

Adjective endings

— DIE ADJEKTIVDEKLINATION

German adjective endings are the letters an adjective takes when it stands in front of a noun: guter, gute, gutes, guten.

Not “ein guter Auto” but “ein gutes Auto” — this is where the system collapses. English adjectives never change; in German the ending depends on three situations: an article that shows the case, an **ein**-word that doesn’t, or no article at all.

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The big idea: the signal shows up once



SHORTCUT

The gender-case signal appears **exactly once** in the phrase. If the article carries it, the adjective just takes **-e** or **-en**; if there is no article, **the adjective carries the signal**.

Look at these three phrases first. Same adjective, same noun, three different endings — and you can see exactly why it changes:

In all three, that little **-r** does the same job: it says “this word is masculine and in the nominative.” The only thing that changes is **who carries it**. German never shows this signal twice, and never skips it.

- ① What grammar books call “weak, mixed and strong declension” are exactly these three situations. You don’t need to memorise the names — there is only one question: **does the article carry the signal or not?**

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Why English gives you no help here

Let’s be honest: English adjectives **never change**. *the big house · the big houses · in the big house · the big house’s roof* — “big” every time. So this whole system feels completely foreign, and **that’s fair**.

But English has a tiny cousin of the same reflex: *a* becomes *an* depending on the word next to it — “a house”, “an apple”. Nobody handed you a table, and you still get it right, because **the little word adjusts to its neighbour**.

The German adjective ending works on the same principle: **it looks at what stands before it**. If an article that already carries the signal is there, it relaxes; if not, it does the job itself. The mechanism is familiar — only the trigger is different.

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Situation 1 — with an article: only two endings

der · die · das · dieser · jeder · welcher — all of these carry the signal. The adjective has nothing left to do and **only two endings** are used: **-e** and **-en**.

	MASCULINE DER WEIN	FEMININE DIE MILCH	NEUTER DAS BIER	PLURAL DIE WEINE
Nominativ	der gute	die gute	das gute	die guten
Akkusativ	den guten	die gute	das gute	die guten
Dativ	dem guten	der guten	dem guten	den guten

Don’t read the table, look at its **shape**: five **-e** cells in the top left, everything else **-en**. Five cells to memorise — not twelve.

So the rule fits in one sentence: **the three Nominativ singulars and the feminine and neuter Akkusativ take -e; everything else takes -en**. Five cells **-e**, seven cells **-en**.

- ① When you’re speaking, you have no time to work it out. Practical shortcut: **if you’re unsure, say -en**. Seven of the twelve cells in this table are **-en** anyway, so even a blind guess is right more than half

the time.

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Situation 2 — with ein: three cells change, the rest stay the same

The **ein** · **kein** · **mein** · **dein** · **sein** · **ihr** · **unser** family. The problem: in three places **ein** is **bare** — it takes no ending, so it doesn't carry the signal. In those three places the adjective steps in.

	MASCULINE	FEMININE	NEUTER	PLURAL
Nominativ	ein guter Wein	eine gute Milch	ein gutes Bier	keine guten Weine
Akkusativ	einen guten Wein	eine gute Milch	ein gutes Bier	keine guten Weine
Dativ	einem guten Wein	einer guten Milch	einem guten Bier	keinen guten Weinen

Put this table next to the first one: **exactly three cells** differ — Nom. masculine (**-er**), Nom. neuter and Akk. neuter (**-es**). Everything else is letter-for-letter the same.

Why exactly those three? Because **ein** stands without an ending in exactly those three places: **ein** Wein · **ein** Bier. Compare: **eine** Milch, **einen** Wein, **einem** Bier — those have an ending, so the adjective can relax.



TRAP 01

"ein gute Wein" — the most common mistake

People who memorise the first table and never move on to the second get stuck right here. **der gute Wein** is correct, but **ein gute Wein** is wrong — because **ein** has no **-r**, so somebody else has to carry it.

