
NWB Specification Language

Release v2.0.0-beta

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Table of Contents

1	NWB Specification Language	1
1.1	Introduction	1
1.2	Extensions	1
1.3	Namespaces	2
1.3.1	Namespace declaration keys	3
1.3.1.1	doc	3
1.3.1.2	name	3
1.3.1.3	full_name	3
1.3.1.4	version	3
1.3.1.5	date	3
1.3.1.6	author	3
1.3.1.7	contact	3
1.3.1.8	schema	4
1.4	Schema specification	4
1.5	Groups	5
1.5.1	Group specification keys	5
1.5.1.1	name	5
1.5.1.2	default_name	5
1.5.1.3	doc	5
1.5.1.4	neurodata_type_inc and neurodata_type_def	6
1.5.1.5	quantity	7
1.5.1.6	linkable	7
1.5.1.7	attributes	7
1.5.1.8	links	8
1.5.1.9	datasets	8
1.5.1.10	groups	8
1.5.1.11	_required	8
1.6	Attributes	8
1.6.1	Attribute specification keys	9
1.6.1.1	name	9
1.6.1.2	doc	9
1.6.1.3	dtype	9
1.6.1.3.1	Reference dtype	11
1.6.1.3.2	Compound dtype	11
1.6.1.4	dims	12
1.6.1.5	shape	13

1.6.1.6	required	13
1.6.1.7	value	13
1.6.1.8	default_value	13
1.7	Links	14
1.7.1	Link specification keys	14
1.7.1.1	target_type	14
1.7.1.2	doc	14
1.7.1.3	name	14
1.7.1.4	quantity	14
1.8	Datasets	14
1.8.1	Dataset specification keys	15
1.8.1.1	name	15
1.8.1.2	default_name	15
1.8.1.3	doc	15
1.8.1.4	neurodata_type_inc and neurodata_type_def	15
1.8.1.5	quantity	15
1.8.1.6	linkable	16
1.8.1.7	dtype	16
1.8.1.8	shape	16
1.8.1.9	dims	16
1.8.1.10	value and default_value	16
1.8.1.11	attributes	16
1.9	Relationships	16
2	Release Notes	17
2.1	Version 2.0.2 (Upcoming)	17
2.2	Version 2.0.1 (March, 2019)	17
2.3	Version 2.0.0 (January, 2019)	17
2.3.1	Summary	17
2.3.2	Currently unsupported features:	20
2.3.3	YAML support	20
2.3.4	`quantity`	20
2.3.5	`merge` and `include`	21
2.3.6	`structured_dimensions`	21
2.3.7	`autogen`	21
2.4	Version 1.1c (Oct. 7, 2016)	22
3	Credits	23
3.1	Acknowledgments	23
3.2	Authors	23
3.2.1	NWB:N: Version 2.0.0 and later	23
3.2.2	NWB:N: Version 1.0.x and earlier	23
4	Legal	25
4.1	Copyright	25
4.2	Licence	25
5	Indices and tables	27

NWB Specification Language

Version: v2.0.0-beta Jan 07, 2020¹

1.1 Introduction

In order to support the formal and verifiable specification of neurodata file formats, NWB:N defines and uses the NWB specification language. The specification language is defined in YAML (or optionally JSON) and defines formal structures for describing the organization of complex data using basic concepts, e.g., Groups, Datasets, Attributes, and Links. A specification typically consists of a declaration of a namespace and a set of schema specifications. Data publishers can use the specification language to extend the format in order to store types of data not supported by the NWB core format (Section 1.2).

See also:

- The mapping of objects described in the specification language to HDF5 is described in more detail in the NWB storage docs available here <http://nwb-storage.readthedocs.io/en/latest/>
- Data structures for interacting with the specification language documents (e.g. namespace and specification YAML/JSON files) are available as part of PyNWB. For further details see the PyNWB docs available here: <http://pynwb.readthedocs.io/en/latest/index.html>
- For a general overview of the NWB:N data format see here: <http://nwb-overview.readthedocs.io/en/latest/>
- For detailed description of the actual NWB:N data format see here: <http://nwb-schema.readthedocs.io/en/latest/index.html>

1.2 Extensions

As mentioned, extensions to the core format are specified via custom user namespaces. Each namespace must have a unique name (i.e. must be different from NWB). The schema of new neurodata_types (groups, datasets etc.) are

¹ The version number given here is for the specification language and is independent of the version number for the NWB format. The date after the version number is the last modification date of this document.

then specified in separate schema specification files. While it is possible to define multiple namespaces in the same file, most commonly, each new namespace will be defined in a separate file with corresponding schema specifications being stored in one or more additional YAML (or JSON) files. One or more namespaces can be used simultaneously, so that multiple extensions can be used at the same time while avoiding potential name and type collisions between extensions (as well as extensions and the NWB core spec).

The specification of namespaces is described in detail next in [Section 1.3](#) and the specification of schema specifications is described in [Section 1.4](#) and subsequent sections.

