

German conversation reflexes: Genau, Echt?, Na ja...

— GESPRÄCHSPARTIKELN

Conversation reflexes are one-word reactions you give without building a sentence: Genau to agree, Echt? when surprised, Kein Ding to thanks, Alles klar to close.

You say “Yes, that is correct” — a German says one word: **Genau**. A conversation is made of four moments (agreeing, being surprised, brushing off, closing) and each has its own reflex. **Learn to spot the moment, not the word.**

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01 00:10

The moment: they are telling a story and you hunt for a sentence

SHORTCUT ⚡ A conversation has four moments: **agreeing · being surprised · brushing off · closing**. Take one word from each: **Genau · Ach so · Kein Ding · Alles klar**. Don’t memorise words, learn to spot the **moment**.

Your German is correct, yet with a German you still sound “foreign”. The reason is usually not the words. The other person tells you something; you either answer with a full sentence or listen in silence. A German does neither: **they give a reflex**.

Morgen soll es regnen.

It’s supposed to rain tomorrow. → the other person gave you a piece of information.

Ja, das ist richtig.

Yes, that's right. → grammatically flawless, but in conversation it sounds like an exam answer.

✓ Genau, das habe ich auch gehört.

Exactly, I heard that too. → what a German says at that moment.

The third line is not a shortened version of the first; it does a different job. **Ja, das ist richtig** hands over **information**; **Genau** is a **signal**: “I heard you, I agree, keep going.” Signals like this keep a conversation alive.

- ① This page is not a word list, it is a **decision map**. First find out which moment you are in, then take that moment's word. All of these words are spoken German; they do not appear in formal writing.

02 01:00

You already do this in English

When someone is right, you don't say “Yes, that is correct.” “Exactly” comes out on its own; you don't even think. When you're surprised: “oh” or “really?”; when it doesn't matter: “no worries”; when you finish: “alright then”, “see you”. All of these are reflexes.

IN ENGLISH	IN GERMAN	WHICH MOMENT
exactly	Genau.	agreeing
right, true	Stimmt.	agreeing
oh, I see	Ach so.	surprise
really?	Echt?	surprise
no worries	Kein Ding.	brushing off
well ... so-so	Na ja ...	brushing off
alright then	Alles klar.	closing
see you	Bis dann!	closing

You didn't know the German word, but you already know the reflex. All that is left to learn is the equivalent.

Der Kurs fällt heute aus.

The class is cancelled today.

✓ Ach so. Dann bleibe ich zu Hause.

Oh, I see. Then I'll stay at home. → the same moment as your English “oh, I see”.

That is why learning reflexes is not like learning grammar: there is no new rule, only the German version of **something you already do**. The one difference is speed. You say the English reflex without thinking; the German one has to reach that speed.

Table: the four moments of a conversation

A conversation is made of four moments. The other person says something you agree with (**agreeing**), gives new information (**surprise**), thanks you or apologises (**brushing off**), or the conversation ends (**closing**). Each moment has its own reflex.

MOMENT OF THE CONVERSATION	WHAT YOU SAY IN ENGLISH	GERMAN REFLEX
1 - Agreeing	exactly - right	Genau . - Stimmt .
2 - Surprise	oh I see - really?	Ach so . - Echt?
3 - Brushing off	no worries - well ...	Kein Ding . - Na ja .
4 - Closing	alright then - see you	Alles klar . - Mach's gut .

Four moments, eight words. A conversation rarely steps outside these; the rest is sentences you already know. **The order is:** first which moment you are in, then which word.

Spotting the moment is easier than remembering the word. When the other person finishes a sentence, ask yourself one question: **is this a fair point, new information, a thank-you or a goodbye?** Once the answer is clear, the word comes by itself.

Heute ist ja Feiertag.

