

How-To-Guide to German Grammar

This document summarizes the main grammar items covered in GERM 1111. It explains how to perform basic communicative tasks in German. Please print this PDF as a reference guide for your journey with Emma and Emil.

Table of Content

How to Organize a Basic Sentence	2
How to Identify the Gender of Nouns	4
How to Conjugate Regular Verbs in the Present Tense	5
How to Conjugate Irregular Verbs in the Present Tense	7
How to Use Modal Verbs	8
How to Use Separable Prefix Verbs	10
How to Use Personal Pronouns	11
How to Use Prepositions	12
How to Ask and Answer Questions	14
How to Distinguish the Nominative from the Accusative Case	16



HOW TO ORGANIZE A BASIC SENTENCE

A very basic German sentence consists of just a main clause. A main clause is a sentence that is complete in itself. It has at minimum a subject and a verb. More complex sentence structures include main and subordinate clauses. In GERM 1111, we focus on main clauses.

Basic sentences, or main clauses, can be statements, questions or commands. In GERM 1111, we learn about statements and questions in more detail but also encounter commands (also called imperatives), e.g., “Hören Sie zu!” When we organize a sentence, we need to follow some important rules for the placement of the verb:

- In a main clause, the verb is always in second place (note exceptions below);
- The verb in second place is the finite verb, i.e., the verb that is conjugated in accordance with the subject of the sentence; the verb has to agree with the subject;
- In questions, the verb is also in second place if the question starts with a question word such as “was” (what) or “wo” (where);
- Exceptions: the verb is in first place in yes/no questions and commands.

Word Order in Simple Statements

The basic pattern in simple statements is (1) Subject — (2) Verb — (3) Other Element:

Position 1	Position 2	Position 3	Position 4
Subject	Verb	Other	Other
Du	hast	Hunger.	
Ich	esse	gern	Schnitzel.
Frau Schmidt	ist	unsere	Lehrerin.
Das Flugzeug	landet	in	Frankfurt.
Emil	schläft.		

In some cases you can start your sentence with a word other than the subject. The verb is then still in second place and the subject moves into third position:

Position 1	Position 2	Position 3	Position 4
Other	Verb	Subject	Other
Mittags	esse	ich	wenig.
Abends	hast	du	Hunger.
Zum Frühstück	trinken	wir	Milch.
Um 10 Uhr	landet	das Flugzeug.	
Frisch	sind	die Brötchen	nicht.

Word Order in Questions with Question Words

In sentences that begin with a question word, the verb still remains in second place and the subject in third position.

Position 1	Position 2	Position 3	Position 4
Question Word	Verb	Subject	Other
Wann	frühstückst	du?	
Warum	hast	du	Hunger?
Was	kauft	du?	
Wohin	reist	ihr	gern?
Woher	kommt	Emma?	

Word Order in Yes/No Questions

In yes/no questions (questions that require a positive or negative answer), verb is in first position and the subject in second place.

Position 1	Position 2	Position 3	Position 4
Verb	Subject	Other	Other
Isst	du	mittags	wenig?
Hörst	du	gern	Musik?
Geht	ihr	zum	Römer?
Landet	das Flugzeug	um 10 Uhr?	
Hat	er	ein	Handy?

Word Order in Commands (Imperatives)

In GERM 1111, we do not discuss imperatives in detail but you encounter them all the time in the course. Whenever you are asked to perform a task, a command is used. Commands start with the verb in first position, followed by the personal pronoun “Sie” when the polite address is used.

Position 1	Position 2	Position 3	Position 4
Verb	Pronoun (“Sie”)	Other	Other
Hören	Sie	zu!	
Schreiben	Sie	einen	Dialog!
Lesen	Sie!		
Sprechen	Sie	Deutsch!	

Now you know how to put together a basic German sentence!

HOW TO IDENTIFY THE GENDER OF NOUNS

There are three genders in German: masculine, feminine and neuter. Gender is assigned to nouns in a rather arbitrary fashion, so it is best to memorize nouns with their respective definite article. The latter signifies the gender of the noun, for example: **der Computer, die Tasche, das Buch**. While in English the definite article is always “the”, in German it differs according to the gender of the noun. In the nominative case (the case of the subject of a sentence), the articles are **der, die** and **das**.

