

Infinitive with zu

— INFINITIV MIT „ZU“

The infinitive with zu is the German construction where an infinitive is introduced by “zu”: zu, um...zu, ohne...zu.

English already splits its infinitives in two: “I can go”, but “I hope **to** go.” German does the same, and **zu** is its “to”. After a modal verb the infinitive comes bare; after almost every other verb, **zu** slips in front of it. The moment you learn **um ... zu** (“in order to”), your sentences double in length — the most visible win at B1.

CONTENTS

- 01 The one question: zu or no zu 02 You already do this in English
- 03 Verbs that take zu: a group to recognise, not a list to memorise
- 04 um ... zu: the structure that lengthens your sentences at once 05 ohne ... zu and (an)statt ... zu
- 06 The part nobody tells you: the comma has split in two 07 What to do this week 08 Test yourself

01 00:10

The one question: zu or no zu

⚡ **SHORTCUT** If the second verb sits at the end of the clause as an infinitive: **if the first verb is a modal, there is NO zu; if not, there IS zu.** There is no third option.

When a German sentence has two verbs, the second one **always goes to the end and stays an infinitive**. The only question is whether you put **zu** in front of it.

✓ Ich **will** heute früh **schlafen**.

I want to sleep early today. — modal, no zu.

✓ Ich **versuche**, heute früh **zu schlafen**.

I'm trying to sleep early today. — not a modal, so zu.

02 01:10

You already do this in English

English makes the same split — it just hides it. *I can go* (bare) · *I forgot **to** go* (with “to”). German's **zu** is that little “to”. The rule about *which* verbs take it is close enough that your ear is a decent guide.

ENGLISH	GERMAN	WHAT'S HAPPENING
I can go	Ich kann gehen .	modal → bare infinitive
I forgot to go	Ich habe vergessen zu gehen .	ordinary verb → zu
I came in order to go	Ich bin gekommen , um zu gehen .	purpose → um ... zu
He left without paying	Er ist gegangen , ohne zu bezahlen .	negative → ohne ... zu

English “**so that**” and “**in order to**” look like two ways of saying the same thing. In German they are two different structures: **um ... zu** and **damit**. You will see the difference in a moment — it is a classic B1 exam question.

03 02:10

Verbs that take zu: a group to recognise, not a list to memorise

You do not need to memorise them one by one — **every verb that is not a modal belongs to this group**. Still, it helps to see the most common ones, because these are the ones that come up when you speak:

VERB	MEANING	EXAMPLE
versuchen	to try	Ich versuche , Deutsch zu lernen .
vergessen	to forget	Ich habe vergessen , dich anzurufen .
anfangen / beginnen	to start	Er fängt an zu arbeiten .
aufhören	to stop	Hör auf zu rauchen!
hoffen	to hope	Ich hoffe , dich bald zu sehen .
versprechen	to promise	Er verspricht , pünktlich zu sein .
vorhaben	to plan · to intend	Wir haben vor , umzuziehen .
Lust / Zeit haben	to feel like it / to have time	Hast du Lust , ins Kino zu gehen?

Also, “**it is ...**” patterns always take zu: **Es ist wichtig / schwer / schön / verboten, ... zu ...** — a very handy opening line in a written exam.



TRAP 1

With a separable verb, zu goes in the middle

If the verb is separable, **zu** does not go in front — it goes **right into the middle**, and everything is written as **one word**.

✗ Ich habe vergessen, dich ~~zu anrufen~~.

zu was left outside.

✓ Ich habe vergessen, dich **anzurufen**.

I forgot to call you. — an + zu + rufen, all one word.

Same logic every time: aufstehen → aufzustehen · einkaufen → einzukaufen · umziehen → umzuziehen · mitkommen → mitzukommen.

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04 03:40

um ... zu: the structure that lengthens your sentences at once

Wherever you would say “*in order to ...*” or just “*to ...*” in English (*I get up early to catch the train*), German uses **um ... zu**. This structure earns the most points at B1 because it lets you **add a reason to every sentence**.

✓ Ich lerne Deutsch, **um** in Deutschland **zu** arbeiten.

I’m learning German in order to work in Germany.

✓ Ich stehe früh auf, **um** den Zug **zu** erreichen.

I get up early to catch the train.

um goes first, **zu** + infinitive goes last. Whatever is in between stays in the middle. And **the comma is compulsory**.



TRAP 2

If the subject changes, um ... zu does not work

This is the exam's favourite question. In an **um ... zu** structure **both clauses must have the same subject**. If the subject changes, you need **damit** — and **damit** is a subordinating conjunction, so it sends the verb to the end.

✗ Ich erkläre es langsam, ~~um~~ du es ~~zu~~ verstehen.

The subject changed (ich → du) — um...zu cannot be used.

✓ Ich erkläre es langsam, **damit** du es **verstehst**.

I'm explaining it slowly so that you understand it. — damit + verb at the end.

