

The German alphabet and pronunciation

— DAS ALPHABET

The German alphabet has 26 letters plus three umlauts (ä, ö, ü) and ß; several letters sound different from English: W = V, Z = TS.

W sounds like “v”, V sounds like “f”, Z sounds like “ts”. Your English reading habits will fight you here, and your eyes will lie. The whole alphabet, the letter pairs **ch** · **sch** · **ei** · **ie**, and how to spell your name out loud on the phone.

CONTENTS

- 01 Why this comes first
- 02 Eight letters that do not sound the way you expect
- 03 Three umlauts and ß
- 04 Letter pairs — this is where the real rule is
- 05 ch — one spelling, two sounds
- 06 Stress and the names of the letters
- 07 Traps
- 08 Test yourself

01 00:10

Why this comes first

⚡ SHORTCUT Two letters fix most of it: **W** sounds like English *v*, **V** sounds like English *f*. One reminder word: Volkswagen = *FOLKS-vah-gen*.

The most expensive mistake at the start of a language is **memorising a word with the wrong sound**. You read the letters the English way, the word settles in your head like that; months later a German says “**Wasser**” and it does not match the word you know, so you think you did not understand. But you know the word — you just do not know its sound.

- ✓ **Wasser**
not “WOSS-er” → *VAH-sa* · water
- ✓ **Vater**
not “VAY-ter” → *FAH-ta* · father
- ✓ **Zeit**
not “zeet” → *TSITE* (rhymes with “bite”) · time

- ① Good news: German is **read the way it is written** — there is no word-by-word chaos like English (through, though, tough, cough). Once you have the rules in place, you can read a word you have never seen and get it right.

Eight letters that do not sound the way you expect

Do not memorise the whole table; **start with these eight**. Nearly every everyday word contains at least one of them.

LETTER	SOUND IT MAKES	EXAMPLE
W	English <i>v</i>	Wasser · wo · Wein → <i>VAH-sa · voh · vine</i>
V	English <i>f</i>	Vater · vier · viel → <i>FAH-ta · feer · feel</i>
Z	<i>ts</i> — as in “cats”, one sound	Zeit · zehn · Zimmer → <i>tsite · tsayn · TSIM-a</i>
J	English <i>y</i> , as in “yes”	ja · Jahr · jung → <i>yah · yahr · yoong</i>
S	Before a vowel: <i>z</i>	Sonne · sagen · Sie → <i>ZO-nuh · ZAH-gen · zee</i>
R	From the back of the throat, not English “r”	Rot · at the end almost an a : Vater → <i>FAH-ta</i>
C	Almost never alone	Always in a pair: <i>ch · sch · ck</i>
H	After a vowel it is silent and just lengthens the vowel	gehen · Jahr · sehr → <i>GAY-en · yahr · zair</i>

Two of them get mixed up all the time: **W** sounds like English *v*, **V** sounds like English *f*. Reminder: **Volkswagen** = *FOLKS-vah-gen*. Both letters sit in the same word, and both follow their rule.

If you are looking for the English “w” sound, German does not have a letter for it: **W** is “v”. And if you are looking for “z”, look at the letter **S** — the letter **Z** never sounds like z.

✓ **Sonne und Zeit**

ZO-nuh unt tsite (sun and time)

Three umlauts and ß

English has neither umlauts nor **ß**, so these four are new. Nothing to fear: the umlauts are just familiar vowels with a twist, and **ß** is simply a sharp s.

LETTER	SOUND	EXAMPLE
ä	Open <i>e</i> — like the “e” in “bed”	Mädchen · spät · Käse
ö	Say “ay” (as in “day”) with your lips rounded as for “oh”	schön · können · hören
ü	Say “ee” with your lips rounded as for “oo”	über · Tür · müde
ß	Sharp <i>s</i> — called “Eszett”	Straße · groß · heißen

If your keyboard has no umlauts, you can write them out and it **is not counted wrong**: **ä** → *ae*, **ö** → *oe*, **ü** → *ue*, **ß** → *ss*. Writing **Strasse** instead of **Straße** is accepted even in official letters. Switzerland never uses **ß** at all.

