

# German Grammar Primer

## What is Grammar?

“Grammar” is the word we use to talk about “how words fit together to change meaning”.

When we combine words into sentences, we use grammar to show how those words connect and interact. One of the things that makes toddlers difficult to understand is that they frequently **don't** use grammar...

"BLUE!"

"Yes, sweetie, good job!" That car **is** blue."

Most traditional language learning methods want you to drill and practice German grammar before you really understand anything. This primer is different.

German *grammar rules* are very complicated and difficult to grasp, even for native speakers.

But learners can fully understand German even if they don't know all of the underlying grammar rules. The brain is a natural pattern-recognition machine and is capable of picking up these rules subconsciously, as long as it receives enough comprehensible input.

This primer will explain the main things you should be aware of before going into German so that it's *easier* to understand.

## Nouns (aka *things*)

Libs," If you've ever played “Mad Libs,” you might remember that nouns are the “things” we talk about. People, places, ideas, and *stuff*. All German nouns are written with a capital letter, no matter where they are in the sentence, so it makes finding them *super* easy!

But there are a few things about nouns you will want to keep in mind:

### Gender

All nouns fall into one of three categories. These are masculine, feminine, and neuter.

Gender	Word	Meaning
Masculine	<b>der</b> Hund	the dog (hound)
Feminine	<b>die</b> Katze	the cat
Neuter	<b>das</b> Schaf	the sheep

As you can see above, the word “*the*” changed for each word. This will change *often*. This can be disconcerting, especially for beginners, because it feels like words are changing at random. It's not random, but you don't need to know *exactly* what's going on in order to understand the sentence.

Here's an example of some changes:

Gender	Phrase	Meaning	Change
Masculine	mit <b>dem</b> braunen Hund	with the brown dog	<b>der</b> turns into <b>dem</b> , <b>en</b> is added to braun
Feminine	mit <b>der</b> braunen Katze	and the brown cat	<b>die</b> turns into <b>der</b> , <b>en</b> is added to braun
Neuter	mit <b>dem</b> braunen Schaf	over the brown sheep	<b>das</b> turns into <b>den</b> , <b>en</b> is added to braun

This may seem daunting, but these changes start to make a lot more sense once you've spent more time with German. For now, just allow yourself to think, "oh look! That changed. I still understand, though!"

## Cases

You may have heard of "German Cases" with big words like Nominative, and Genitive. German cases are a lot less scary than they are made out to be. When we say "case" what we mean is "situation". German cases help us understand who is doing what.

In English, we use word order to figure out who is doing an action, and who is receiving it:

✓ I write my mother a card

If we rearrange the words, the sentence doesn't make sense anymore:

✗ I write a card my mother

There's an invisible "to" in the first sentence that we need to add in to make the rearranged version work:

✓ I write a card **to** my mother.

The order of the sentence tells us:

"I" am the subject

"write" is the action

"a card" is the direct object

"(to) my mother" is the indirect object

In German, the word order is a lot more flexible. You can't rely on word order to tell you who is doing the action and who is receiving it. The 3 sentences below all mean the same thing:

- ✓ **Ich** **schreibe** **meiner** **Mutter** **eine** **Karte.**  
 I write to my mother a card.
- ✓ **Meiner** **Mutter** **schreibe** **ich** **eine** **Karte.**  
 To my mother write I a card.
- ✓ **Eine** **Karte** **schreibe** **ich** **meiner** **Mutter.**  
 A card write I to my mother.

!! Think of “**scribe**” when you see “**schreiben**”

Instead of using word order, German changes the endings of words to tell us who is doing the action and who is receiving it. This is called “marking the case”.

- mein ⇒ my
- meiner** ⇒ to my

The sentences above are all the same because “meiner Mutter” (my mother) is the same, no matter where it is in the sentence. **meiner** (to my) is an example of the “dative” case.

There are 4 different cases in German. You don't need to memorize this table below, it's just here to teach you the basics so you know what to look up later.