Examples:

Masculine	Neuter	Feminine
der Mann, der Laptop, der Stift, der Tee, der Onkel	das Auto, das Handy, das Mädchen, das Frühstück	die Frau, die Brille, die Mutter, die Orange

While it is best to memorize nouns right away with their respective article, there are some indicators that can help you identify the gender of a noun. The table below gives you some clues:

Masculine	Neuter	Feminine
Words with these endings are always masculine: -ig, -ling, -ist, -ant, -ismus	Words with these endings are always neuter: -chen, -lein, -ment, -um	Words with these endings are always feminine: -heit, -ung, -keit, -ei, -schaft, -in, -ie, -ät, -ik, -enz
Words with these endings are usually masculine: -er, -el, -en, -ent, -or, -eur	Words with these endings are usually neuter: -o, -a, -nis, -tum, -at	Words with these endings are usually feminine: -ur, -ion, -e
Words in these categories are masculine: seasons, months, days, times of day, points of the compass, precipitation, car brands	Words in these categories are neuter: most metals, fractions (except <i>die Hälfte</i>), letters of the alphabet, colours, names of hotels, cafés, movie theaters, theaters	Words in these categories are feminine: many flowers and trees, names of most rivers (exceptions: <i>der Rhein, der Main</i>)

It is almost impossible to detect the correct gender when a noun does not have one of these endings. You can keep in mind a few tendencies: words with the prefix GE- are usually neuter; words which end in a consonant are often masculine or neuter; and the grammatical gender of a noun and the biological gender are usually the same! *Der Mann, die Frau, die Tochter, der Sohn*, etc.

However, as you can see, this list of endings is quite extensive. It is still best to memorize nouns with their respective gender.

HOW TO CONJUGATE REGULAR VERBS IN THE PRESENT TENSE

Verb forms must agree with the subject. An example in English: I play. He plays. In German there are different categories of verbs. Most verbs are regular and follow a simple pattern. These regular verbs are also called “weak” because they do not change their stem vowel in any tense.

The basic verb forms you see in your vocabulary lists are called **infinitives**: to live = wohnen; to listen, to hear = hören. Let’s start with the infinitive and use “wohnen”. Chop off the ending (en) to get the **stem** of the verb: **wohn**. Now add the endings to that stem. Take a look at the chart below. The endings are in red.

	wohnen	hören
ich (I)	wohn e	hör e
du (you, sing.)	wohn st	hör st
er, sie, es (he, she, it)	wohn t	hör t
wir (we)	wohn en	hör en
ihr (you, pl)	wohn t	hör t
sie (they)	wohn en	hör en
Sie (you, formal)	wohn en	hör en

There is a trick to help you remember these endings. If this trick helps you, use it. If it confuses you, ignore it:

E/ST T/EN T/EN

E → ich ending
ST → du ending
T → er, sie, es ending
EN → wir ending
T → ihr ending
EN → sie (they) and Sie (formal you) forms

The Pattern

So, let’s review the pattern. To conjugate a regular verb, first chop off the ending of the infinitive (the -en at the end). Example: spielen, chop chop → spiel. You are left with the stem of the verb and now have to add the endings: ich spiele, du spielst, er/sie/es spielt, wir spielen, ihr spielt, sie spielen, Sie spielen.

Minor Deviations from the Pattern

- When the verb stem ends in -s (reisen), -ß (heißen) or -z, we have to watch out for the second person singular because the ending -st also contains an -s. In these cases we add only a -t in the second person singular:

	reisen	heißen
ich	reise	heiße
du	reist	heißt
er, sie, es	reist	heißt
wir	reisen	heißen
ihr	reist	heißt
sie	reisen	heißen
Sie	reisen	heißen

Note: “heißen” is an irregular verb since it changes its stem vowel in the past tense. But don’t worry about that now. We will learn all about past tense in a later course.

- b. When the verb stem ends in a -t (kosten, antworten), we have to watch out for the second and third person singular as well as the second person plural. For pronunciation reasons, we add an -e to these endings:

	kosten	antworten
ich	koste	antworte
du	kostest	antwortest
er, sie, es	kostet	antwortet
wir	kosten	antworten
ihr	kostet	antwortet
sie	kosten	antworten
Sie	kosten	antworten

HOW TO CONJUGATE IRREGULAR VERBS IN THE PRESENT TENSE

Verbs that change their stem vowels in the present and/or past tense are called “irregular” or “strong”. An example in English is the verb “to be” — we say “I am” but “he is”, “he is” but “he was”. The changes in irregular verbs are not predictable. Therefore, they must be memorized. Examples in our course are “sein”, “essen” and “nehmen”. All three verbs have irregular present tense forms and change their stem vowel in other tenses.

	sein	essen	nehmen
ich	bin	esse	nehme
du	bist	isst	nimmst
er, sie, es	ist	isst	nimmt
wir	sind	essen	nehmen
ihr	seid	esst	nehmt
sie	sind	essen	nehmen
Sie	sind	essen	nehmen

Memorize the conjugations of irregular verbs!