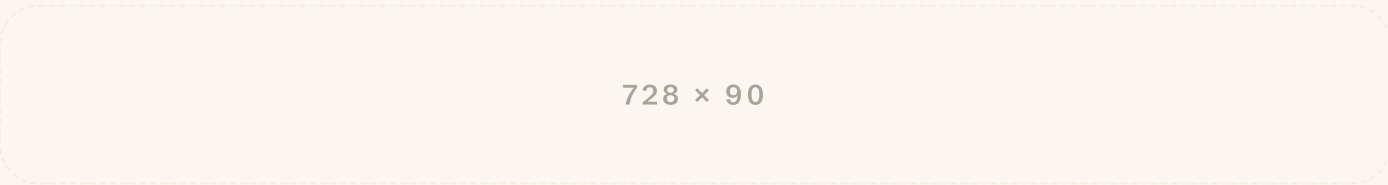
It's a public holiday today, after all.

✓

Stimmt, das habe ich vergessen.

Right, I forgot. → moment 1: you agree, and you have only just noticed.

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Moment 1 - agreeing: not all five mean “yes”

Ja answers a **question**; these five answer a **statement**. That is the difference. The other person said something and you show that you agree. All five look like “yes”, but each does a separate job.

REFLEX	EXACT SENSE	WHICH MOMENT
Genau.	"exactly , just so"	the other person said what you were thinking
Stimmt.	"right , true"	you have only just noticed , you find it correct
Eben.	"that's just it"	you were already saying that
Passt.	"works for me"	confirming a time , plan or number
Alles klar .	"got it"	you have taken the instruction , matter closed

Genau is the word you will hear most in Germany. Germans joke about it themselves; that is where this account gets its name.

Du kommst also am Montag?

So you're coming on Monday?

✓ **Genau.**

Exactly. → the other person said what you were thinking.

Um acht am Bahnhof?

At eight at the station?

✓ **Passt.**

Works for me. → confirming time and place.

Die Wohnung ist viel zu teuer.

The flat is far too expensive.

✓ **Eben! Das habe ich doch gesagt.**

Exactly! That's what I said. → you were already saying it.

- ① A warning about inflation: every learner glues **Genau** onto the end of every sentence. Two or three times per conversation is enough; for the rest, rotate between **Stimmt**, **Eben** and **Passt**.

05 03:40

Moment 2 • surprise: new information arrived, don't stay silent

The other person has told you something new. The reflex for this moment gives no information, it says **"I'm listening."** In Germany, listening silently does not read as interest but as **lack of interest**; without a reflex, the other person stops telling their story.

REFLEX	EXACT SENSE	WHICH MOMENT
Ach so .	"oh, is that so"	you have just understood the reason
Echt?	"really?"	you are surprised , you want to hear more
Wirklich?	"truly?"	same job , a notch more polite
Krass .	"wow"	youth slang , big news
Ach was!	"no way!"	you don't believe it ; friendly settings only

Krass and **Ach was!** are casual words. At work or in a formal talk, **Wirklich?** or **Ach so.** is enough.

Ich ziehe nächsten Monat nach Hamburg.

I'm moving to Hamburg next month.

✓ **Echt?** Warum denn?

Really? Why? → you're surprised and want to hear more.

Ich komme später, mein Zug hat Verspätung.

I'll be late, my train is delayed.

✓ **Ach so,** kein Problem.

Oh, I see, no problem. → you have just learnt the reason.

After a surprise reflex, a short question often follows: **Warum denn?** · **Seit wann?** · **Und dann?** The reflex opens the door, the question keeps the conversation going. Whoever uses both is remembered as a "good listener".

06 04:40

Moment 3 · brushing off: what to say to thanks and apologies

Someone thanked you or made a small apology. In English you say "no problem", "don't worry about it", "it's nothing". German has ready-made words for this moment too; which one you pick depends on **how familiar you are**.