① An umlaut is not decoration, it **changes the meaning**: schon (already) ≠ schön (beautiful) • Mutter (mother) ≠ Mütter (mothers).

ADVERTISEMENT



04 04:00

Letter pairs — this is where the real rule is

German pronunciation is settled in this table. These are not exceptions, they are **the rule itself**: every time they appear, they give the same sound.

SPELLING	SOUND	EXAMPLE
ei	eye	nein • Zeit • mein → <i>nīne • tsīte • mīne</i>
ie	long ee	bier • vier • Liebe → <i>beer • feer • LEE-buh</i>
eu • äu	oy — as in “boy”	heute • Leute • Häuser → <i>HOY-tuh • LOY-tuh • HOY-za</i>
au	ow — as in “cow”	Haus • auch • Frau
sch	English sh	Schule • schön • Tisch → <i>SHOO-luh • shurn • tish</i>
sp • st (at the start of a word)	shp • sht	Sport • Stadt • sprechen → <i>shport • shtat • SHPREKH-en</i>

ei and **ie** are the pair English speakers mix up most — English spelling has trained you to expect the opposite (“receive”, “believe”). The rule is simple: **read the second letter by its English name**. **ei** → the letter I, “eye”; **ie** → the letter E, long “ee”. That is why **Bier** (beer) and **Bein** (leg) sound different.

SPELLING	SOUND	EXAMPLE
tsch	English ch , as in “church”	Deutsch • tschüss → <i>doych • chüss</i>
ck	hard k	Zucker • Ecke → <i>TSOO-ka • EK-uh</i>
qu	kv	Qualität → <i>kvah-li-TAYT</i>
pf	p and f together	Apfel • Kopf
ng	one nasal sound , no hard g — as in “singer” , not “finger”	Zeitung • lange
-ig (at the end of a word)	ikh — a soft ch	richtig • fertig → <i>RIKH-tikh • FER-tikh</i>

05 05:30

ch — one spelling, two sounds

The sound learners fear most. The rule is actually one line: **the vowel in front decides.**

VOWEL IN FRONT	SOUND	EXAMPLE
a · o · u · au	Rough sound from the throat — like the end of Scottish “loch” or “Bach”	Buch · auch · Nacht · doch
i · e · ä · ö · ü · ei · eu and consonants	Soft, hissy sound at the front of the mouth — like the “h” in “huge”	ich · nicht · Milch · München
At the start of a word chr · ch	usually k	Christian · Chaos · Charakter

Many learners say **ich** as “ick” or “ish”. Neither is right. Hold your tongue as if you were about to say “ee”, then just push air out — the hissy sound that comes out is correct. In northern Germany the sound sometimes drifts toward “ish”, and that is accepted.

If the soft **ch** will not come, shape your mouth for “ee”, but instead of vibrating your vocal cords, just **whisper a strong breath**.

✓ Ich möchte Milch.

ikh MURKH-tuh milkh — all three are the soft “kh”

06 06:20

Stress and the names of the letters

- In German words the stress falls on the **first syllable**: Vater · arbeiten · Zeitung.
- In separable verbs the stress is on the **prefix**: aufstehen · anrufen · einkaufen.
- In inseparable prefixes the stress is **not on the prefix**: verstehen · bezahlen · erklären.
- In words of foreign origin the stress is usually **at the end**: Student · Universität · Restaurant.

On the phone or at an office you will be asked to say your name **letter by letter** — that is called **buchstabieren**. Knowing the names of the letters pays off right here.

✓ Wie schreibt man das?

How do you spell that?

✓ Können Sie das bitte buchstabieren?

Could you spell that, please?

