence is valid for one year.
(See rule 3. In British English the verb is “license” and the noun is “licence”. In US English both are “license”.)

Examples of incorrect usage

Setup the system using ...
(Breaks rule 1. You could say, “Set the system up using ...”.)

Layout the items alphabetically.
(Breaks rule 1. You could say, “Lay the items out alphabetically”.)

Other issues

Colour. Do not use colour alone to give meaning. Some people are colour-blind.

Font. Avoid *italics* and BLOCK CAPITALS. They are both harder to read than normal text. Use a font that has been designed for on-screen viewing, such as Verdana. This paragraph uses Verdana.

Images. Avoid images alone to give meaning. Without prior knowledge, they are not self-evident.

Screen size. Many users do not have high-resolution screens. Avoid very large dialogue boxes, or dialogue boxes which cannot be re-sized.