Tip: The `form` package as part of the PyNWB Python API provides dedicated data structures and utilities that support programmatic generation of extensions via Python programs, compared to writing YAML (or JSON) extension documents by hand. One main advantage of using PyNWB is that it is easier to use and maintain. E.g., using PyNWB helps ensure compliance of the generated specification files with the current specification language and the Python programs can often easily be just rerun to generate updated versions of extension files (with little to no changes to the program itself).

Tip: The `nwb-docutils` package includes tools to generate Sphinx documentation from format specifications. In particular the executable `nwb_init_sphinx_extension_doc` provides functionality to setup documentation for a format or extension defined by a namespace (similar to the documentation for NWB core namespace at <http://nwb-schema.readthedocs.io/en/latest/>). Use `nwb_init_sphinx_extension_doc --help` to view the list of options for generating the docs. The package also includes the executable `nwb_generate_format_docs` which is used for generating actual reStructuredText files and figures from YAML/JSON specification sources. For an example see: <http://pynwb.readthedocs.io/en/latest/example.html#documenting-extensions>

See also:

For examples on how to create and use extensions in PyNWB see:

- <http://pynwb.readthedocs.io/en/latest/example.html#extending-nwb> : Examples showing how to extend NWB
- <http://pynwb.readthedocs.io/en/latest/tutorials.html#extensions> : Tutorial showing how to define and use extensions

1.3 Namespaces

Namespaces are used to define a collections of specifications, to enable users to develop extensions in their own namespace and, hence, to avoid name/type collisions. Namespaces are defined in separate YAML files. The specification of a namespace looks as follows:

```
namespaces:
- doc: NWB namespace
  name: NWB
  full_name: NWB core
  version: 1.2.0
  date: 2019-05-22
  author:
  - Andrew Tritt
  - Oliver Ruebel
  - Ryan Ly
  - Ben Dichter
  - Keith Godfrey
  - Jeff Teeters
```

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```

contact:
- ajtritt@lbl.gov
- oruebel@lbl.gov
- rly@lbl.gov
- bdichter@lbl.gov
- keithg@alleninstitute.org
- jteeters@berkeley.edu
schema:
- source: nwb.base.yaml
  neurodata_types: null
  doc : Base nwb types
  title : Base types
- ...

```

The top-level key must be `namespaces`. The value of `namespaces` is a list with the specification of one (or more) namespaces.

1.3.1 Namespace declaration keys

1.3.1.1 `doc`

Text description of the namespace.

1.3.1.2 `name`

Unique name used to refer to the namespace.

1.3.1.3 `full_name`

Optional string with extended full name for the namespace.

1.3.1.4 `version`

Version string for the namespace.

1.3.1.5 `date`

Date the namespace has been last modified or released. Formatting is `%Y-%m-%d %H:%M:%S`, e.g., `2017-04-25 17:14:13`.

1.3.1.6 `author`

List of strings with the names of the authors of the namespace.

1.3.1.7 `contact`

List of strings with the contact information for the authors. Ordering of the contacts should match the ordering of the authors.

1.3.1.8 schema

List of the schema to be included in this namespace. The specification looks as follows:

```
- source: nwb.base.yaml
- source: nwb.ephys.yaml
  doc: Types related to EPhys
  title: EPhys
  neurodata_types:
    - ElectricalSeries
- namespace: core
  neurodata_types:
    - Interface
```

- `source` describes the name of the YAML (or JSON) file with the schema specification. The schema files should be located in the same folder as the namespace file.
- `namespace` describes a named reference to another namespace. In contrast to `source`, this is a reference by name to a known namespace (i.e., the namespace is resolved during the build and must point to an already existing namespace). This mechanism is used to allow, e.g., extension of a core namespace (here the NWB core namespace) without requiring hard paths to the files describing the core namespace.
- `neurodata_types` then is an optional list of strings indicating which `neurodata_types` should be included from the given specification source or namespace. The default is `neurodata_types: null` indicating that all `neurodata_types` should be included.
- `doc` is an optional key for source files with a `doc` string to further document the content of the source file.
- `title` is an option key for source files to provide a descriptive title for a file for documentation purposes.

Attention: As with any language, we can only use what is defined. This means that similar to include or import statements in programming languages, e.g., Python, the `source` and `namespace` keys must be in order of use. E.g., `nwb.ephys.yaml` defines `ElectricalSeries` which inherits from `Timeseries` that is defined in `nwb.base.yaml`. This means that we have to list `nwb.base.yaml` before `nwb.ephys.yaml` since otherwise `Timeseries` would not be defined when `nwb.ephys.yaml` is trying to use it.

1.4 Schema specification

The schema specification defines the groups, datasets and relationship that make up the format. Schema specifications are stored in dict `spec` and consist of a list of Group specifications. Schemas may be distributed across multiple YAML files to improve readability and to support logical organization of types. This is the main part of the format specification. It is described in the following sections.

