

Introduction to technical documentation

Category

TUTORIALS

A tutorial:

- is **learning-oriented**
- allows the newcomer to get started
- is a lesson

Analogy: teaching a small child how to cook

HOW-TO GUIDES

A how-to guide:

- is **goal-oriented**
- shows how to solve a specific problem
- is a series of steps

Analogy: a recipe in a cookery book

EXPLANATION

An explanation:

- is **understanding-oriented**
- explains
- provides background and context

Analogy: an article on culinary social history

REFERENCE

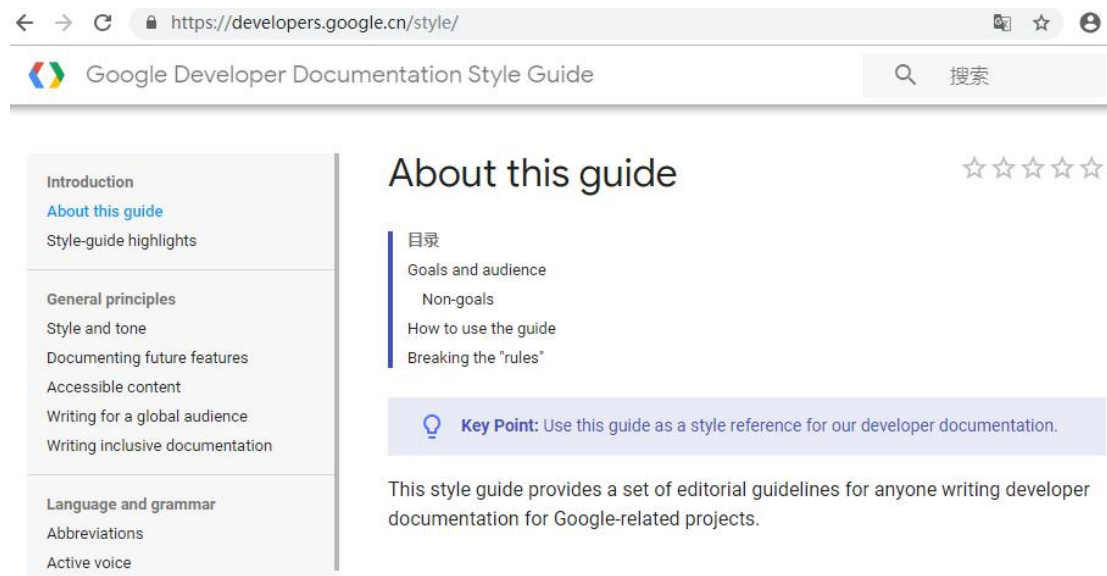
A reference guide:

- is **information-oriented**
- describes the machinery
- is accurate and complete

Analogy: a reference encyclopaedia article

Highlights of Google Developer Documentation style Guide


- Not asking completely follow this style
- just borrow some ideas when necessary
- <https://developers.google.cn/style/>



General principles


Politeness and use of "please"

It's great to be polite, but using "please" in a set of instructions is overdoing the politeness.

 **Not recommended:** To view the document, please click **View**.

 **Recommended:** To view the document, click **View**.

Also:

 **Not recommended:** For more information, please see [link to other document].

 **Recommended:** For more information, see [link to other document].

General Principles

informal Vs formal


Examples


Too informal	Just about right	Too formal
Dude! This API is totally awesome!	This API lets you collect data about what your users like.	The API documented by this page may enable the acquisition of information pertaining to user preferences.
Just like a certain pop star, this call gets your "Telephone" number. The easy way to ask for someone's digits!	To get the user's phone number, call <code>user.phoneNumber.get()</code> .	The telephone number can be retrieved by the developer via the simple expedient of using the <code>get()</code> method on the <code>user</code> object's <code>phoneNumber</code> property.
Then—BOOM—just garbage-collect (or <i>collecter des garbáge</i> , as they say in French), and you're golden.	To clean up, call the <code>collectGarbage()</code> method.	Please note that completion of the task requires the following prerequisite: executing an automated memory management function.

Detailed suggestions

Active voice


Examples


 **Not recommended:** The service is queried, and an acknowledgment is sent.

 **Recommended:** Send a query to the service. The server sends an acknowledgment.

It's possible to indicate who's performing the action in passive voice (using "by"), but the resulting prose is generally not as good as if you were to recast the sentence as active voice. So whenever possible, make the doer the subject of the sentence.

Examples

 **Not recommended:** The service is queried by you, and an acknowledgment is sent by the server.

 **Recommended:** Send a query to the service. The server sends an acknowledgment.

Detailed suggestions

Articles (a, an, the)

- Whether to use "a" or "an" depends on the **pronunciation** of the word that follows it. Use "a" before any consonant sound; use "an" before any vowel sound.

- examples:

An hour.

An HTML file.

A hand.

A hotel.

An umbrella.

A union.

Detailed suggestions

Second person

- In general, use second person in your docs rather than first person—"you" (sometimes implicit) instead of "we."
- It's also important to figure out who the "you" is that you're addressing (the developer? an end-user? a sysadmin? someone else?), and to be consistent about that. Make it clear to the reader who you expect them to be (sometimes with an explicit "Audience" section near the beginning of the document).

Example of "we" vs "you":


 **Not recommended:** If we're deleting multiple entries at a time ...

 **Recommended:** If you're deleting multiple entries at a time ...


 **Also recommended:** When deleting multiple entries at a time ...

(But if you're using an implicit "you" like the one in that last example, be sure that it's clear who's doing the deleting.)

In an instruction, leave out the "you." For example:

 **Not recommended:** Let's click **Submit** now.


 **Not recommended:** We now click **Submit**.

 **Slightly better:** You now click **Submit**.

 **Recommended:** Click **Submit**.

This issue can also interact with tense:

 **Not recommended:** You'll need to create an XML entry

 **Recommended:** Create an XML entry.

Summary

- share some basic ideas of technical documentation
- Google Developer Documentation Style Guide is recommended
- some highlights selected based on personal interest
- more details could be found on the official page
 - <https://developers.google.cn/style/>
- By the way, Google also has style guide for the popular programming languages, for example, Python
 - <https://google.github.io/styleguide/pyguide.html>

← → ↻ <https://google.github.io/styleguide/pyguide.html>

styleguide

Google Python Style Guide

Thanks