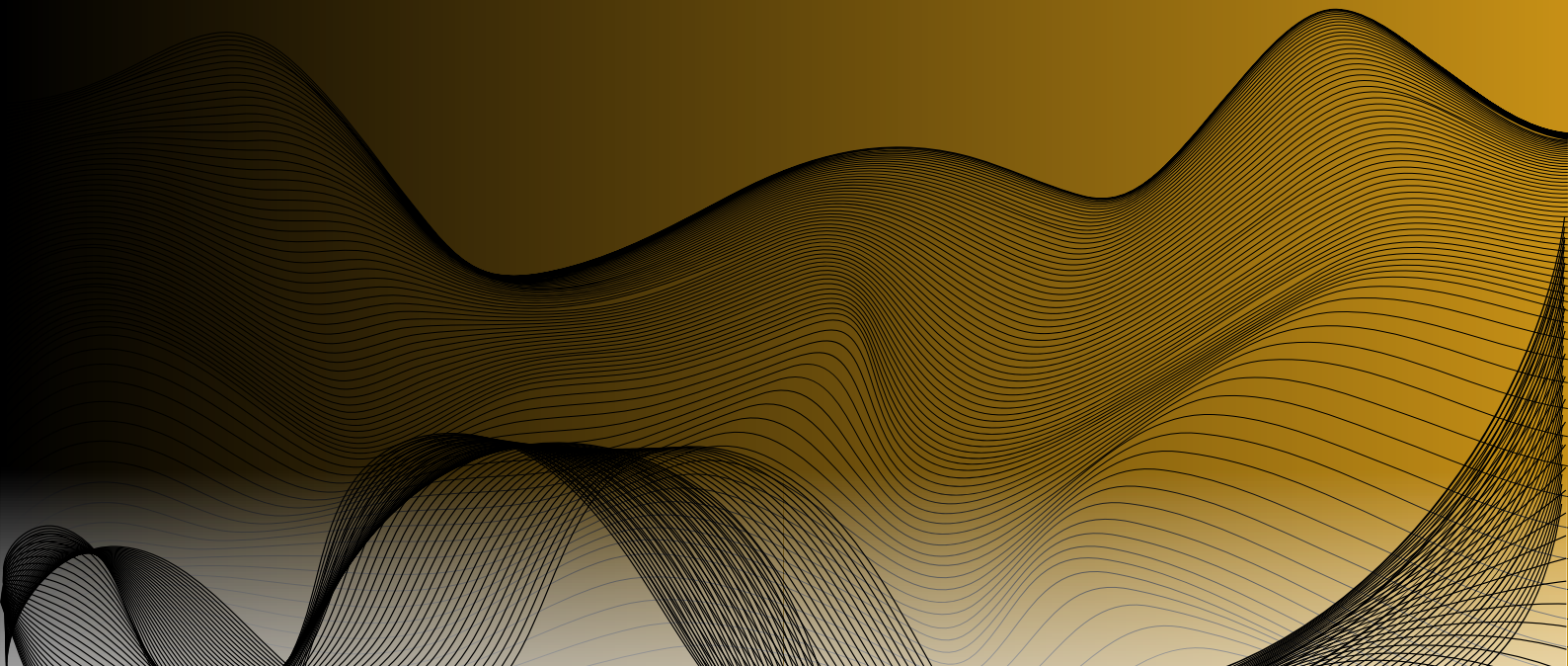




International SEO

hreflang mistakes


Nitin Gothwal



You confuse HTML tags and HTML attributes

This is a common **vocabulary**
error that leads to **confusion!**

Even Google's **Organic Search**
“**experts**” make this mistake!

 **hreflang** are not HTML tags,
they are HTML attributes
usually embedded in **<a>**
or **<link>** HTML tags!



Both href and hreflang are HTML attributes

Attribute	Belongs to	Description
href	<a> , <area> , <base> , <link>	Specifies the URL of the page the link goes to
hreflang	<a> , <area> , <link>	Specifies the language of the linked document

```
<a href="https://www.semking.com">SEM King</a>
```

HTML attributes

```
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en" href="https://www.semking.com/" />
```



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You **block** pages with **hreflang** attributes!