```
specs:
- ...
```

Note: Schema specifications are agnostic to namespaces, i.e., a schema (or type) becomes part of a namespace by including it in the namespace as part of the `schema` description of the namespace. Hence, the same schema can be reused across namespaces.

1.5 Groups

Groups are specified as part of the top-level list or via lists stored in the key groups. The specification of a group is described in YAML as follows:

```
# Group specification
- name: Optional fixed name for the group. A group must either have a unique_
  ↪neurodata_type or a unique, fixed name.
  default_name: Default name for the group
  doc: Required description of the group
  neurodata_type_def: Optional new neurodata_type for the group
  neurodata_type_inc: Optional neurodata_type the group should inherit from
  quantity: Optional quantity identifier for the group (default=1).
  linkable: Boolean indicating whether the group is linkable (default=True)
  attributes: Optional list of attribute specifications describing the attributes_
  ↪of the group
  datasets: Optional list of dataset specifications describing the datasets_
  ↪contained in the group
  links: Optional list of link specification describing the links contained in the_
  ↪group
  groups: Optional list of group specifications describing the sub-groups contained_
  ↪in the group
```

The key/value pairs that make up a group specification are described in more detail next in [Section 1.5.1](#).

1.5.1 Group specification keys

1.5.1.1 name

String with the optional fixed name for the group.

Note: Every group must have either a unique fixed name or a unique `neurodata_type` determined by (`neurodata_type_def` and `neurodata_type_inc`) to enable the unique identification of groups when stored on disk.

1.5.1.2 default_name

Default name of the group.

Note: Only one of either `name` or `default_name` (or neither) should be specified as the fixed name given by name would always overwrite the behavior of `default_name`.

1.5.1.3 doc

The value of the group specification `doc` key is a string describing the group. The `doc` key is required.

Note: In earlier versions (before version 1.2a) this key was called `description`

1.5.1.4 neurodata_type_inc and neurodata_type_def

The concept of a `neurodata_type` is similar to the concept of Class in object-oriented programming. A `neurodata_type` is a unique identifier for a specific type of group (or dataset) in a specification. By assigning a `neurodata_type` to a group (or dataset) enables others to reuse that type by inclusion or inheritance (*Note*: only groups (or datasets) with a specified type can be reused).

- ``neurodata_type_def``: This key is used to define (i.e., create) a new `neurodata_type` and to assign that type to the current group (or dataset).
- ``neurodata_type_inc``: The value of the `neurodata_type_inc` key describes the base type of a group (or dataset). The value must be an existing type.

Both ``neurodata_type_def`` and ``neurodata_type_inc`` are optional keys. To enable the unique identification, every group (and dataset) must either have a fixed name and/or a unique `neurodata_type`. This means, any group (or dataset) with a variable name must have a unique `neurodata_type`.

The `neurodata_type` is determined by the value of the `neurodata_type_def` key or if no new type is defined then the value of `neurodata_type_inc` is used to determine type. Or in other words, the `neurodata_type` is determined by the last type in the ancestry (i.e., inheritance hierarchy) of an object.

Reusing existing neurodata_types

The combination of ``neurodata_type_inc`` and ``neurodata_type_def`` provides an easy-to-use mechanism for reuse of type specifications via inheritance (i.e., merge and extension of specifications) and inclusion (i.e., embedding of an existing type as a component, such as a subgroup, of a new specification). Here an overview of all relevant cases:

<code>neurodata_type_inc</code>	<code>neurodata_type_def</code>	Description
not set	not set	define a standard dataset or group without a type
not set	set	create a new <code>neurodata_type</code> from scratch
set	not set	include (reuse) <code>neurodata_type</code> without creating a new one (include)
set	set	merge/extend <code>neurodata_type</code> and create a new type (inheritance/merge)

Example: Reuse by inheritance

```
# Abbreviated YAML specification
- neurodata_type_def: Series
  datasets:
  - name: A

- neurodata_type_def: MySeries
  neurodata_type_inc: Series
  datasets:
  - name: B
```

The result of this is that `MySeries` inherits dataset A from `Series` and adds its own dataset B, i.e., if we resolve the inheritance, then the above is equivalent to:

```
# Result:
- neurodata_type_def: MySeries
  datasets:
  - name: A
  - name: B
```

Example: Reuse by inclusion

```
# Abbreviated YAML specification
- neurodata_type_def: Series
  datasets:
  - name: A

- neurodata_type_def: MySeries
  groups:
  - neurodata_type_inc: Series
```

The result of this is that `MySeries` now includes a group of type `Series`, i.e., the above is equivalent to:

```
- neurodata_type_def: MySeries
  groups:
  - neurodata_type_inc: Series
    datasets:
    - name: A
```

Note: The keys `neurodata_type_def` and `neurodata_type_inc` were introduced in version 1.2a to simplify the concepts of inclusion and merging of specifications and replaced the keys `include` and `merge` (and `merge+`).

1.5.1.5 quantity

The `quantity` describes how often the corresponding group (or dataset) can appear. The `quantity` indicates both minimum and maximum number of instances. Hence, if the minimum number of instances is 0 then the group (or dataset) is optional and otherwise it is required. The default value is `quantity=1`.

value	minimum quantity	maximum quantity	Comment
<code>zero_or_many` or `*`</code>	0	unlimited	Zero or more instances
<code>one_or_many` or `+`</code>	1	unlimited	One or more instances
<code>zero_or_one` or `?`</code>	0	1	Zero or one instances
<code>1`,`2`,`3`,...</code>	n	n	Exactly n instances

Note: The `quantity` key was added in version 1.2a of the specification language as a replacement of the `quantity_flag` that was used to encode quantity information via a regular expression as part of the main key of the group.

1.5.1.6 linkable

Boolean describing whether the this group can be linked.

1.5.1.7 attributes

List of attribute specifications describing the attributes of the group. See [Section 1.6](#) for details.

```
attributes:
- ...
```

1.5.1.8 links

List of link specifications describing all links to be stored as part of this group. See [Section 1.7](#) for details.

```
links:
- doc: Link to target type
  name: link name
  target_type: type of target
  quantity: optional number of links allowed
- ...
```

1.5.1.9 datasets

List of dataset specifications describing all datasets to be stored as part of this group. See [Section 1.8](#) for details.

```
datasets:
- name: data1
  doc: My data 1
  type: int
  quantity: 'zero_or_one'
- name: data2
  doc: My data 2
  type: text
  attributes:
  - ...
- ...
```

1.5.1.10 groups

List of group specifications describing all groups to be stored as part of this group

```
groups:
- name: group1
  quantity: 'zero_or_one'
- ...
```

1.5.1.11 _required

Attention: The `_required` key has been removed in version 2.0. An improved version may be added again in later version of the specification language.

1.6 Attributes

Attributes are specified as part of lists stored in the key `attributes` as part of the specifications of `groups` and `datasets`. Attributes are typically used to further characterize or store metadata about the group, dataset, or link they are associated with. Similar to datasets, attributes can define arbitrary n-dimensional arrays, but are typically used to store smaller data. The specification of an attributes is described in YAML as follows:

```

...
attributes:
- name: Required string describing the name of the attribute
  doc: Required string with the description of the attribute
  dtype: Required string describing the data type of the attribute
  dims: Optional list describing the names of the dimensions of the data array stored_
↳by the attribute (default=None)
  shape: Optional list describing the allowed shape(s) of the data array stored by_
↳the attribute (default=None)
  required: Optional boolean indicating whether the attribute is required_
↳(default=True)
  value: Optional constant, fixed value for the attribute.
  default_value: Optional default value for variable-valued attributes. Only one of_
↳value or default_value should be set.
-

```

1.6.1 Attribute specification keys

1.6.1.1 name

String with the name for the attribute. The `name` key is required and must specify a unique attribute on the current parent object (e.g., group or dataset)

1.6.1.2 doc

`doc` specifies the documentation string for the attribute and should describe the purpose and use of the attribute data. The `doc` key is required.

1.6.1.3 dtype

String specifying the data type of the attribute. Allowable values are:

dtype spec value	storage type	size
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “float” • “float32” 	single precision floating point	32 bit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “double” • “float64” 	double precision floating point	64 bit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “long” • “int64” 	signed 64 bit integer	64 bit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “int” • “int32” 	signed 32 bit integer	32 bit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “short” • “int16” 	signed 16 bit integer	16 bit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “int8” 	signed 8 bit integer	8 bit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “uint64” 	unsigned 64 bit integer	64 bit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “uint32” 	unsigned 32 bit integer	32 bit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “uint16” 	unsigned 16 bit integer	16 bit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “uint8” 	unsigned 8 bit integer	8 bit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “numeric” 	any numeric type (i.e., int, uint, float etc.)	8 to 64 bit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “text” • “utf” • “utf8” • “utf-8” 	unicode	variable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “ascii” • “bytes” 	ascii text	variable
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “bool” 	8 bit integer with valid values 0 or 1	8 bit
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “isodatetime” • “datetime” 	ISO8061 datetime string, e.g., 2018-09-28T14:43:54.123+02:00	variable

Note: The precision indicated in the specification is generally interpreted as a minimum precision. Higher precisions

may be used if required by the particular data.

1.6.1.3.1 Reference dtype

In addition to the above basic data types, an attribute or dataset may also store references to other data objects. Reference dtypes are described via a dictionary. E.g.:

```
dtype:
  target_type: ElectrodeGroup
  reftype: object
```

target_type here describes the neurodata_type of the target that the reference points to and reftype describes the kind of reference. Currently the specification language supports two main reference types.

reftype value	Reference type description
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “ref” • “reference” • “object” 	Reference to another group or dataset of the given target_type
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • region 	Reference to a region (i.e. subset) of another dataset of the given target_type

1.6.1.3.2 Compound dtype

Compound data types are essentially a struct, i.e., the data type is a composition of several primitive types. This is useful to specify complex types, e.g., for storage of complex numbers consisting of a real and imaginary components, vectors or tensors, as well to create table-like data structures. Compound data types are created by defining a list of the form:

```
dtype:
- name: <name of the data value>
  dtype: <one of the above basic dtype strings or references>
  doc: <description of the data>
- name: ....
  .
  .
  .
```

Note: Currently only “flat” compound types are allowed, i.e., a compound type may not contain other compound types but may itself only consist of basic dtypes, e.g., float, string, etc. or reference dtypes.

Below and example from the NWB:N format specification showing the use of compound data types to create a table-like data structure for storing metadata about electrodes.