HOW TO USE MODAL VERBS

We use modal verbs (also called “modal auxiliary verbs”) to express a modality. What is a modality? Well, instead of making a factual statement such as “We are eating breakfast at 9 am”, a speaker might want to say that we are able to or that it is possible to have breakfast at 9 am. Therefore, she would say “We can eat breakfast at 9 am”. Ability and possibility are modalities. Using the modal auxiliary verb “can” enables the speaker to express these modalities instead of just making a factual statement.

The three modalities we learn about in GERM 1111 are expressing ability (the verb “können”), desire (the verb “möchten”) and intent (the verb “wollen”). Their conjugations are as follows:

können (can, be able to)	möchten (would like to)	wollen (to want to)
ich kann	ich möchte	ich will
du kannst	du möchtest	du willst
er, sie, es kann	er, sie, es möchte	er, sie, es will
wir können	wir möchten	wir wollen
ihr könnt	ihr möchtet	ihr wollt
sie können	sie möchten	sie wollen
Sie können	Sie möchten	Sie wollen

Be Aware of the Word Order in a Sentence with a Modal Verb

In statements (declarative sentences), the modal verb is always in second place, the position normally occupied by the main verb. This is because the modal verb becomes the conjugated verb following the subject and the main verb keeps its infinitive form. For example, we say “Emil kauft einen Mantel”. However, when we add a modal verb, “kaufen” moves to the end and the modal verb takes its place in second position: “Emil möchte einen Mantel kaufen”. This is different from English where the main verb follows immediately after the modal (auxiliary) verb: “Emil would like to buy a coat”.

Therefore, the basic sentence structure of a statement using a modal verb looks like this:

Position 1	Position 2	Position 3	Position 4
Subject	Modal Verb	Other	Main Verb
Er	kann	heute	spazieren gehen.
Ihr	möchtet	morgen	einkaufen.
Du	willst	Pizza	essen.

When we ask yes/no questions, the modal verb comes first and the main verb is still in last position:

Position 1	Position 2	Position 3	Position 4
Modal Verb	Subject	Other	Main Verb
Kann	er	heute	spazieren gehen?
Möchtet	ihr	morgen	einkaufen?

Willst	du	Pizza	essen?
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In questions with a question word, the modal verb comes second, same as in statements. The main verb still takes up the last spot:

Position 1	Position 2	Position 3	Position 4	Position 5
Question Word	Modal Verb	Subject	Other	Main Verb
Wo	kann	er	heute	spazieren gehen?
Wann	möchtet	ihr	morgen	einkaufen?
Warum	willst	du	Pizza	essen?

Make sure you memorize the present tense conjugations of these three modal verbs, and remember the positions of the modal and main verbs.

HOW TO USE SEPARABLE PREFIX VERBS

We can add prefixes to German verbs to change their meaning. Many of these prefixes are separable from the verb. Example: kommen (to come); an + kommen = ankommen (to arrive).

A prefix is often a preposition such as “an”, “aus”, etc. It is attached to the front of the infinitive of the verb and is separated during conjugation. For example: abfahren (to depart) – ich fahre ab, du fährst ab, sie fährt ab, etc.

Some common separable prefix verbs we have learned: **ankommen**, **abfahren**, **anschauen**, **einkaufen**, **mitkommen** and **zuhören**. When pronouncing separable prefix verbs, the stress is on the prefix.

In a sentence, the separable prefix moves to the end and the verb is in second place. In the case of yes/no questions and when giving directions, the prefix still moves to the end but the verb is in first position. For example:

Position 1	Position 2	Position 3	Position 4
Ich	fahre	heute	ab.
Wann	kommst	du	an?
Wir	kaufen	heute nachmittag	ein.
Schauen	Sie	das Video	an?
Hören	Sie	gut	zu!

There are a number of prefixes in German that are **not separable** from the verb. The following prefixes fall into this category: be-, emp-, ent-, er-, ge-, miss-, ver-, and zer-. Examples of inseparable prefix verbs we have encountered:

- Das Kleid gefällt mir.
- Was erzählt Emma?
- Beantworten Sie die Fragen!

HOW TO USE PERSONAL PRONOUNS

Personal pronouns replace nouns. They have the same gender (masculine, feminine or neuter), case (nominative, accusative or dative), and number (singular or plural) as the nouns they replace. Personal pronouns are often used when one does not want to repeat a noun. For example:

- **Emma** schläft bis neun Uhr. Dann geht **sie** einkaufen.
- **Die Milch** ist frisch. **Sie** schmeckt sehr gut.

