

Irregular verbs

— DIE UNREGELMÄSSIGEN VERBEN

Irregular verbs in the German present tense are verbs whose stem vowel changes in the du and er forms: ich fahre, du fährst.

In German irregular verbs only the du and er lines change, everything else stays put. English verbs hardly change in the present (just the -s in “he drives”), so a vowel that shifts inside the word feels strange at first — but it happens in just two spots.

CONTENTS

- 01 What changes, what doesn't 02 Three patterns
03 The vowel doesn't change but the ending still looks odd: three sound rules
04 The link to the imperative 05 Traps 06 Test yourself

01 00:10

What changes, what doesn't



SHORTCUT

The vowel changes in **only two lines**: du and er/sie/es. In the plurals the stem goes back to the infinitive.

In a regular verb the stem stays fixed and only the ending changes: **ich lerne · du lernst · er lernt**. In an irregular verb **the endings are still the same** — the only thing that changes is the vowel inside the stem, and only in the **du** and **er/sie/es** lines.

	LERNEN · REGULAR	FAHREN · IRREGULAR
ich	lerne	fahre
du	lernst	fährst
er / sie / es	lernt	fährt
wir	lernen	fahren
ihr	lernt	fahrt
sie / Sie	lernen	fahren

Four lines never changed. **Only two cells** are different. That is all an irregular verb is in the Präsens — not a table to panic about.

① That is why dictionaries list verbs as **fahren (fährt)**: the form in brackets is the **er** line, and the **du** line follows from it.

02 01:20

Three patterns

PATTERN	WHAT HAPPENS	COMMON VERBS
a → ä	The a in the stem takes an Umlaut	fahren → du fährst · schlafen → du schläfst · tragen → du trägst · fallen → du fällst · halten → du hältst · waschen → du wäschst · einladen → du lädst ein
e → i	The e in the stem becomes a short i	essen → du isst · geben → du gibst · helfen → du hilfst · sprechen → du sprichst · treffen → du triffst · nehmen → du nimmst · vergessen → du vergisst
e → ie	The e in the stem lengthens to ie	sehen → du siehst · lesen → du liest · empfehlen → du empfiehlst · stehlen → du stiehlst
au → äu	Almost just one verb	laufen → du läufst , er läuft

The difference between **e→i** and **e→ie** is **the sound**: in **essen** the **e** is short and stays short (**isst**); in **sehen** it is long and stays long (**sieht**). Say the word out loud and you will hear which group it belongs to.

- fahren → du fährst, er fährt — to go (by vehicle) / to drive
- essen → du isst, er isst — to eat
- nehmen → du nimmst, er nimmt — to take
- sprechen → du sprichst, er spricht — to speak
- sehen → du siehst, er sieht — to see
- lesen → du liest, er liest — to read

03 03:00

The vowel doesn't change but the ending still looks odd: three sound rules

In some verbs the stem already ends in **-s, -ss, -ß, -z** or **-t**. Then the ending shrinks so that sounds don't pile up. This is **not irregularity, it is pronunciation logic** — it happens with regular verbs too.

IF THE STEM ENDS IN	DU LINE	EXAMPLE
-s · -ss · -ß · -z · -tz	just -t , not -st	essen → du isst · heißen → du heißt · sitzen → du sitzt · lesen → du liest
-t · -d	an -e- slips in between	arbeiten → du arbeitest · finden → du findest
a vowel-changing verb ending in -t	the er line gets no ending	halten → er hält (not hältet) · raten → er rät

The last row is often missed: **arbeiten** is regular, so it gives **er arbeitet**. **halten** changes its vowel, so no **-e-** is inserted and it stays **er hält**.

ADVERTISEMENT



04 04:20

The link to the imperative

The vowel change you learn here carries over into the imperative — but only in the **e→i** and **e→ie** group. In the **a→ä** group the Umlaut **drops out** in the command.

VERB	DU FORM	IMPERATIVE (DU)
nehmen	du nimmst	Nimm!
geben	du gibst	Gib!
sehen	du siehst	Sieh!
fahren	du fährst	Fahr!
schlafen	du schläfst	Schlafe!

Short rule: **the e-change stays in the imperative, the a-change doesn't**. There is no command **Fähr!**.

Traps



TRAP 01

Carrying the change over to wir and ihr

The most common mistake. The vowel change is **only** in the **du** and **er/sie/es** lines. In the plurals the stem goes back to its infinitive form.

✗ **Wir fähren** nach Berlin.

no Umlaut in the plural

✓ **Wir fahren** nach Berlin.

We're going to Berlin.

✓ **Ihr esst** zu viel.

You eat too much. — the ihr line doesn't change either



TRAP 02

nehmen → nimmst: two letters change at once

nehmen is the sneakiest verb in the group. The vowel changes *and* the **h** drops out while the **n** doubles: ich nehme → du nimmst → er nimmt. There is no du nehmst.

✗ **Du nehmst** den Bus.

wrong conjugation

✓ **Du nimmst** den Bus.

You take the bus.



TRAP 03

du isst / er isst — both are the same

Because the stem ends in **-ss**, the **du** line takes just **-t**, not **-st**. The result is that **du** and **er** look identical: **du isst • er isst**. The same happens with **lesen**: **du liest • er liest**.

✗ **Du isstst zu schnell.**

the ending has been added twice

✓ **Du isst zu schnell.**

You eat too fast.



TRAP 04

Thinking werden and wissen belong on this list

werden and **wissen** fit none of these three patterns; you learn them on their own. **ich weiß • du weißt • er weiß** — there is no **ich wisse**. For **werden**, see the [sein • haben • werden](#) page.

✓ **Ich weiß es nicht.**

I don't know.

06 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

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+7

Take the full test

13 questions · timed · rule breakdown at the end

↗

ADVERTISEMENT



728 × 250

GENAU — NOT RULES, THE MOMENT IT CLICKS.
GENAU · FREE GERMAN LIBRARY