REFLEX	EXACT SENSE	WHICH MOMENT
Kein Ding .	"no worries"	friendly reply to thanks
Kein Problem .	"no problem"	works everywhere , neutral
Passt schon .	"it's fine , forget it"	you forgive a small slip
Macht nichts .	"doesn't matter"	polite reply to an apology
Na ja ...	"well ... so-so"	careful : not positive , see the trap below

To a formal thank-you (**Vielen Dank!**) the safest reply is still **Gern geschehen.** or **Bitte.** The ones in this table are everyday-speech replies.

Danke dir!

Thanks!

✓ **Kein Ding.**

No worries. → a friendly reply to a friendly thank-you.

Entschuldigung, dass ich zu spät komme.

Sorry I'm late.

✓ **Macht nichts. Wir haben gerade erst angefangen.**

Doesn't matter. We only just started.



TRAP 01

"Na ja" is not a compliment

Wie war der Film?

How was the film?

✗ **~~Na ja ...~~**

(when you meant "well, it was good") → the other person hears "I didn't like it".

✓ **Ganz gut!**

Not bad, it was good. → if you liked it.

✓ **Richtig gut!**

Really good! → if you really liked it.

English speakers take **Na ja** for a shrugging "well, not bad"; to a German ear it hides a **"not really"**. If you liked something, don't use this word. **Ganz gut** is a mild "it was good", **Richtig gut** says you really liked it.

07 05:40

Two traps: the wrong reflex at the wrong moment

Pick the right reflex for the wrong moment and the meaning turns **upside down**. The two most common places are here: answering a negative question and answering a request.



TRAP 02

You don't say "ja" to a negative question: doch

Hast du keine Zeit?

Don't you have time?

✗ ~~Ja~~, ich habe Zeit.

→ **Ja** is heard as "yes, I have no time"; it clashes with the sentence that follows.

✓ **Doch!** Ich habe Zeit.

Sure I do! I have time.

If the question is negative and you want to say the **opposite**, the answer is **doch**, not **ja**. English has no separate word: to "Don't you have time?" you just say "Yes, I do." German keeps a special word for it. If you **agree** with the negative question, you say **Nein, leider nicht.**: no, unfortunately not. Details on the [questions](#) page.



TRAP 03

"Genau" doesn't fit everywhere

Kannst du mir helfen?

Can you help me?

✗ ~~Genau.~~

→ it is no answer to a request; it just hangs there.

✓ **Na klar!**

Of course!

✓ **Klar, mach ich.**

Sure, I'll do it.

Genau confirms **something that was said**: "exactly, right." It fits when the other person is asking you to confirm a fact (**Du kommst also am Montag?**). But it is no answer to a **request**, and it is the foreign-speaker giveaway people catch most often. Requests have their own reflexes: **Na klar** • **Klar** • **Klar doch** • **Gerne**.

✓ **Na klar, ich helfe dir gern.**

Of course, I'm happy to help you. → the reflex for a request, plus a short sentence after it.

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08 06:30

Moment 4 • closing: ending a conversation is a skill of its own

A German conversation doesn't end all at once; first someone **starts the closing**, then comes the goodbye. **Tschüss** on its own feels a bit abrupt. Germans put a closing reflex in front of it.

REFLEX	EXACT SENSE	WHICH MOMENT
Alles klar , dann ...	"alright then"	starts the closing
Also gut .	"well , okay"	signal to get going
Wir hören uns .	"we'll talk"	closing a call or a message
Mach's gut!	"take care"	friendly goodbye
Bis dann!	"see you then"	neutral , for anyone
Schönen Tag noch!	"have a nice day"	cashier , neighbour , any stranger

The order of a closing: first the signal (**Alles klar** • **Also gut**), then the goodbye (**Bis dann** • **Tschüss**). The gap between them is the gap between rude and natural.

✓ **Alles klar, dann bis später. Tschüss!**

Alright then, see you later. Bye!

Tschüss.

Bye. → not wrong, but abrupt on its own; put a closing signal in front.