Case Name	Use in a Sentence	English Example	Grammar Term
Nominative	The person (or thing) that is doing the action	<b>He</b> gave his mom's ring to me.	Subject
Accusative	The thing (or person) being directly acted upon	He gave his mom's <b>ring</b> to me.	Direct Object
Dative	The thing (or person) to whom the direct object is going	He gave his mom's ring to <b>me</b> .	Indirect Object
Genitive	Showing when something belongs to someone	He gave his <b>mom's</b> ring to me.	Possessive

## Case Marker Crazyiness

What makes German challenging is that the ending we use to “mark the case” is not consistent. It changes based on the gender, quantity, and several other factors that we’re not going to go into.

If we look at more examples, it can get crazy!

<b>Der</b>	<b>Mann</b>	<b>schreibt</b>	<b>der</b>	<b>Frau</b>	<b>eine</b>	<b>Karte.</b>
The	man	writes	to the	woman	a	card.

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<b>Dem</b>	<b>Mann</b>	<b>schreibt</b>	<b>die</b>	<b>Frau</b>	<b>eine</b>	<b>Karte.</b>
To the	man	writes	the	woman	a	card.

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<b>Schreibt</b>	<b>der</b>	<b>Mann</b>	<b>der</b>	<b>Frau</b>	<b>eine</b>	<b>Karte?</b>
Writes	the	man	to the	woman	a	card?

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<b>Der</b>	<b>Hund</b>	<b>beißt</b>	<b>die</b>	<b>Katze.</b>
The	dog	bites	at the	cat.

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<b>Den</b>	<b>Hund</b>	<b>beißt</b>	<b>die</b>	<b>Katze.</b>
At the	dog	bites	the	cat.

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<b>Beißt</b>	<b>die</b>	<b>Katze</b>	<b>den</b>	<b>Hund?</b>
Bites	the	cat	at the	dog?

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<b>Beißt</b>	<b>der</b>	<b>Hund</b>	<b>die</b>	<b>Katze?</b>
Bites	the	dog	at the	cat?

!! The last four sentences don’t actually mean “at the”, but English has no other way to break the word order rules to show who’s doing what.

This is why speaking and writing German is so hard, because you need to know the gender, quantity, case, and more when choosing the right ending for each word. It’s too much stuff to keep in your head.

Which is why we focus on understanding first. It's much easier to understand case markers than to use them. After hundreds of hours of immersion, you'll gain an instinct for which marker is right in which situations. You won't have to think about it. It will just *sound right*.

## Plurals

Unlike in English where plurals (more than one of something) are almost the same, some words in German can change a lot between their singular and plural forms.

German	English
der Fuß	the foot
<b>die Füße</b>	the feet
der Hund	the dog
<b>die Hunde</b>	the dogs
der Mann	the man
<b>die Männer</b>	the men
die Blume	the flower
<b>die Blumen</b>	the flowers

As you can see, it's not always the end of the word that changes, sometimes the middle. Every dictionary has these different forms, so if you come across one you're unsure of, you can simply look it up to verify.

## Pronouns

In language, we use smaller words to refer to "things" that have already been mentioned. Such as words like "he", "they" or "her". These are called "pronouns" and take the place of another thing (or person) that is being talked about.

Mein Auto ist kaputt. **Ich** muss **es** reparieren.

My car is broken. **I** must (*have to*) repair **it**.

Here, **it (es)** is taking the place of **mein Auto** instead of saying it again.

You only need to know two things about pronouns:

1. There are different versions of each of them. They change, as we saw in the part on cases.
2. Things that aren't alive use the pronouns "he" and "she" (**er** and **sie**).

To clarify, *the ball* is masculine (der Ball) and if someone's looking for it, they might say:

<b>Wo</b>	<b>ist</b>	<b>er?</b>
Where	is	he?
<i>Where</i>	<i>is</i>	<i>it?</i>

While the word **er** translates directly to *he*, it means *it*, as in, *the ball*.

Pronouns are actually quite easy to understand as you're getting familiar with the language. Just to make sure you've seen them before you start, here is a quick "cheat sheet" for the pronouns of German.