This is obvious but if any page is NOT indexable, your **hreflang** attributes will be ignored!

Check your **robots.txt** file to ensure it does **NOT** contain any page with **hreflang** attributes!

And check your **noindex** pages!

```
<meta name="robots" content="noindex, nofollow">
```



Not using **absolute URL** in **hreflang** attributes!

Your **hreflang** attributes must be **absolute URLs! Never** use a **relative path!**

CORRECT (absolute URL):

```
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-US" href="https://semking.com/blog/USA/" />
```

INCORRECT (relative path):

```
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-US" href="/blog/USA/" />
```



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Canonicalization is different than hreflang!

Many confuse canonical and hreflang attributes! Do you?

Yes, both canonical and hreflang attributes tell search engines how to handle multiple versions of a page! However, they serve completely distinct purposes!



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Canonicals or hreflang

When to use which?

Canonical attributes do **NOT** target languages or countries! They aren't meant for **multilingual content!**

Using **hreflang** annotations won't consolidate duplicate content!

If you have **near-identical** pages targeting the **same audience**, **canonical attributes** are the best option!



hreflang attributes

Purpose and Action

Purpose: to specify targeted versions of a page for different languages and countries.

Action: each version of your page includes hreflang attributes pointing to the other language and country variations. This helps Google show the most relevant version to users based on their location and language!



Canonical attributes Purpose and Action

Purpose: to avoid duplicate content and ensure the most relevant page gets indexed!

Action: canonical attributes on non-preferred pages point to the preferred version. Google should **index** and **rank** only the "preferred" version!



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Canonical & hreflang key differences



Feature	Canonical Attributes	Hreflang Attributes
Purpose	Consolidate duplicate content	Specify language/regional variations of a page
Focus Area	Internal website structure	Internationalization (i18n) and user location
Scenario	Multiple pages with similar content	Same content in different languages/regions
Action on Other Pages	Points to the preferred version	Points to other language/regional variations
Impact on Search Ranking	May influence ranking of the chosen version	Helps serve users the most relevant version by location



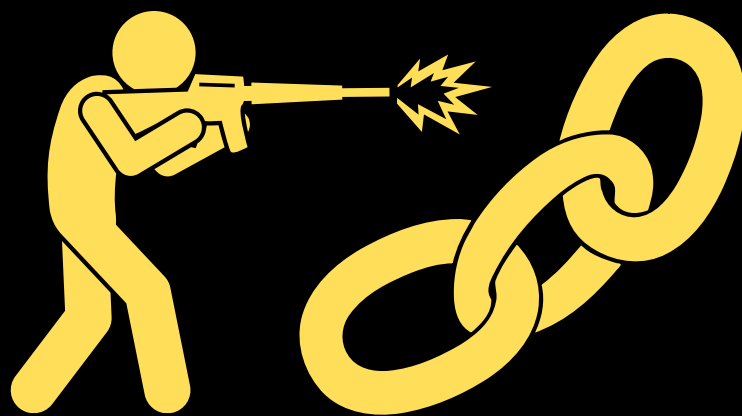
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Your hreflang cluster must link to **canonicals**

A common hreflang mistake is linking to **non-canonical** pages.

This can create multiple SEO issues such as **duplicate content** (indexing problems), **link equity dilution** and **crawl budget waste!**



You forget hreflang reciprocal linking!

Every page with a **hreflang attribute** pointing to another page must have a corresponding **<link>** HTML tag on that other page pointing back to the first!

If this **two-way communication** is missing, Google might ignore your **hreflang** instructions!



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Missing reciprocal <link> HTML tag

Let me give you a very simple example!

Suppose you own the website `run.com` to sell shoes with an English page (`en`) and a Spanish page (`es`) for the same product.

Let's say the English page < <https://run.com/shoes/running> > has a `hreflang` attribute pointing to the Spanish page, like this:

```
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="es" href="https://run.com/zapatos/correr" />
```

This indicates that < <https://run.com/zapatos/correr> > (Spanish page) is an alternative version of the current English page.

Now, if the Spanish page < <https://run.com/zapatos/correr> > does NOT have a `hreflang` attribute pointing back to the English page, it creates a missing return <link> (missing reciprocal linking)!