```
datasets:
- doc: 'a table for storing queryable information about electrodes in a single table'
  dtype:
  - name: id
    dtype: int
```

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```

    doc: a user-specified unique identifier
  - name: x
    dtype: float
    doc: the x coordinate of the channels location
  - name: y
    dtype: float
    doc: the y coordinate of the channels location
  - name: z
    dtype: float
    doc: the z coordinate of the channels location
  - name: imp
    dtype: float
    doc: the impedance of the channel
  - name: location
    dtype: ascii
    doc: the location of channel within the subject e.g. brain region
  - name: filtering
    dtype: ascii
    doc: description of hardware filtering
  - name: description
    dtype: utf8
    doc: a brief description of what this electrode is
  - name: group
    dtype: ascii
    doc: the name of the ElectrodeGroup this electrode is a part of
  - name: group_ref
    dtype:
      target_type: ElectrodeGroup
      reftype: object
    doc: a reference to the ElectrodeGroup this electrode is a part of
  attributes:
    - doc: Value is 'a table for storing data about extracellular electrodes'
      dtype: text
      name: help
      value: a table for storing data about extracellular electrodes
  neurodata_type_inc: NWBData
  neurodata_type_def: ElectrodeTable

```

1.6.1.4 dims

Optional key describing the names of the dimensions of the array stored as value of the attribute. If the attribute stores an array, `dims` specifies the list of dimensions. If no `dims` is given, then attribute stores a scalar value.

In case there is only one option for naming the dimensions, the key defines a single list of strings:

```

...
dims:
- dim1
- dim2

```

In case that the attribute may have different forms, this will be a list of lists:

```

...
dims:
- - num_times

```

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```
- - num_times
- - num_channels
```

Each entry in the list defines an identifier/name of the corresponding dimension of the array data.

1.6.1.5 shape

Optional key describing the shape of the array stored as the value of the attribute. The description of `shape` must match the description of dimensions in so far as if we name two dimensions in `dims` than we must also specify the shape for two dimensions. We may specify `null` in case that the length of a dimension is not restricted, e.g.:

```
...
shape:
- null
- 3
```

Similar to `dims` `shape` may also be a list of lists in case that the attribute may have multiple valid shape options, e.g.:

```
...
shape:
- - 5
- - null
- 5
```

The default behavior for `shape` is:

```
...
shape: null
```

indicating that the attribute/dataset is a scalar.

1.6.1.6 required

Optional boolean key describing whether the attribute is required. Default value is `True`.

1.6.1.7 value

Optional key specifying a fixed, constant value for the attribute. Default value is `None`, i.e., the attribute has a variable value to be determined by the user (or API) in accordance with the current data.

1.6.1.8 default_value

Optional key specifying a default value for attributes that allow user-defined values. The default value is used in case that the user does not specify a specific value for the attribute.

Note: Only one of either `value` or `default_value` should be specified (or neither) but never both at the same time, as `value` would always overwrite the `default_value`.

1.7 Links

The link specification is used to specify links to other groups or datasets. The link specification is a dictionary with the following form:

```
links:
- doc: Link to target type
  name: link name
  target_type: type of target
```

Note: When mapped to storage, links should always remain identifiable as such. For example, in the context of HDF5, this means that soft links (or external links) should be used instead of hard links.

1.7.1 Link specification keys

1.7.1.1 target_type

`target_type` specifies the key for a group in the top level structure of a namespace. It is used to indicate that the link must be to an instance of that structure.

1.7.1.2 doc

`doc` specifies the documentation string for the link and should describe the purpose and use of the linked data. The `doc` key is required.

1.7.1.3 name

Optional key specifying the name of the link.

1.7.1.4 quantity

Optional key specifying how many allowable instances for that link. Default is 1. If `name` is defined, quantity may not be >1. See Section 1.5.1.5 for details.

1.8 Datasets

Datasets are specified as part of lists stored in the key `datasets` as part of group specifications. The specification of a datasets is described in YAML as follows:

```
- datasets:
- name: fixed name of the dataset
  default_name: default name of the dataset
  doc: Required description of the dataset
  neurodata_type_def: Optional new neurodata_type for the group
  neurodata_type_inc: Optional neurodata_type the group should inherit from
  quantity: Optional quantity identifier for the group (default=1).
  linkable: Boolean indicating whether the group is linkable (default=True)
```

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dtype: Optional string describing the data type of the dataset
dims: Optional list describing the names of the dimensions of the dataset
shape: Optional list describing the shape (or possible shapes) of the dataset
value: Optional to fix value of dataset
default_value: Optional to set a default value for the dataset
attributes: Optional list of attribute specifications describing the attributes,
↳ of the group

The specification of datasets looks quite similar to attributes and groups. Similar to attributes, datasets describe the storage of arbitrary n-dimensional array data. However, in contrast to attributes, datasets are not associated with a specific parent group or dataset object but are (similar to groups) primary data objects (and as such typically manage larger data than attributes). The key/value pairs that make up a dataset specification are described in more detail next in Section Section 1.8.1.

1.8.1 Dataset specification keys

1.8.1.1 name

String with the optional fixed name for the dataset

Note: Every dataset must have either a unique fixed name or a unique `neurodata_type` to enable the unique identification of datasets when stored on disk.

1.8.1.2 default_name

Default name of the group.

Note: Only one of either name or `default_name` (or neither) should be specified as the fixed name given by name would always overwrite the behavior of `default_name`.

1.8.1.3 doc

The value of the dataset specification `doc` key is a string describing the dataset. The `doc` key is required.

Note: In earlier versions (before version 1.2a) this key was called `description`

1.8.1.4 neurodata_type_inc and neurodata_type_def

Same as for groups. See Section 1.5.1.4 for details.

1.8.1.5 quantity

Same as for groups. See Section 1.5.1.5 for details.

1.8.1.6 linkable

Boolean describing whether the this group can be linked.

1.8.1.7 dtype

String describing the data type of the dataset. Same as for attributes. See [Section 1.6.1.3](#) for details. `dtype` may be omitted for abstract classes. Best practice is to define `dtype` for most concrete classes.

1.8.1.8 shape

List describing the shape of the dataset. Same as for attributes. See [Section 1.6.1.5](#) for details.

1.8.1.9 dims

List describing the names of the dimensions of the dataset. Same as for attributes. See [Section 1.6.1.4](#) for details.

1.8.1.10 value and default_value

Same as for attributes. See [Section 1.6.1.7](#) and [Section 1.6.1.8](#) for details.

1.8.1.11 attributes

List of attribute specifications describing the attributes of the group. See [Section *Attributes*](#) for details.

