

dürfen

— DAS MODALVERB DÜRFEN

dürfen is a German modal verb meaning “to be allowed to”: ich darf · du darfst · er darf.

dürfen carries the meaning of **permission** and “may”; in the negative it means **forbidden**. The biggest trap: **nicht dürfen** is not “don’t have to” — it is “must NOT” (the prohibition itself).

CONTENTS

01 The conjugation table 02 When to use it 03 Sentence structure

04 The mix-up: negative = FORBIDDEN 05 Traps 06 The other modal verbs 07 Test yourself

01 00:00

The conjugation table

With modal verbs, the **ich** and **er/sie/es** forms are **exactly the same** and take no ending at all. Memorise this once; it helps with every modal verb.

The only endings you see in the table are **du** (-st), **ihr** (-t) and **wir/Sie/sie** (-en).

PERSON	FORM	HINT
ich	darf	no ending
du	darfst	adds -st
er / sie / es	darf	same as ich
wir	dürfen	infinitive form
ihr	dürft	adds -t
Sie / sie	dürfen	infinitive form

The umlaut (ü) appears only in the plural persons (wir, ihr, Sie, sie); in the singular (ich, du, er) the letter stays ‘a’.

02 01:10

When to use it

dürfen turns up in three main situations: asking for or giving formal permission, general permissions based on rules, and polite offers.

SITUATION	GERMAN SENTENCE	ENGLISH
Asking formal permission	Darf ich hier parken?	May I park here?
Rule-based permission	Man darf hier nicht rauchen .	Smoking is not allowed here (it is forbidden) .
Permission from a parent	Mein Vater sagt , ich darf heute länger wach bleiben .	My dad says I'm allowed to stay up later today .
Polite offer	Darf ich Ihnen helfen?	May I help you? (Can I give you a hand?)

man is the pronoun for “people in general / one / you”. English usually says “you” or “people”, or uses a passive: “smoking isn’t allowed here”.

03 02:20

Sentence structure

The rule is simple: **the modal verb sits conjugated in second position**, and **the main verb goes to the very END of the sentence as an infinitive**.

In the negative, **nicht** comes after the modal verb and before the main verb; it marks the prohibition.

In a question, the modal verb jumps to the front (verb first), the subject moves to second place, and the main verb still stays at the end.

SENTENCE TYPE	STRUCTURE	EXAMPLE
Positive	Subject + modal (2nd) + ... + infinitive (last)	Ich darf heute nach Hause gehen .
Negative	Subject + modal (2nd) + nicht + ... + infinitive (last)	Ich darf heute nicht nach Hause gehen .
Yes/no question	Modal (1st) + subject + ... + infinitive (last)?	Darf ich heute nach Hause gehen?
Question word	Question word + modal (2nd) + subject + ... + infinitive (last)?	Wann darf ich nach Hause gehen?

The main verb is **never conjugated**; it always sits at the end of the sentence as an infinitive (e.g. **gehen, machen, schlafen**).

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04 03:30

The mix-up: negative = FORBIDDEN

In English, “you don’t have to go” (no need) and “you must not go” (forbidden) sound close enough to get mixed up. In German the difference is sharp:

nicht dürfen = **FORBIDDEN** (stop, don’t do it).

nicht müssen = **NO NEED** (do it if you like, skip it if you don’t).

The negatives of these two modal verbs are complete opposites; mix them up and you lose the meaning entirely.

GERMAN	MEANING	ENGLISH
Du darfst nicht rauchen .	Forbidden	You must not smoke . / Smoking is forbidden .
Du musst nicht rauchen .	No need / not obligatory	You don't have to smoke (if you want to , go ahead) .

English “mustn’t” and “don’t have to” already differ, but many learners hear “don’t have to” and reach for **nicht dürfen**. Whichever modal verb you choose decides the result.

Traps



TRAP 01

Conjugating the main verb or putting it in second place

If the modal verb is in second position, the main verb **must stay at the end as an infinitive**. Learners instinctively pull the main verb into second place or conjugate it too.

✗ **Ich darf gehe nach Hause.**

gehe is conjugated and in third position; both the place and the form are wrong.

✓ **Ich darf nach Hause gehen.**

The modal **darf** is in second position, the main verb **gehen** is an infinitive at the end.



TRAP 02

Saying "forbidden" when you mean "no need"

In English, "you don't need to come" and "don't come" are easy to blur together. German asks for **two different modal verbs**, and the meaning changes completely.

✗ **Du darfst nicht kommen.**

this means "you are FORBIDDEN to come"

✓ **Du musst nicht kommen.**

You don't have to come. (come if you like)



TRAP 03

Adding a personal ending to the modal

Regular verbs take **-e** for ich (ich **gehe**). Modal verbs **do not**.

✗ **Ich darfe nach Hause gehen.**

a modal takes no ending for ich

✓ **Ich darf nach Hause gehen.**

I may go home. (I have permission)

06 07:00

The other modal verbs

07 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

07 07 : 30

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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GENAU — NOT RULES, THE MOMENT IT CLICKS.