This means you MUST add a return link on the Spanish page to the English page:

```
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en" href="https://run.com/shoes/running" />
```

If you forget a return/reciprocal link, Google will likely IGNORE your `hreflang` instructions!



You forget to add **self-referencing!**

Each page with hreflang annotations should include a **self-referencing** link specifying its own URL and language code.

This helps search engines understand the page's language and its **relationship** to other translated versions.



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Self-referencing, an optional good practice

Imagine you have an e-commerce website with a product description page for a pair of sneakers.

The English page (en-US) has the following URL:

```
https://sell.com/shoes/running-sneakers
```

It has the following `<link>` tags in the `<head>` section of the HTML code:

```
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-US" href="https://sell.com/shoes/running-sneakers" />
```

```
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="es-ES" href="https://sell.com/zapatos/zapatillas-correr" />
```

The first link is the self-referencing part:

```
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-US" href="https://sell.com/shoes/running-sneakers" />
```

This link tells search engines that this specific page `<https://sell.com/shoes/running-sneakers>` is in US English (en-US).



Missing **x-default hreflang** attribute

The **x-default hreflang** attribute acts as a **language fallback mechanism** for websites with multilingual content!

X-default tells Google the default version of your page it should serve if **none** of the other **hreflang** alternatives are a better fit for the user's language!



X-default is your SEO fallback mechanism!

To simplify, **x-default** acts as a generic landing page for users who don't match any other **language targeting**.

Add it to your **hreflang** cluster!

```
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-us" href="https://www.semking.com/en/us/" />  
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="en-gb" href="https://www.semking.com/en/gb/" />  
<link rel="alternate" hreflang="x-default" href="https://www.semking.com/" />
```



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hreflang annotations in `<head>` + sitemap

It is technically possible to implement hreflang attributes in both the `<head>` section of your HTML code **AND** in your XML sitemap.

This seems like a **great SEO strategy!** Why not implement it?



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hreflang attributes in <head> + sitemap?

I will explain why combining hreflang attributes in the HTML code and your XML sitemap can, at times, lead to an international SEO disaster!



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Conflicting hreflang attributes are ignored!

If the hreflang annotations in your <head> section and your XML sitemap conflict with each other, Google will simply ignore the conflicting instructions from both sources (HTML and XML)!

Given the high probability of error, this SEO strategy is very risky!



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There is no hreflang source prioritization

The hreflang danger exists because neither the HTML code of the <head> section, nor the XML sitemap has priority over the other!



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hreflang combined in <head> & sitemap?

Google will combine the
localization signals in your
hreflang attributes from the
HTML code of the <head>
section **and the XML sitemap**
IF and only IF they are
NOT conflicting!



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hreflang annotations in <head> + sitemap

For enterprise SEO projects (very large global websites), combining correct hreflang attributes in the <head> section + XML sitemap will consume more bandwidth and server resources (such as CPU or RAM).



This SEO strategy might negatively impact your crawl budget!

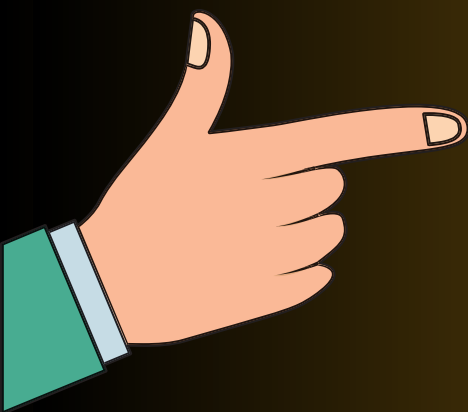


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Specifying language but forgetting country

hreflang attributes should use two-letter codes based on international standards to specify language and country



English (en):
`hreflang="en-US"`



French (fr):
`hreflang="fr-FR"`



German (de):
`hreflang="de-DE"`



Spanish (es):
`hreflang="es-ES"`



Language **codes** alone?
Technically an **option!**

Language codes follow the
ISO 639-1 standard. For
example, "en" for English, "es"
for Spanish, "fr" for French, etc

Many advocate using only the
language code. I do NOT!

Yes, it's technically an **option** but
why not specify the **country**?