```
attributes:  
- ...
```

1.9 Relationships

Note: Future versions will add explicit concepts for modeling of relationships, to replace the implicit relationships encoded via shared dimension descriptions and implicit references in datasets in previous versions of the specification language.

2.1 Version 2.0.2 (Upcoming)

- add `value` and `default_value` as optional keys of a dataset.
- `dtype` changed from required to optional for datasets.
- add dtypes that are already supported in *hdmf.spec*: `short` (`int16`), `uint64`, `bytes` (`ascii`), and `datetime` (`isodate-time`)

2.2 Version 2.0.1 (March, 2019)

- Added support for specifying a `title` and `doc` for `source` files as part of the `schema` portion of a namespace specification. This was added to improve documentation of individual source files and to support sorting of types by source file with meaningful titles and text as part of autogenerated docs.
- Updated the docs for `quantity` to indicate that the default value is 1 if not specified.

2.3 Version 2.0.0 (January, 2019)

2.3.1 Summary

- **Simplify reuse of `neurodata_types`:**
 - Added new key: `neurodata_type_def` and `neurodata_type_inc` (which in combination replace the keys `neurodata_type`, `include` and `merge`). See below for details.
 - Removed key: `include`
 - Removed key: `merge`

- Removed key: ``merge+``
 - Removed key: ``neurodata_type`` (replaced by `neurodata_type_inc` and `neurodata_type_def`)
 - Removed ``_properties`` key. The primary use of the key is to define abstract specifications. However, as format specifications don't implement functions but define a layout of objects, any spec (even if marked abstract) could still be instantiated and used in practice without limitations. Also, in the current instantiation of NWB:N this concept is only used for the ``Interface`` type and it is unclear why a user should not be able to use it. As such this concept was removed.
 - To improve compliance of NWB:N inheritance mechanism with established object-oriented design concepts, the option of restricting the use of subclasses in place of parent classes was removed. A subclass is always also a valid instance of a parent class. This also improves consistency with the NWB:N principle of a minimal specification that allows users to add custom data. This change affects the ``allow_subclasses`` key of links and the `subclasses` option of the removed ``include`` key.
- **Improve readability and avoid collision of keys by replacing values encoded in keys with dedicated key/value pairs:**
 - **Explicit encoding of names and types:**
 - * Added ``name`` key
 - * Removed `<...>` name identifier (replaced by empty ``name`` key)
 - * Added ``groups`` key (previously groups were indicated by `"/` as part of object's key)
 - * Added ``datasets`` key (previously datasets were indicated by missing `"/` as part of the object's key)
 - * Added ``links`` key (previously this was a key on the group and dataset specification). The concept of links is with this now a first-class type (rather than being part of the group and dataset specs).
 - * Removed `link` key on datasets as this functionality is now fully implemented by the `links` key on groups.
 - * Removed `/` flag in keys to identify groups (replaced by ``groups`` and ``datasets`` keys)
 - **Explicit encoding of quantities:**
 - * Added new key ``quantity`` (which replaces the ``quantity_flag``). See below for details.
 - * Removed ``quantity_flag`` as part of keys
 - * Removed `Exclude_in`` key. The key is currently not used in the NWB core spec. This feature is superseded by the ability to overwrite the ``quantity`` key as part of the reuse of ``neurodata_types``
 - Removed ``_description`` key. The key is no longer needed because name conflicts with datasets and groups are no longer possible since the name is now explicitly encoded in a dedicated key/value pair.
 - **Improve human readability:**
 - Added support for YAML in addition to JSON
 - Values, such as, names, types, quantities etc. are now explicitly encoded in dedicated key/value pairs rather than being encoded as regular expressions in keys.
 - **Improve direct interpretation of data:**

- Remove `references` key. This key was used in previous versions of NWB to generate implicit data structures where datasets store references to part of other metadata structures. These implicit data structures violate core NWB principles as they hinder the direct interpretation of data and cannot be interpreted (neither by human nor program) based on NWB files alone without having additional information about the specification as well. Through simple reorganization of metadata in the file, all instances of these implicit data structures were replaced by simple links that can be interpreted directly.
- **Simplified specification of dimensions for datasets:**
 - Renamed `dimensions` key to `dims`
 - Added key `shape` to allow the specification of the shape of datasets
 - **Removed custom keys for defining structures as types for dimensions:**
 - * `unit` keys from previous structured dimensions are now `unit` attributes on the datasets (i.e., all values in a dataset have the same units)
 - * The length of the structs are used to define the length of the corresponding dimension as part of the `shape` key
 - * `alias` for components of dimensions are currently encoded in the dimensions name.
- **Added support for default vs. fixed name for groups and datasets:**
 - Added `default_name` key for groups and dataset to allow the specification of default names for objects that can have user-defined names (in addition to fixed names via `name`). Attributes can only have a fixed name since attributes can not have a `neurodata_type` and can, hence, only be identified via their fixed name.
- **Updated specification of fixed and default values for attributes to make the behavior of keys explicit:**
 - **Specifying attribute values:**
 - * Added `default_value` key for attributes to specify a default value for attributes
 - * Removed `const` key for attributes which was used to control the behavior of the `value` key, i.e., depending on the value of `const` the `value` key would either act as a fixed or default value. By adding the `default_value` key this behavior now becomes explicit and the behavior of the `value` key no longer depends on the value of another key (i.e., the `const` key)
- **Improved governance and reuse of specifications:**
 - The core specification documents are no longer stored as `.py` files as part of the original Python API but are released as separate YAML (or optionally JSON) documents in a separate repository
 - All documentation has been ported to use reStructuredText (RST) markup that can be easily translated to PDF, HTML, text, and many other forms.
 - Documentation for source codes and the specification are auto-generated from source to ensure consistency between sources and the documentation
- **Avoid mixing of format specification and computations:**
 - Removed key `autogen` (without replacement). The `autogen` key was used to describe how to compute certain derived datasets from the file. This feature was problematic with respect to the guiding principles of NWB for a couple of reasons. E.g., the resulting datasets were often not interpretable without the provenance of the autogeneration procedure and autogeneration itself and often described the generation of derived data structures to ease follow-on computations. Describing computations as part of a format specification is problematic as it creates strong dependencies and often unnecessary restrictions for use and analysis of data stored in the format. Also, the reorganization of metadata has

eliminated the need for autogen in many cases. An autogen feature is arguably the role of a data API or intermediary derived-quantity API (or specification), rather than a format specification.

- **Enhanced specification of data types via dtype:**

- Enhanced the syntax for `dtype` to allow the specification of flat compound data types via lists of types
- Enhanced the syntax for `dtype` to allow the specification of i) object references and ii) region references
- Removed “!” syntax (e.g., “float32!”) previously used to specify a minimum precision. All types are interpreted as minimum specs.
- Specified list of available data types and their names
- Added `isodatetime` dtype for specification of ISO8061 datetime string (e.g., `2018-09-28T14:43:54.123+02:00`) as data type
- Added `bool` dtype for specification of boolean type fields (see [PR691 \(PyNWB\)](#) and [I658 \(PyNWB\)](#)).

- **Others:**

- Removed key ```_custom``` (without replacement). This feature was used only in one location to provide user hints where custom data could be placed, however, since the NWB specification approach explicitly allows users to add custom data in any location, this information was not binding.

2.3.2 Currently unsupported features:

- ```_required```: The current API does not yet support specification and verification of constraints previously expressed via ```_required```.
- Relationships are currently available only through implicit concepts, i.e., by sharing dimension names and through implicit references as part of datasets. The goal is to provide explicit mechanisms for describing these as well as more advanced relationships.
- ```dimensions_specification```: This will be implemented in later version likely through the use of relationships.

2.3.3 YAML support

To improve human readability of the specification language, Version 1.2a now allows specifications to be defined in YAML as well as JSON (Version 1.1c allowed only JSON).

2.3.4 ```quantity```

Version 1.1c of the specification language used a ```quantity_flag``` as part of the name key of groups and datasets to the quantity

- `!` - Required (this is the default)
- `?` - Optional
- `^` - Recommended
- `+` - One or more instances of variable-named identifier required
- `*` - Zero or more instances of variable-named identifier allowed

Version 1.2a replaces the ``quantity_flag`` with a new key ``quantity`` with the following values:

value	required	number of instances
<code>`zero_or_more` or `*`</code>	optional	unlimited
<code>`one_or_more` or `+`</code>	required	unlimited but at least 1
<code>`zero_or_one` or `?`</code>	optional	0 or 1
<code>`1`,`2`,`3`,...</code>	required	Fixed number of instances as indicated by the value

2.3.5 ``merge` and `include``

To simplify the concept ``include`` and ``merge``, version 1.2a introduced a new key ``neurodata_type_def`` which describes the creation of a new `neurodata_type`. The combination ``neurodata_type_def`` and ``neurodata_type_inc`` simplifies the concepts of merge (i.e., inheritance/extension) and inclusion and allows us to express the same concepts in an easier-to-use fashion. Accordingly, the keys ``include``, ``merge`` and ``merge+`` have been removed in version 1.2a. Here a summary of the basic cases:

neuro- data_type_inc	neuro- data_type_def	Description
not set	not set	define standard dataset or group without a type
not set	set	create a new <code>neurodata_type</code> from scratch
set	not set	include (reuse) <code>neurodata_type</code> without creating a new one (include)
set	set	merge/extend <code>neurodata_type</code> and create a new type (merge)

2.3.6 ``structured_dimensions``

The definition of structured dimensions has been removed in version 1.2a. The concept of structs as dimensions is problematic for several reasons: 1) it implies support for defining general tables with mixed units and data types which are currently not supported, 2) they easily allow for colliding specification where mixed units are assigned to the same value, 3) they are hard to use and unsupported by HDF5. Currently structured dimensions, however, have been used only to encode information about “columns” of a dataset (e.g., to indicate that a dimension stores x,y,z values). This information was translated to the `dims`` and `shape`` keys and `unit`` attributes. The more general concept of structured dimensions will be implemented in future versions of the specification language and format likely via support for modeling of relationships or support for table data structures (stay tuned)

2.3.7 ``autogen``

The ``autogen`` key has been removed without replacement.

Reason: The `autogen`` specification was originally used to specify that the attribute or dataset contents (values) can be derived from the contents of the HDF5 file and, hence, generated and validated automatically. As such, `autogen`` crossed a broad range of different functionalities, including:

1. Specification of the structure of format datasets/attributes
2. Description of data constraints (e.g., the shape of the generated dataset directly depends on the structure of the input data consumed by `autogen``),
3. Specification of the content (i.e., value) of datasets and attributes,
4. Description of computations to create derived data, and
5. Validation of the structure and content of datasets/attributes.

This mixing of functionality in turn led to several concerns:

- autogen exhibited a fairly complex syntax, which made it hard to interpret and use
- autogen is specifically used to create derived data from information that is already in the NWB file. Attributes/datasets generated via autogen: i) are redundant, ii) often require bookkeeping to ensure data consistency, iii) generate dependencies across data and types, iv) have limited utility as the information can be derived through other means, and v) interpretation of data values may require the provenance of autogen.
- Description of computations as part of a format specification was seen as problematic.
- There was potential for collisions between autogen and the specification of the dataset/attribute itself.

Usage in NWB autogen was used in NWB V.1.0.6 to generate 17 datasets/attributes primarily to: i) store the path of links in separate datasets/attributes or ii) generate lists of datasets/groups of a given type/property. The datasets were reviewed at a hackathon and determined to be non-essential and as such removed from the format as well.

2.4 Version 1.1c (Oct. 7, 2016)

- Original version of the specification language generated as part of the NWB pilot project

3.1 Acknowledgments

For details on the partners, members, and supporters of NWB:N please see the <http://www.nwb.org/> project website. For specific contributions to the format specification and this document see the change logs of the Git repository at <https://github.com/NeurodataWithoutBorders/nwb-schema>.

3.2 Authors

3.2.1 NWB:N: Version 2.0.0 and later

Documentation for Version 2 of the NWB:N specification and later have been created by Oliver Ruebel and Andrew Tritt et al. in collaboration with the NWB:N community.

3.2.2 NWB:N: Version 1.0.x and earlier

The specification language and corresponding documentation for Version 1.0.5g (and earlier) of the NWB file format were created by Jeff Teeters et al. as part of the first NWB pilot project. The documents for NWB:N 2 have been adopted from the final version of format docs released by the original NWB pilot project.

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CHAPTER 5

Indices and tables

- `genindex`
- `modindex`
- `search`