✓ **Danke, schönen Tag noch!**

Thanks, have a nice day! → at the till, to someone you don't know.

Mach's gut! is a friendly goodbye that belongs to the **du** world. To a cashier, a neighbour or any stranger, **Schönen Tag noch!** fits better; in the evening, **Schönen Abend noch!** All the goodbyes are on the [greetings and goodbyes](#) page.

09 07:20

What nobody tells you: a reflex's job is not to give information

So far we have placed words into moments. Now the real idea: a reflex's job is **not to give information but to give a signal**. **Genau** says nothing new; it says "I'm here, I'm listening, go on."

In English you make sounds while you listen: "uh-huh • yeah • oh really". The same is expected in German: a reflex every two or three sentences. If you give none, you are taken to be "not listening, bored, angry", and not because of your German but because of the **silence**.

HOW IT IS SAID	WHAT IS UNDERSTOOD
Ach so . — flat and short	"I understand"
Aaach sooo ... — drawn out	"so that's how it is" , with reproach in it
Na ja . — short	"well , so-so"
Na ja ... — drawn out	"not good at all"

Tone changes the word. Choosing the right word and missing the tone is worse than missing the word.

✓ **Ach so.**

Flat and short → "I understand".

Aaach sooo ...

Drawn out → "so that's how it is". Same word, with reproach.

✗ ~~**Genau. Genau. Genau.**~~

→ stacked like this you sound both robotic and uninterested. Spread the reflexes over the four moments.

- ① **An honest note:** all of this is **spoken** German. It doesn't appear in formal writing, in emails or in the writing part of an exam; there you build full sentences. Reflexes are for the street, forms are for paper.

10 08:10

Three scenes: this is how real conversation sounds

Three short scenes, eight reflexes. Every sentence in between is A1. What makes the conversation German is not the sentences but **the words you put between them**.

- ① **1 • Neighbour, on the stairs** — surprise + agreeing

— **Der Aufzug ist wieder kaputt.**

— The lift is broken again.

✓ — **Ach so, deswegen hab ich niemanden gehört.**

— Oh, I see, that's why I haven't heard anyone.

✓ — **Genau. Seit gestern.**

— Exactly. Since yesterday.

- ① **2 • At work, you apologise** — brushing off + closing

— **Sorry, ich hab die Mail vergessen.**

— Sorry, I forgot the email.

- ✓ — **Kein Ding.** Kann passieren.
— No worries. It happens.
- ✓ — **Alles klar,** ich schick sie gleich.
— Alright, I'll send it right away.

① 3 • **Saying goodbye** — closing

- ✓ — **Also gut,** ich muss los.
— Well, okay, I have to go.
- ✓ — **Mach's gut!**
— Take care!
- ✓ — **Bis dann!** Schönen Tag noch.
— See you! Have a nice day.

hab and **schick** in the scenes are spoken-German contractions; in writing they become **habe** and **schicke**. **Sorry** has also settled into everyday German; in formal settings use **Entschuldigung** instead.

11 09:00

What to do this week

Don't memorise the list. Take **one** word from each moment and make the four automatic. Most of conversation runs on these four; the rest is decoration.

- **Step 1 • spot the moment.** Before you search for a word, find out which moment you are in: agreeing • surprise • brushing off • closing. There is no fifth.
- **Step 2 • four words are enough.** **Genau • Ach so • Kein Ding • Alles klar.** The others come once these four have settled.
- **Step 3 • don't stay silent.** Give a signal every two or three sentences. The right word used late beats no word at all.

✓ **Alles klar, dann bis morgen!**

Alright then, see you tomorrow!

- ① **Write it in your notebook:** four moments, four words. Tomorrow try only **one** of them: **Genau**. A week from now you will be giving all four without thinking; that is the day the real difference is heard.

12 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

12 09 : 50

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+4

Take the full test

10 questions · timed · rule breakdown at the end



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