

kein & nicht

— KEIN UND NICHT

kein and nicht are the two basic German negation words: kein negates a noun (Ich habe kein Auto), nicht negates everything else.

kein or **nicht** — German has two separate ways to say “not”. English makes the same split without you noticing: “I have *no* car” but “the car is *not* new”. German makes you choose **in every sentence**. The decision takes three seconds: is the thing you are negating a noun, or not?

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01 00:12

One question: are you negating a noun?

⚡ SHORTCUT If there is a noun with no article (or with **ein**), use **kein**; otherwise **nicht**. Three seconds: **are you negating a noun, or a verb?**

One question decides it: **are you saying “no” or “not”?** If a *noun* is missing (“no car”), it is **kein**; for everything else it is **nicht**.

- ✓ **Ich habe **kein** Auto.**
I have no car. → the noun itself is missing
- ✓ **Das Auto ist **nicht** neu.**
The car is not new. → the adjective is negated
- ✗ **Ich habe ~~nicht ein~~ Auto.**
Wrong — there is no **nicht ein** here; that is **kein**.

- ① Build the shortcut like this: **kein** = **nicht** + **ein**, fused into one word (compare English *no* = *not a*). That is why the two never stand side by side.

The three-second decision flow

- 1 • Is the thing you are negating a **noun**? If not → **nicht**.
- 2 • If it is a noun: does it have **ein/eine** in front of it, or **no article at all**? → **kein**.
- 3 • Is there **der/die/das** or **mein/dein** in front of the noun? → **nicht**.

POSITIVE	NEGATIVE	WHY
Ich habe ein Auto .	Ich habe kein Auto .	ein → kein
Ich trinke Kaffee .	Ich trinke keinen Kaffee .	noun without article → kein
Ich habe das Auto .	Ich habe das Auto nicht .	definite article → nicht
Das ist mein Buch .	Das ist nicht mein Buch .	possessive → nicht
Ich komme heute .	Ich komme heute nicht .	no noun → nicht

You can hear the difference in the meaning too: **kein Auto** = *I don't have a car at all*. **das Auto nicht** = *not that car* (some other one). The English split between “no” and “not” follows the same line.

kein declines — like ein, but it has a plural too

kein declines exactly like **ein**. One difference: **ein** has no plural, **kein** does — because “none at all” is something you need to say about plurals too (*no cars*).

	DER (MASCULINE)	DIE (FEMININE)	DAS (NEUTER)	PLURAL
Nominativ	kein	keine	kein	keine
Akkusativ	keinen	keine	kein	keine
Dativ	keinem	keiner	keinem	keinen

In the Akkusativ only the **masculine** changes — just like **ein** → **einen**, **der** → **den**. That is why it is **Ich trinke keinen Kaffee** (der Kaffee) but **Ich trinke keine Milch** (die Milch).

The same endings work for **mein** • **dein** • **sein** • **ihr**. Once the **kein** table is in your head, you have solved five words at once.

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04 02:30

Where nicht goes — the real problem

The position of **nicht** is not fixed, but the rule is intuitive: **it goes to the end of the sentence — except that it stands in front of these five things.**

NICHT STANDS IN FRONT OF	EXAMPLE	ENGLISH
an adjective / a word describing a state	Ich bin nicht müde .	I'm not tired .
an infinitive at the end	Ich kann heute nicht kommen .	I can't come today .
Partizip II (Perfekt)	Ich habe nicht gearbeitet .	I didn't work .
a separated prefix	Ich rufe dich nicht an .	I'm not calling you .
a place / direction phrase	Ich gehe nicht ins Kino .	I'm not going to the cinema .

Sum the pattern up in one sentence: **nicht goes immediately to the left of the sentence's “closing piece”**. If there is no such piece, it drops to the very end: **Ich komme heute nicht**.

Time information stands **before nicht**: Ich komme *heute* nicht. Reverse it (**nicht heute**) and the meaning changes: “not today (but tomorrow)”. So it is not wrong, but you are saying **something else**.

05 03:40

Five traps



TRAP 01

Jobs and nationalities: kein

✓ Ich bin **kein** Lehrer.

I'm not a teacher.

✗ Ich bin ~~nicht~~ Lehrer.

It trips the ear — Germans don't say this.

Jobs, nationalities and religions are used without an article in German (**Ich bin Lehrer**) — and a noun without an article is negated with **kein**. English keeps “a” here (“I'm a teacher”), which is why this catches people. The rule is not new; it is step 2 of the flow.



TRAP 02

kein ≠ nichts

- ✓ Ich habe **nichts** gegessen.

I ate nothing. → a pronoun standing alone

- ✓ Ich habe **kein** Brot gegessen.

I ate no bread. → a noun follows

nichts is “nothing” and stands **on its own**. **kein** attaches to a noun. The same logic applies to people: **niemand** (nobody) stands alone, **kein Mensch** goes with the noun.



TRAP 03

Saying “yes” to a negative question: doch

- ✓ — Kommst du **nicht**? — **Doch!**

— Aren’t you coming? — Yes, I am!

- ✗ — Kommst du nicht? — ~~Ja~~.

Confusing — “yes, I’m not coming” or “yes, I’m coming”?

German has a special word for **contradicting** a negative question: **doch**. English has no single word for it — you have to add “I am!” — so English speakers instinctively say **ja** and are misunderstood.



TRAP 04

Two negatives don’t stack

- ✓ Ich habe **nie** Zeit.

I never have time.

- ✗ Ich habe ~~nie keine~~ Zeit.

Wrong — the same mistake as “I don’t have no time”.

Some languages mark negation twice, and English slang does too (“I ain’t got no time”). Standard German marks it once. **nie** • **nichts** • **niemand** • **nirgendwo** are already negative, so you never add **kein/nicht** next to them.



TRAP 05

Contrastive negation: nicht moves forward

✓ Ich fahre **nicht heute**, sondern morgen.

I'm going not today but tomorrow.

If you negate **one single element** instead of the whole sentence, **nicht** moves in front of that element and is usually followed by **sondern**. This is not a rule violation — it is deliberate emphasis.

06 05:20

What to do this week

The mistakes here don't come from not knowing the rule — they come from **the decision taking too long**. The way to shorten it is to build the same sentence in two forms.

- Ich habe kein ... — three things you don't have
- Das ist nicht ... — three things that aren't true
- Ich bin kein ... — one thing you are not (a job or type)

① When you hesitate in a sentence, ask yourself: am I saying “no” or “not”? **No → kein. Not → nicht.** This two-word check works faster than the whole table.

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

TAP THE WORDS

07 06:00

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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