The personal pronouns in the nominative case are:

masculine	er
feminine	sie
neuter	es
plural	sie

A few more examples:

- **Frank** hat einen Bruder. **Er** hat auch eine Schwester.
- **Meine Freundin** heißt Karin. **Sie** ist 22 Jahre alt.
- **Das Auto** ist teuer. **Es** ist ein Porsche.
- **Die Brötchen** sind noch warm. **Sie** sind sehr frisch.

HOW TO USE PREPOSITIONS

Prepositions are words that clarify the relationship between a noun or pronoun and other elements in a sentence. For instance, we want to say when and/or where we will meet someone. Examples of prepositions in English are “over”, “on”, “at” or “in”. These relationships can be, among others, temporal (time) or spatial (location):

- Temporal — She is meeting her partner **at** 5 pm.
- Spatial — We eat **in** an expensive restaurant.

This works the same way in German. However, in German we also have to know which case the preposition triggers, e.g., accusative or dative. Therefore, we must distinguish between accusative, dative and genitive prepositions. At this point, though, we do not need to worry about that.

In GERM 1111, we have already encountered a number of prepositions.

Spatial Prepositions

We ask questions about spatial relationships by using question words such as “wo”, “woher” and “wohin”.

- Wo wohnt Emma? Sie wohnt **in** Stuttgart.
- Wo gibt es Restaurants? Restaurants gibt es **am** Römer.
- Woher kommt Sabine? Sie kommt **aus** Stuttgart.
- Wohin fliegen wir? Wir fliegen **nach** Frankfurt.

Temporal Prepositions

We ask questions about temporal relationships by using question words like “wann” or phrases like “wie spät” or “wieviel Uhr”.

- Wann essen wir? Wir essen **um** 18 Uhr.
- Wie spät ist es? Es ist zehn **vor** neun.
- Wie viel Uhr ist es? Es ist Viertel **nach** zwölf.

The Same Prepositions can have both Spatial and Temporal Meaning

Context is everything! Be aware that in English and German the same preposition can have a spatial or temporal meaning depending on the context:

- Spatial — We fly **from** Calgary to Frankfurt. Wir fliegen **von** Calgary nach Frankfurt.
- Temporal — We work **from** nine to five. Wir arbeiten **von** neun bis fünf.

For now, simply memorize the phrases that contain prepositions without worrying about accusative or dative. In other words, learn them by heart as standard ways of saying things in German. Examples:

- Ich komme **aus** Vancouver.
- Er wohnt **in** Kamloops.

- Ich komme **um** 14 Uhr.
- Ich gehe gern **ins** Kino.

We will learn a lot more about prepositions later as we continue to study German.

HOW TO ASK AND ANSWER QUESTIONS

In declarative sentences (statements), the subject comes first and the verb second: Er spielt gern Fußball.

In interrogative sentences (questions), the word order changes.

- In Yes-No questions, the verb comes first and the subject second: Spielt er gern Fußball?
- In questions with Fragewörter (question words), the verb is second and the subject third: Wann spielt er gern Fußball?

1	2	3	4	5
Er	spielt	gern	Fußball.	-
Spielt	er	gern	Fußball?	-
Wann	spielt	er	gern	Fußball?

Yes/No Questions

- Questions about activities: use “nicht” if the answer is negative. Examples:
 - Gehst du einkaufen? Ja, ich gehe einkaufen. Nein, ich gehe nicht einkaufen.
 - Fährst du in die Stadt? Ja, ich fahre in die Stadt. Nein, ich fahre nicht in die Stadt.
- Questions about an object/thing: use “kein” if the answer is negative. Examples:
 - Hast du einen Computer? Ja, ich habe einen Computer. Nein, ich habe keinen Computer.
 - Kaufst du Bananen? Ja, ich kaufe Bananen. Nein, ich kaufe keine Bananen.
- Questions about likes or dislikes: use “nicht” (activities) or “kein” (objects/things). Examples:
 - Liest du gern? Ja, ich lese gern. Nein, ich lese nicht gern.
 - Magst du Wein? Ja, ich mag Wein. Nein, ich mag keinen Wein.
- Negative questions about an object/thing: use “doch” if you want to state the opposite. Examples:
 - Hast du keinen Computer? Doch, ich habe einen Computer. Nein, ich habe keinen Computer.
 - Hast du keine Schwester? Doch, ich habe eine Schwester. Nein, ich habe keine Schwester.