**Country codes alone?
NO, not an option!**

**Country codes follow the
ISO 3166-1 Alpha-2 **standard.****

**Examples: "DE" for Germany,
"GB" for United Kingdom,
"FR" for France, etc.**

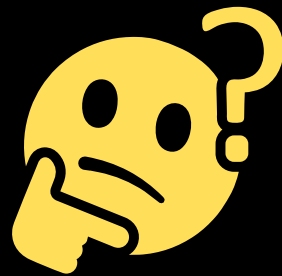
**Using country codes alone is a
BIG international **SEO** mistake!**



The downsides of language codes alone

The first major downside of using the **language code alone** is **ambiguous geo-targeting**.

Google might not understand the intended audience because **the language code alone doesn't specify the geographic region!**



Targeting **countries** with **languages**?

The language code "**en**" could represent English for users in the **US, UK, Canada**, and any other English-speaking country...

Without **country codes**, you might never reach new users because you'll not be visible! Plus, you might pop up in an **unintended location!**



The United Kingdom, a confusing country!

The **UK** uses the **.uk ccTLD**
(**.co.uk** is the popular variation).

What would happen if you wrote
`hreflang="uk"` to specify the
British **language**? 

Amazingly, you'd be targeting
the **Ukrainian language (uk)**!



The United Kingdom or Ukraine? Seriously?!

If you use only **one code** in **hreflang** attributes, you are targeting the language!

To target the **British** language, you must target the **English** language spoken in the **UK!**

The **UK's** country code in **hreflang** is **not UK**, it is **GB!**



The United Kingdom: so British, so confusing

So, the UK's country code in hreflang is not UK, it is GB!

But if we use only one code, it is the language code, **NOT** the country code (GB)! The language spoken in the United Kingdom is English and the code is: "en".

But don't write hreflang="en".

Write hreflang="en-GB".



The **high risk** of low **hreflang** precision

If you think using **language codes alone** is easier, think again! You run the risk of making **BIG** international SEO mistakes!

Even I could **confuse language codes and country codes!** No one is immune to **inattention!**



Use very **precise**  **hreflang** attributes!

You use **hreflang** attributes to tell Google about **alternative language versions** of your pages. Be precise!

Without the **country code**, you're not providing the full picture for **regional targeting!** This can hinder your website's ranking in specific regions!



The risks of targeting language alone

You might miss users because your page might **NOT** show up in search results for people in your **target region** because the **language code** doesn't pinpoint their **location!**

You risk irrelevant results and **lower CTR** because users might see a **random page** instead of the page targeted for their location!



International SEO is nuanced, not generic!

Google often considers **regional nuances** when ranking websites.

By NOT including the **country code** of the targeted country, you miss the chance to optimize your content's visibility for those regional variations!

Using language codes alone reduces the **precision** and **effectiveness** of your hreflang implementation!



Belgium, a country with 3 languages!

Belgium has 3 official languages: Dutch, French and German.

```
Belgium:  
hreflang="nl-BE"
```



```
Also Belgium:  
hreflang="fr-BE"
```

```
Also Belgium:  
hreflang="de-BE"
```



What would happen if you used **BE** alone?

nl-BE indicates **Dutch** language (**nl**) specific to **Belgium (BE)**.

fr-BE indicates **French** language (**fr**) specific to **Belgium (BE)**.

de-BE indicates **German** language (**de**) specific to **Belgium (BE)**.

What would happen if you used only **BE** to indicate **Belgium**?



The Belgium and Belarus example

```
hreflang="be" = not Belgium!
```

```
"be" = Belarusian language!
```

If you wrote hreflang="be" thinking you targeted Belgium, you are still confusing language codes and country codes...

Yes, "BE" is Belgium's country code, but if you use **only one code**, it becomes the language code!



Global SEO & hreflang can get very complex!

I could have listed **MANY** more hreflang mistakes! **International SEO** goes beyond implementing hreflang attributes. It can get **very complex, very quickly!**



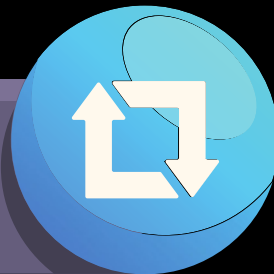
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