✗ **Das ist ~~ein gute~~ Wein.**

Wrong — the signal got lost.

✓ **Das ist **ein guter** Wein.**

This is a good wine.

How to check: **delete the article and ask what has to be left**. "... Wein" is masculine nominative → the signal is **-r**. If the article doesn't carry it, the adjective does.

Situation 3 — no article: the adjective becomes the article

The third situation is the easiest, and the least taught. With no article at all, the adjective takes **the article's own ending**. The **-r** of **der** and the **-s** of **das** move straight onto the adjective.

	ARTICLE ENDING	ADJECTIVE	EXAMPLE
Nom. masc.	der	guter	Guter Wein ist teuer .
Nom. fem.	die	gute	Gute Milch ist frisch .
Nom. neuter	das	gutes	Gutes Bier braucht Zeit .
Akk. masc.	den	guten	Ich trinke guten Wein .
Dat. masc.	dem	gutem	mit gutem Wein
Plural	die	gute	Gute Weine sind teuer .

The one exception is the Dativ plural: **guten Weinen** — that one takes **-en**. Everywhere else, the adjective copies the article's ending exactly.

Where will you meet this? **With uncountable nouns and plurals** — in the kitchen, at the shop, on the menu. Talking without an article is half of everyday German:

The part nobody tells you: where the adjective does not change

All these tables apply **only to an adjective that comes BEFORE the noun**. When the adjective comes after the verb, it **never changes** — which is something learners get right without noticing, and then ruin.

✓ **Der Wein ist gut.**

The wine is good. — NO ending.

✓ **Das ist ein guter Wein.**

This is a good wine. — before the noun, ending.

✗ **Der Wein ist guter.**

Wrong — no ending after the verb.

The same holds when the word works like an adverb: **Er spricht gut Deutsch.** — here **gut** describes the verb, it doesn't attach to a noun, so it stays bare.

- ① So in **half of your sentences you won't use these tables at all**. In the pattern "X is good · X is pretty · X is expensive" the adjective is always bare. The tables only kick in when you put the adjective in front of the noun.



TRAP 02

When two adjectives stand side by side

If two adjectives describe the same noun, **both take the same ending**. One doesn't get an ending while the other stays bare.

✓ **ein großer, alter Baum**

a big, old tree — both -er.

✓ **mit frischem, kaltem Wasser**

with fresh, cold water — both -em.



TRAP 03

hoch · teuer · dunkel — a letter drops out in writing

Three adjectives lose a letter from their stem when they take an ending. You already say it that way; it's the spelling that trips you up.

ADJECTIVE	PREDICATE FORM	WITH AN ENDING
hoch	Der Turm ist hoch .	ein hoher Turm — the c drops
teuer	Das ist teuer .	ein teurer Wein — the e drops
dunkel	Es ist dunkel .	ein dunkles Zimmer — the e drops

07 07:00

What to do this week

This topic won't **stick** by memorising tables — nobody can hold forty-eight cells in their head. The only way to build the reflex is to say the same noun in all three situations.

- Pick a noun (**der Kaffee**) and an adjective (**stark**).
- Say the three situations back to back: **der starke Kaffee • ein starker Kaffee • starker Kaffee**.
- Then switch to the Akkusativ: **Ich trinke den starken / einen starken / starken Kaffee**.
- The next day, repeat with a feminine noun (**die Milch • frisch**), then a neuter one (**das Brot • warm**).
- If you get stuck while speaking, say **-en** and keep going. Stopping to think costs you more than a wrong ending.

① We cover comparing adjectives (**besser • am besten**) separately on the [comparing adjectives page](#) — the **-er** you learn there is a **comparison** ending, while the **-er** here is an **agreement** ending. Same letters, completely different job: **ein besserer Wein** — both sit side by side in the same word.

08 BUILD

Build the sentence yourself

Tap the words and put them in order. This is the hardest part of German — and there are no options to pick from, **you** build it.

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

08 07 : 30

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+16

Take the full test

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