## German Pronouns Cheat Sheet

English					💡 Hints:
I, me	ich	mich	mir	mein	Starts with 'M'
You	du	dich	dir	dein	Starts with 'D'
You (formal)	Sie	Sie	Ihnen	Ihr	Capitalized
He, him	er	ihn	ihm	sein	Changes the most
She, her	sie	sie	ihr	ihr	Almost like English
It	es	es	ihm	sein	You get used to this one
We, us	wir	uns	uns	unser	Almost like English
You all	ihr	euch	euch	euer	"Oi! You lot!" (dumb mnemonic)
You all (formal)	Sie	Sie	Ihnen	Ihr	Same as other formal*
They, them	sie	sie	ihnen	ihr	

\*The capitalized ones sound the same as the non-capitalized in speech

## Compound Nouns

In German, words can get mashed together to make bigger, more expressive words! However, since they have no spaces in them, they can be hard to lookup.

As a learner, you just need to be able to recognize the borders of these “words within words”. Here are some examples:

**Hundefutter**

**Dogfood**

*Dog food*

**Hundefuttermarke**

**Dogfoodbrand**

*Dog food brand*

**Trockenfutter**

**Dryfood**

*Dry food (for animals)*

So whenever you come across a word that feels “too large”, get out your magnifying glass and break it apart!

## Ending modifiers

Some “partial words” can be added to the ends of things to change their meanings. Think about “-let” or “-er” in English.

Pig

*Piglet*

Eat

*Eater*

While this isn't *super* common in English, it often happens in German! You can add *-chen* or *-lein* to the end of almost any noun to make it small! If a dictionary isn't finding a word you're trying to look up, make sure it doesn't have an ending modifier. There are several endings you might encounter, but they're often similar to English, so you won't need to study them super hard.

German	English	Suffix	Meaning
der Hund	the dog		
das Hündchen	the little dog (puppy)	-chen	a small version
der Freund	the friend		
die Freundschaft	the friendship	-schaft	-ship or a community of something
gesund	healthy		
die Gesundheit	the state of being healthy	-heit	the state of being something

## Verbs

Verbs might look like they change a lot in German, but that makes them easier to understand. Verbs show "who is doing the something".

English	German		English	German
I speak	Ich spreche		We speak	Wir sprechen
You speak	Du sprichst		Y'all speak	Ihr sprecht
She speaks	Sie spricht		They speak	Sie sprechen

Most verbs are consistent and follow this pattern. There are exceptions with irregular verbs, but you'll learn those as you encounter them in your immersion.

## Verb Kicking

One of the weird quirks of German is that there's only enough "space" for one verb toward the beginning of a sentence or phrase. So all the other verbs have to go to the end. You can think of this as the "helper verb" actually *kicking* the important one to the end.

Ich	werde	meiner	Mutter	helfen.
I	will	to my	mother	help.
I	will	help	my	mother.

It doesn't matter how many words go between the verbs, it goes all the way to the end.

Später	werde	ich	meiner	Mutter	mit	ihrem	Auto	helfen.
Later	will	I	to my	mother	with	her	car	help.
I	will	help	my	mother	with	her	car	later.

Here are some other common "kicker verbs":

Example	German	English	Translation
Ich <b>werde</b> meiner Mutter <b>helfen</b>	werden	will	I will help my mother
<b>Kannst</b> du mir mit meinem Auto <b>helfen</b> ?	können	to be able to	Can you help me with my car?
<b>Möchtest</b> du eine Pizza <b>essen</b> ?	möchten	would like to	Would you like to eat a pizza?
Ich <b>will</b> dir <b>helfen</b>	wollen	to want to	I want to help you
Ich <b>soll</b> meiner Mutter <b>helfen</b>	sollen	should	I should help my mother
<b>Würdest</b> du mir <b>helfen</b> , wenn ich...	würden	would	Would you help me if I...



## The Past

Something you might notice is that using "have" for the past tense is the default in German.

