

Nouns

— DIE SUBSTANTIVE

German nouns (Substantive) are the words that name things; they are always capitalised and carry a gender: das Haus, die Haustür.

Every German noun starts with a **capital letter** — even in the middle of a sentence. English only capitalises names, so your eye keeps catching on it. Here: how to spot a noun, why the last part of a compound gives the article, and why you learn the plural together with the noun.

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Capital letters — no exceptions

⚡ SHORTCUT The article of a compound noun comes from its **last word**: das Haus + die Tür = **die** Haustür.

German is almost the only major language that writes nouns with a **capital letter** even in the middle of a sentence. It is not decoration: as you read, your eye finds where each noun begins, which is a real help in long sentences.

✓ **Ich kaufe Brot und Milch.**

I'm buying bread and milk.

✗ **Ich kaufe brot und milch.**

lower case — a spelling mistake

- **Every noun** is capitalised: **der Tisch** • **die Liebe** • **das Wetter** — concrete or abstract, it makes no difference.
- **A verb used as a noun** is capitalised too: **das Essen** (food, eating), **das Lernen** (learning).
- **An adjective used as a noun** as well: **etwas Neues** (something new), **nichts Gutes**.
- Adjectives, verbs and adverbs stay **lower case**: **Das neue Buch ist gut.**
- The formal **Sie** and **Ihnen** are capitalised — they are not nouns, but politeness works that way.

A noun comes as a set of three: article + word + plural

In English “table” is one piece of information. In German **Tisch** on its own is incomplete; without its article and plural you cannot use it in a sentence.

IN THE DICTIONARY	WHAT IT TELLS YOU	IN A SENTENCE
der Tisch, -e	masculine · plural -e	Der Tisch ist neu . · Die Tische sind neu .
das Buch, -er	neuter · plural -er + Umlaut	Das Buch ist neu . · Die Bücher sind neu .
die Frau, -en	feminine · plural -en	Die Frau kommt . · Die Frauen kommen .

The “” sign in a dictionary means “an Umlaut appears in the plural”. **Learn the word as a set of three:** article + word + plural. Collecting them one by one later is much harder.

- ① The rules for reading the article off the end of a word are on [the der · die · das page](#), and the five plural types are on [the plural page](#).

Compound nouns — German's power tool

It is not that German loves long words; it **makes words**. Writing two nouns side by side to build a new noun is allowed, and people do it constantly in everyday speech.

PARTS	COMPOUND	MEANING
das Haus + die Tür	die Haustür	front door
die Hand + der Schuh	der Handschuh	glove — literally “hand shoe”
der Zug + der Bahnhof	der Zugbahnhof	train station
die Arbeit + der Platz	der Arbeitsplatz	workplace — an -s- slipped in between
der Kühlschrank	kühl + Schrank	fridge — literally “cool cupboard”

The golden rule: the LAST word decides the article. das Haus + **die** Tür = **die** Haustür, because the last word is **Tür**. The last word carries the meaning too: a **Haustür** is a door, not a house.

- You can decode a long word you have never seen by **breaking it up**: Krankenhaus = krank (sick) + Haus (house) → hospital.
- You can **guess its article**: if you know the last part, you know the article.
- Your vocabulary multiplies: once you know Zeit, Freizeit · Arbeitszeit · Zeitung are half solved.

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Reading gender off the ending — three safe groups

ARTICLE	ENDING	EXAMPLE
die	-ung · -heit · -keit · -schaft · -ion · -tät	die Zeitung · die Freiheit · die Möglichkeit · die Nation
das	-chen · -lein · -um · -ment	das Mädchen · das Brötchen · das Museum · das Dokument
der	-er · -ling · -ismus · -or	der Lehrer · der Frühling · der Motor

The first row has almost no exceptions and covers a large part of everyday words: **if a word ends in -ung, it is die.**

Traps



TRAP 01

Taking the article of a compound from the first word

English works the same way — the last word is the head: a “house door” is a door, not a house. The trap is that learners still grab the article of the *first* noun they recognise. In German the **last word** carries both the article and the meaning.

- × **das** Haustür
taken from Haus — wrong
- ✓ **die** Haustür
taken from Tür — right



TRAP 02

Writing a compound as separate words

In German a compound noun is written **as one word**, with no space or hyphen in between. The English habit of “front door”, “train station” makes mistakes here.

✗ **die Haus Tür**

written apart

✓ **die Haustür**

written together

Exception: when three or more parts pile up and become hard to read, a hyphen is accepted — **Kaffee-Ersatz**. It is not required.



TRAP 03

Forgetting the linking -s- and -n-

Some compounds get a linking letter in the middle: **Arbeitsplatz** • **Geburtstag** • **Sonnenbrille** • **Straßenbahn**. Do not try to memorise a rule; learn the word **as a whole**.



TRAP 04

Writing a verb used as a noun in lower case

The moment a verb is used like a noun it switches to a capital letter and takes **das**: **Das Rauchen ist verboten**. (Smoking is forbidden.) If the same word stays a verb, it is lower case: **Er raucht**.

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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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