

Compound nouns

— ZUSAMMENGESETZTE NOMEN

German compound nouns are nouns built from two or more words stuck together: Handschuh, Krankenhaus, Arbeitszimmer.

Geschwindigkeitsbegrenzung is not in the dictionary — because it is not one word, it is **three words glued together**. English works the same way (the last part carries the meaning: a *hand bag* is a bag), but German writes them without spaces, so the word looks scary. The moment you learn to split them, your dictionary needs drop by half: the last part gives you both the meaning and the article.

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Right now: two rules, the whole system



SHORTCUT

The last part is the word itself. It gives the meaning and it gives the article. The parts in front only describe it.

English does the same job, just **with a space in between** (or a hyphen): “hand bag”, “hospital room”. German deletes the space and writes one word. The structure does not change, only the spelling.

All three start with the same head: **Hand**, feminine. But their articles differ — because **the last part decides the article, not the first**: **der** Schuh · **die** Tasche · **das** Tuch.

- ① This rule works without exceptions. For every long word you meet after A2 you can guess the article — **all you have to do is spot the last part.**

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The meaning is read from the end, too

Put the same two words in the opposite order and you get **something completely different**. Once you have seen this, the rule sinks in:

WORD	PARTS	MEANING	WHY
der Hausschlüssel	Haus + Schlüssel	house key	a key
das Schlüsselhaus	Schlüssel + Haus	key house	a house
der Sommerurlaub	Sommer + Urlaub	summer holiday	a holiday
der Urlaubesommer	Urlaub + Sommer	holiday summer	a summer

English works the same way: a “house key” is a key, a “key house” is a house. And the order is **exactly the same** — the describing word first, the main word last. This is one of the rare things English speakers get for free in German.

So the method for reading a long word is always the same: **start at the end and read backwards.**

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The s, n and e in between — the “Fugenlaut”

In some compounds there is an extra letter between the parts: **Arbeitszimmer, Krankenhaus, Hundefutter**. It has no meaning — **it just makes the word easier to say.**

LINKING SOUND	WHEN IT APPEARS	EXAMPLE
-s-	after words ending in -ung · -helt · -kelt · -schaft · -tät	Wohnungstür · Sicherheitsgurt · Arbeitsplatz
-n-	after words whose plural takes -n	Krankenhaus · Straußenei · Blumenvase
-e-	after some one-syllable words	Hundefutter · Tagebuch
none	In most cases nothing is added	Handschuh · Haustür · Kaffeetasse

You **do not need to produce** this sound. Recognising it when you read is enough: if you see **Arbeitszimmer** and can split it into “Arbeit + Zimmer”, you are done. You will not be inventing your own words anyway.

**TRAP 01**

Mistaking the -s- in the middle for a plural

The -s- inside **Arbeitsplatz** does not mean “works”. It is not a plural; it only links. (Think of “craftsman” or “sportsman” in English — that -s- is not a plural either.)

✓ **der Arbeitsplatz**

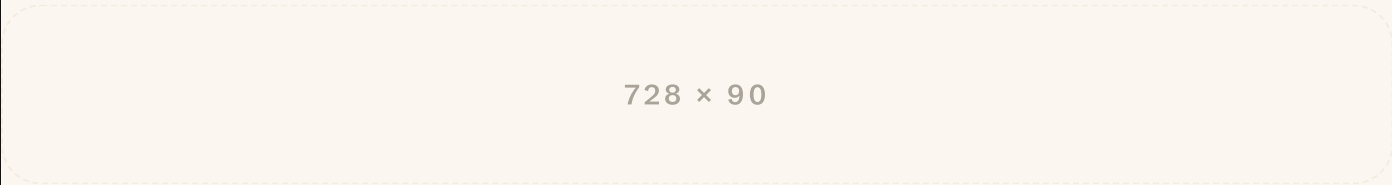
the workplace — one place, one job.

✓ **die Arbeitsplätze**

The plural is made **at the end** — Platz → Plätze.

Same rule as before: **the plural is also read from the last part**. das Handtuch → die Handtücher. We covered the plural types in detail on the [plural page](#).