<b>Ich</b>	<b>habe</b>	<b>meine</b>	<b>Hausaufgaben</b>	<b>gemacht</b>
I	have	my	homework	done
<i>I</i>	<i>did</i>	<i>my</i>	<i>homework</i>	

The past tense "to have" (*haben*) kicks the verb to the end, just like we learned in the "Verb Kicking" section. This can take some getting used to since it feels like you're missing key information.

Almost all the verbs in the past will have **ge** in them. It's like the German version of "-ed".

<b>Es</b>	<b>hat</b>	<b>geregnet</b>
It	has	rained
<i>It</i>	<i>rained</i>	

<b>Ich</b>	<b>habe</b>	<b>ihm</b>	<b>gefragt</b>
I	have	him	asked
<i>I</i>	<i>asked</i>	<i>him</i>	

## Separable Verbs

Many verbs in German are actually two pieces that like to "drift apart". In English, a verb like "let out" is already in two pieces and you can add words in between.

Can you **let the dog out**, please?

The same thing happens with a verb like "aufgeben"

<b>Gib</b>	<b>nicht</b>	<b>auf!</b>
Give	not	up!
<i>Don't</i>	<i>give</i>	<i>up!</i>

The strange part is that verbs might look like they're one single word, even though you'll need to look in two different places. The nice thing is that the "first part" (**auf** in this case) is always at the end of the phrase.

You can recognize these verbs because they usually start with a preposition: an, auf, zu, aus (and many more). But not all of them are separable, so watch out in your immersion if they can "come apart"!

<b>Ich</b>	<b>ziehe</b>	<b>mir</b>	<b>die</b>	<b>Jacke</b>	<b>an.</b>
I	pull	me	the	jacket	on.
<i>I</i>	<i>put</i>	<i>the</i>	<i>jacket</i>	<i>on.</i>	

## Reflexive Verbs

Some verbs you "do to yourself" in German. These verbs often change the meaning of the words subtly or completely.

On its own "anziehen" can mean "to attract" or "to pull", but with "sich", it means "to get dressed"

<b>Ich</b>	<b>ziehe</b>	<b>mich</b>	<b>an.</b>
I	pull	myself	on.
<i>I</i>	<i>get</i>	<i>dressed.</i>	

<b>Magnete</b>	<b>ziehen</b>	<b>Metall</b>	<b>an.</b>
Magnets	pull	metal	on.
<i>Magnets</i>	<i>attract</i>	<i>metal.</i>	

This is very similar to how "What do you see" and "How do you see yourself" are very different meanings of "see".

Be on the lookout for words like "sich anziehen":

## Backwards Verbs

Some verbs feel backwards to English speakers. These are only a few words like this in German. But we mention it because one of the most common verbs does this:

<b>Das</b>	<b>gefällt</b>	<b>mir.</b>
That	pleases	me.
<i>I</i>	<i>like</i>	<i>that.</i>

In German, something pleases you instead of you liking something.

And the same goes for the simple phrase, "what's up?"

<b>Wie</b>	<b>geht</b>	<b>es</b>	<b>dir?</b>
How	goes	it	you?
<i>How</i>	<i>are</i>	<i>you?</i>	

## Final German Notes

### Man

You'll come across the word "man" (not to be confused with **der Mann**). This is equivalent to the English "one" or the "collective you".

<b>Man</b>	<b>kann</b>	<b>ein</b>	<b>neues</b>	<b>Handy</b>	<b>kaufen.</b>
One	can	a	new	phone	buy.
<i>You</i>	<i>can</i>	<i>buy</i>	<i>a</i>	<i>new</i>	<i>phone.</i>

### Gern

Just think of this as "gladly"! It's super commonly used to express when someone's happy to do something.

<b>Ich</b>	<b>fahre</b>	<b>gerne</b>	<b>mit</b>	<b>dem</b>	<b>Fahrrad.</b>
I	ride	gladly	with	the	bike.
<i>I</i>	<i>like</i>	<i>to</i>	<i>ride</i>	<i>bikes.</i>	