LETTER	NAME	LETTER	NAME
A	<i>ah</i>	N	<i>enn</i>
B	<i>bay</i>	O	<i>oh</i>
C	<i>tsay</i>	P	<i>pay</i>
D	<i>day</i>	Q	<i>koo</i>
E	<i>ay</i>	R	<i>err</i>
F	<i>eff</i>	S	<i>ess</i>
G	<i>gay</i>	T	<i>tay</i>

LETTER	NAME	LETTER	NAME
H	<i>hah</i>	U	<i>oo</i>
I	<i>ee</i>	V	<i>fow</i> (as in “cow”)
J	<i>yot</i>	W	<i>vay</i>
K	<i>kah</i>	X	<i>iks</i>
L	<i>ell</i>	Y	<i>ÜP-si-lon</i>
M	<i>emm</i>	Z	<i>tset</i>

Umlauts are not called “a-umlaut”; you say the sound itself, **ä · ö · ü**. **ß** is called “*Eszett*”.

07 07:00

Traps



TRAP 01

Reading W and V the wrong way round

One word solves both: **Volkswagen** = *FOLKS-vah-gen*. The **V** at the start is *f*, the **W** in the middle is *v*. As long as you remember this word, you will not mix them up.



Wo wohnst du?

voh vohnst doo — Where do you live?



TRAP 02

ich → “ick” or “ish”

German **ch** is never the “ch” of “church” — that sound only appears in the spelling **tsch** (*Deutsch*). **ich** · **nicht** · **Milch** are all read with the soft, hissy “h” sound.

✓ **Ich spreche nicht viel Deutsch.**

soft “h” in the first three words, English “ch” at the end



TRAP 03

Reading the s at the start of a word the English way

An **s** before a vowel gives a **z** sound: **Sonne** = *ZO-nuh*, **sieben** = *ZEE-ben*, **Sie** = *zee*. But if the word starts with **sp-** or **st-**, it becomes *sh*: **Sport** = *shport*.



TRAP 04

Reading the final -er as “er”

The **-er** at the end of a word sounds almost like **an open “a”**: **Vater** = *FAH-ta*, **Lehrer** = *LAY-ra*, **aber** = *AH-ba*. Saying the English “-er” with a hard **r** sounds foreign at once.



TRAP 05

Leaving a final b · d · g soft

At the end of a word **b** → **p**, **d** → **t**, **g** → **k**: **Kind** = *kint*, **Tag** = *tahk*, **gelb** = *gelp*. The spelling does not change, only the sound hardens.

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

TAP THE WORDS

TIPS

Know this before the test

The core of the topic in three lines, then the mistakes people make most often.

01

The surprising
consonants: w=v · v=f
· z=ts

Wasser → VAH-sa · Vater →
FAH-ta · Zug → tsook. Three
letters, three surprises.

w → v · v → f · z → ts

02

Letter pairs give
one sound

ei → eye (Bein → bine) · eu/
äu → oy (neun → noyn) · ie
→ long ee (vier → feer) · sch
→ sh.

ei → eye · eu → oy · ie → ee

03

st/sp at the start are
read sht/shp

At the start of a word Sport
→ shport, Straße → shtrah-
suh. In the middle of a word
s-t stays as it is.

Sport → shport

04

At the end of a word
b·d·g harden

Kind → kint · Tag → tahk.
Soft in writing, hard
in sound.

Kind → kint

✗ ~~Reading Wein with an English w,
as “wine”~~

✓ vine

✗ ~~Reading Zug as “zug”~~

✓ tsook

z = ts, and a final g = k.

German w is English v; the English w sound does not exist in German.

✗ ~~Reading the ch in ich and Buch the same way~~

✓ Soft and hissy after a front vowel (ich), from the throat after a back vowel (Buch)

The vowel in front picks the sound of ch.

✗ ~~Thinking ß is a B~~

✓ ß = the ss sound; write ss if your keyboard lacks it

Straße = Strasse. It has nothing to do with B.

08 07:40

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+7

Finish the topic: take the full test

13 questions · timed · exam style · 60% finishes the topic



ADVERTISEMENT

728 × 250

GENAU — NOT RULES, THE MOMENT IT CLICKS.