✓ Ich lerne Deutsch, **um** es **zu verstehen**.

Same subject (ich = ich) — um...zu is correct.

① Quick check: before you build the sentence, **say the two subjects side by side**. "I ... I" → **um ... zu**. "I ... you" → **damit**. With the same subject **damit** is also correct but sounds heavy; **um ... zu** is preferred.

05 05:00

ohne ... zu and (an)statt ... zu

The same pattern has two siblings, and English covers both with a single "-ing" form ("without paying", "instead of learning"). In both, **the subject must stay the same** — the same rule as **um ... zu**.

STRUCTURE	ENGLISH	EXAMPLE
um ... zu	in order to ...	Er geht zum Arzt , um sich untersuchen zu lassen .
ohne ... zu	without ...-ing	Er ist gegangen , ohne zu bezahlen . — he left without paying
(an)statt ... zu	instead of ...-ing	Er spielt , statt zu lernen . — he plays instead of studying

In an **ohne ... zu** structure you **do not** add **nicht** — the negation is already inside **ohne**. English works the same way: nobody says "he left without not paying".

✗ Er ist gegangen, ohne ~~nicht~~ zu bezahlen.

Double negative — wrong.

✓ Er ist gegangen, ohne zu bezahlen.

He left without paying.

① This trio has **counterparts** that take over when the subject changes: **um...zu** → **damit** · **ohne...zu** → **ohne dass** · **statt...zu** → **statt dass**. All three send the verb to the end.

The part nobody tells you: the comma has split in two

Since the 2006 spelling reform, **the comma is optional with a plain zu clause**. With **um · ohne · statt**, though, it is **still compulsory**. Textbooks usually never mention the difference.

SENTENCE	COMMA	WHY
Ich versuche zu schlafen .	optional	short , plain zu
Ich versuche , heute früh zu schlafen .	recommended	longer , for readability
Ich lerne , um zu arbeiten .	compulsory	um · ohne · statt

Practical rule: **if the sentence has got long, add a comma; with a one-word infinitive, leave it out** — **Hör auf zu rauchen!** And wherever you see **um · ohne · statt**, always add it. If in doubt, add it: leaving it out where it is compulsory is a mistake; adding it where it is optional is not.

The second unspoken thing: in everyday speech **brauchen** has started to **behave like a modal**. The textbook says **Du brauchst nicht zu kommen**, but on the street you hear **Du brauchst nicht kommen**. The second is officially wrong yet common — **in the exam, write the one with zu**.

What to do this week

This structure sticks by **stretching your sentences**. Five minutes a day, one exercise:

- Write down something simple you did today: **Ich stehe früh auf**.
- Add the **reason**: ..., **um den Zug zu erreichen**.
- Build the same sentence again **with a different subject**: **Ich wecke dich früh, damit du den Zug erreichst**.
- And once more **in the negative**: **Ich bin gegangen, ohne zu frühstücken**.
- One day a week, work **only with separable verbs**: **anzurufen · aufzustehen · einzukaufen · mitzukommen**.

① Next up: time conjunctions — the **als · wenn · wann** trio and the words that set the order of two events.

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

TIPS

Know this before the test

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

01

In a two-verb sentence, the second verb takes zu

After structures like versuchen · vergessen · anfangen · Lust haben · wichtig sein, the second verb becomes **zu** + **infinitive** and stands at the end of the clause.

Ich versuche, früh zu schlafen.

02

Purpose: same subject means um zu

In a purpose clause, if the subject **stays the same**, use **um ... zu**; if it **changes**, use **damit**. **damit** never takes zu.

Ich lerne, um zu arbeiten. ·
Ich erkläre es, damit du verstehst.

03

With a separable verb, zu goes in the middle

zu sits between the prefix and the stem, and all three are written as **one word**: anrufen → anzurufen, ausgehen → auszugehen.

Ich habe vergessen, dich anzurufen.

04

After a modal there is NO zu

können · müssen · wollen · dürfen · sollen · mögen take a bare infinitive. The same goes for sehen · hören · lassen · gehen.

Ich will schlafen. · Ich gehe schwimmen.

✗ ~~Ich muss zu arbeiten.~~

✓ Ich muss arbeiten.

✗ ~~Ich habe vergessen, dich zu anrufen.~~

After a modal verb the infinitive stands **bare**; no **zu** is added.

✓ **Ich habe vergessen, dich anzurufen.**

With a separable verb, **zu** goes **in the middle**, not in front, and the word is written as one.

✗ ~~Ich erkläre es, damit du zu verstehen.~~

✓ **Ich erkläre es, damit du verstehst.**

damit is an ordinary subordinating conjunction: it wants a conjugated verb, not **zu**.

✗ ~~Er spielt, statt lernen.~~

✓ **Er spielt, statt zu lernen.**

statt and ohne also need **zu** + infinitive.

08 06 : 40

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+7

Finish the topic: take the full test

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GENAU — NOT RULES, THE MOMENT IT CLICKS.