Fragewörter — Questions with Question Words

Question words are words such as Wann (When), Wo (Where) and Warum (Why). Examples of questions introduced by question words:

- Wann kommt er? (When)
- Warum schläfst du so lang? (Why)
- Was machst du gern? (What)
- Wer bist du? (Who)
- Wie geht es dir? (How)

- Wie viel kostet das? (How much)
- Wo wohnt sie? (Where)
- Woher kommen Sie? (From where)
- Wohin reist ihr? (To where)

A Special Case: Do You Speak German/English/Etc.?

When someone asks you whether you speak a certain language, you can use “kein” or “nicht” when answering in the negative. Germans mostly use “kein” but both negative statements are correct. Examples:

- Sprichst du Deutsch?
 - Ja, ich spreche Deutsch.
 - Nein, ich spreche kein Deutsch.
 - Nein, ich spreche nicht Deutsch.
- Spricht sie Englisch und Japanisch?
 - Ja, sie spricht Englisch und Japanisch.
 - Nein, sie spricht kein Englisch und auch kein Japanisch.
 - Nein, sie spricht nicht Englisch und auch nicht Japanisch.
 - Sie spricht Englisch, aber kein Japanisch.
 - Sie spricht Englisch, aber nicht Japanisch.
- Kann er Französisch?
 - Ja, er kann Französisch.
 - Nein, er kann kein Französisch.
 - Nein, er kann nicht Französisch.

HOW TO DISTINGUISH THE NOMINATIVE FROM THE ACCUSATIVE CASE

A sentence consists of multiple parts. For example, a sentence can consist of a subject, a verb, an object and other elements such as adjectives and prepositions. In order to clarify the function of a noun in a sentence, it is assigned a particular case.

English only has remnants of cases as seen in personal pronouns. We say “He sees me” and “I see him”. “I, he, she” are reserved for the subjects of a sentence, and “me, him, her” for the person who is the object of an action. German, on the other hand, has a full system of cases: nominative, accusative, dative and genitive. In GERM 1111, we only encounter the nominative and accusative cases.

The nominative case is reserved for the subject of a sentence. The subject is the person or thing performing the action described in a sentence. For example:

- Emma isst.
- Das Flugzeug landet.

The accusative case is reserved for the direct object in a sentence. The direct object receives an action and shows what the action is all about. There is a direct link between the subject, the verb and the object. For example:

- Emma isst eine Banane.
- Emil kauft ein Handy.

Without the direct object we would not know what Emma is eating and what Emil is buying.

So, how do we figure out which word is a subject and which is a direct object? Let’s remember that a subject performs an action, and that the direct object receives an action. Consider this sentence:

My brother is buying a car.

Step 1: Find the verb, i.e., the word that describes the action. In our example that’s “buying”; “to buy” is the verb in the sentence.

Step 2: Ask “who is buying?”; answer: my brother. My brother is the person performing the action of buying. Therefore, “my brother” is the subject of the sentence (nominative case).

Step 3: Ask “What is he buying?”; answer: a car. The car is the object of my brother’s action. Therefore, “a car” is the direct object of the sentence (accusative case).

Easy, right? However, remember that in German it is especially important to distinguish between the subject and the direct object (nominative and accusative case) because the definite and indefinite articles have to agree

- with the gender and number of the noun and
- with the noun’s role in a sentence, i.e., whether it is the subject or the direct object.

Example:

Ich nehme einen Hamburger.

“Ich” is the subject performing the action and “Hamburger” is the direct object. We now need to know the gender and number of the noun “Hamburger”. The gender is masculine, and the number is singular. The word “Hamburger” functions as the direct object and is, therefore, in the accusative case. This triggers the form of the indefinite article “ein”: it is singular, attached to a masculine noun, and in the accusative case, resulting in “einen”.

This handy table shows the nominative and accusative forms of the definite and indefinite articles:

	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter	Plural
Nominative	der/ein	die/eine	das/ein	die
Accusative	den/einen	die/eine	das/ein	die

As we can see, the definite and indefinite articles stay the same regardless of whether they are in the nominative or accusative case. Only in the masculine are they different.

Let’s look at another example:

Peter trinkt ein Glas Bier.

Step 1: What describes the action? Answer: trinken (the verb)

Step 2: Who drinks a glass of beer? Answer: Peter (the subject = nominative case)

Step 3: What does Peter drink? Answer: ein Glas Bier (the direct object = accusative case)

On identifying the nominative and accusative case, also consult the grammar section in Folge 3.