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Not only nouns: verbs and adjectives join in, too

The first part of a compound does not have to be a noun. German also uses **verb stems, adjectives, prepositions**:

TYPE	EXAMPLE	PARTS	IN ENGLISH
noun + noun	der Wohnzimmertisch	Wohnzimmer + Tisch	living room table
verb + noun	das Schlafzimmer	schlaf(en) + Zimmer	bedroom
adjective + noun	die Großmutter	groß + Mutter	grandmother
preposition + noun	der Nachteil	nach + Teil	disadvantage
noun + adjective	zuckerfrei	Zucker + frei	sugar-free
adjective + adjective	dunkelblau	dunkel + blau	dark blue

When a verb joins a compound, **it drops the infinitive ending**: schlafen → Schlaf-, waschen → Wasch- (die Waschmaschine), fahren → Fahr- (die Fahrkarte).

Building words with endings — where your vocabulary doubles

Next to compounds there is a second mechanism: **suffixes and prefixes**. Once you know one word, you get four or five related words for free.

ENDING	WHAT IT DOES	EXAMPLE	ARTICLE
-ung	turns a verb into a noun	wohnen → die Wohnung	always die
-heit / -keit	turns an adjective into a noun	frei → die Freiheit	always die
-er	gives the person or tool that does it	arbeiten → der Arbeiter	always der
-in	makes a person feminine	der Lehrer → die Lehrerin	always die
-chen / -lein	makes it smaller	das Haus → das Häuschen	always das
un-	reverses the meaning	möglich → unmöglich	—
-los	makes it "less"	Arbeit → arbeitslos	—
-bar	makes it "able"	essen → essbar	—

The right-hand column is exactly what the [article page](#) is about: **the article is read from the end of the word**. The same rule for compounds and for derived words.

The best way to show how this system works is to see what grows out of a single root — **Arbeit** (work):

- **arbeiten** — to work
- **der Arbeiter · die Arbeiterin** — worker
- **der Arbeitgeber** — employer (work + giver)
- **der Arbeitnehmer** — employee (work + taker)
- **arbeitslos** — unemployed
- **die Arbeitslosigkeit** — unemployment
- **der Arbeitsplatz** — workplace
- **die Arbeitserlaubnis** — work permit

① Eight words, one root. You did not memorise them one by one — **you knew one and built seven**. This is how your vocabulary grows after A2.

What nobody tells you: cutting in the wrong place

The most common mistake when splitting a long word is **cutting in the wrong place**. A hint: German words end in **familiar chunks** like -ung · -heit · -keit · -schaft · -platz · -zimmer · -haus. Find that first, then cut backwards.

WORD	WRONG CUT	RIGHT CUT
Lebensmittel	~~Leben + Smittel~~	Lebens + Mittel — groceries
Versicherung	~~Ver + Sicherung~~	ver-sicher-ung — insurance
Aufenthaltserlaubnis	~~Aufenthalts + Erlaubnis~~	Aufenthalts + Erlaubnis — residence permit

The linking sound belongs to **the part in front**, not the one behind. **Arbeitsplatz** = Arbeit + s + Platz.

The second mistake: **assuming every long word is a compound**. **Versicherung** · **Entschuldigung** · **Verabredung** are not compounds, they are **derived** words — prefix + root + suffix. In those you look for the **suffix**, not the last part: if you see **-ung**, the article is **die**.

- ① In practice there is only one question: **can the final part stand alone as a word?** Platz yes → compound. **-ung** no → derived. Either way the article is read from the end, so the result does not change.

07 06:00

What to do this week

This is the last topic of A2, and it has an interesting side: **you practise it on the street**.

- Look at a German supermarket shelf (or a photo of one). Split every long word you see, **starting from the end**.
- **Guess** the article first, then check. If you know the last part, you are supposed to know it.
- Pick a word you know (**Haus** · **Arbeit** · **Fahr-**) and write five words derived from it.
- When you learn a new long word, write it in your notebook **together with its parts**: **die Aufenthaltserlaubnis** = **Aufenthalt + Erlaubnis**. Write it as one piece and you will forget it; write it in parts and you learn the system.

- ① **A2 is done**. From here on it is B1: prepositions that stick to verbs, indirect speech and the Konjunktiv. But first go through these eleven topics once more on the [A2 path](#) — they are all lined up in order.

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Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+7

Take the full test

13 questions · timed · rule breakdown at the end



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