

Ich helfe ~~dich~~ dir

English has one object form: *him*. German has two — **ihn** and **ihm** — and the verb decides which one you get. Below: the full 13-row table, the **ihr** trap that catches everyone, the verbs that ignore English intuition, and the word-order rule almost no A1 book prints.

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English already does half of this

You say *I see **him***, never *I see he*. You say *I gave **him** the book*, never *I gave he the book*. Nobody taught you a rule there — you learnt *he / him, she / her, they / them* as a pair and stopped thinking about it.

That is a case system. English kept it, but only on pronouns, and only in a shrunken form: it merged the two object cases into **one** word. German never merged them. So the single English word *him* arrives in German as two different words, and which one you need depends on the verb in front of it.

✓ **Ich sehe ihn.**

I see him. → he is the thing being seen (Akkusativ)

✓ **Ich gebe ihm das Buch.**

I give him the book. → the book goes *to* him (Dativ)

Same for *her*: **Ich sehe sie** (I see her) but **Ich helfe ihr** (I help her). One English word, two German ones. This is the whole topic — everything below is just the list.

And you still have one surviving trace of the third case: *who / whom*. German runs that same split every day, out loud, with no hesitation: **wer · wen · wem**.

- ① So the mental move is not «learn a foreign concept». It is: **take the object form you already have and split it in two**. Direct object → Akkusativ. Something given, said, shown or done *to* someone → Dativ.

The table — this is the part you save

Nine rows cover every person. The four rows after that are the ones the carousel had no room for — question words and indefinites — and they inflect exactly the same way, so you get them almost for free.

PERSON	NOMINATIV	AKKUSATIV	DATIV	ENGLISH OBJECT
1st sg.	ich	mich	mir	me
2nd sg. — informal	du	dich	dir	you
3rd sg. masc.	er	ihn	ihm	him — or <i>it</i>
3rd sg. fem.	sie	sie	ihr	her — or <i>it</i>
3rd sg. neut.	es	es	ihm	it
1st pl.	wir	uns	uns	us
2nd pl. — informal	ihr	euch	euch	you (all)
3rd pl.	sie	sie	ihnen	them
polite — sg. + pl.	Sie	Sie	Ihnen	you (formal)
question word	wer	wen	wem	who / whom
impersonal	man	einen	einem	one / you in general
somebody	jemand	jemanden	jemandem	somebody
nobody	niemand	niemanden	niemandem	nobody

Do not read this table row by row. Read it by **what does not move** — that is three quarters of the work done in one look.

- **sie and es never change in the accusative.** Ich sehe sie. · Ich sehe es. Exactly like the articles **die** and **das**. Same logic, same rows.
- **uns and euch are identical in both cases.** One form, two jobs. Two full rows of the table cost you nothing.
- **Only er actually has three distinct forms:** er · ihn · ihm. If you can say those three in your sleep, the masculine is finished.
- **The polite Sie is capitalised in every case:** Sie · Sie · Ihnen. If it is capitalised mid-sentence, it is talking to a person you address formally.
- **Dativ is where the endings live:** mir · dir · ihm · ihr · uns · euch · ihnen. Say that line out loud a few times — it is the single most useful sequence on this page.

① Genitive pronouns (**meiner, seiner**) exist and you can ignore them at A2. They appear in a handful of fixed expressions and in literature, almost never in speech.

Three words that look identical and are not

The table itself is short. What actually costs learners points is that German recycles the same three or four letters for completely different jobs. Here are the collisions, named, so you recognise them the moment they appear.



TRAP 01

ihr — four jobs, one spelling

- ✓ **Ihr** kommt zu spät.

You (all) are late. → subject, 2nd person plural

- ✓ **Ich** helfe **ihr**.

I am helping her. → dative of *sie* (she)

- ✓ **Das** ist **ihr** Bruder.

That is her brother. → possessive

- ✓ **Das** ist **ihr** Haus.

That is their house. → possessive again, but plural owners

Four jobs, zero difference in spelling. The good news: they never compete for the same slot. In front of a noun it is possessive. Standing alone as a subject it is «you all». Standing alone after a dative verb it is «to her».

The sentence that catches everybody: **Ich helfe ihr**. Learners read the **ihr** they met first — «you all» — and hear «I help you». It says **her**. «I help you all» is **Ich helfe euch**.



TRAP 02

Ihnen or ihnen — one capital letter, opposite meaning

- ✓ **Ich** danke **Ihnen**.

Thank you. → to one or more people you address formally

- ✓ **Ich** danke **ihnen**.

I thank them. → to a group of other people

In writing the capital is the entire difference, and getting it wrong in an email reads as either cold or oddly familiar. In speech there is **no difference at all** — the two are pronounced identically and context does the whole job. That is not a flaw you can fix; native speakers rely on context too.

① Same collision one row up: **sie** can be «she» or «they», **Sie** is «you (formal)». The verb ending separates two of them — **sie kommt** = she comes, **sie kommen** = they come. But **Sie kommen** and **sie kommen** sound the same, and again only context decides.



TRAP 03

ihm is not always «him»

- ✓ Das Kind weint. Ich helfe ihm.

The child is crying. I am helping it/them. → **das Kind** is neuter, so its dative is **ihm**

Both **er** and **es** land on the same dative form, **ihm**. So **ihm** can mean «to him» or «to it» — and, as above, «to that child». The word tells you the case, not the sex of anybody.

This runs the other way too, and it is the mistake English speakers make most: **objects are not «it» in German**. A pronoun copies the *grammatical gender* of its noun.

- ✓ Ich habe einen Tisch gekauft. Er war nicht teuer.

I bought a table. It was not expensive. → **der Tisch** → er, never **es**

- ✓ Wo ist die Brille? — Sie liegt auf dem Tisch.

Where are the glasses? — They are on the table. → **die Brille** → sie

- ✓ Hast du den Schlüssel? — Ja, ich habe ihn.

Do you have the key? — Yes, I have it. → **ihn** here means «it», not «him»

Which means: every time you say **es** for a random object, you are guessing wrong two times out of three. The pronoun is only as good as the article you learnt with the noun.

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04 02:50

The verb decides — and it does not consult English

Most of the time your instinct works. *I see you* → direct object → **Ich sehe dich**. The problem is a short, extremely common list of verbs where German chose the dative and English chose a plain object. There is no logic to reverse-engineer here. There is a list.

VERB	MEANING	CASE	EXAMPLE
helfen	to help	Dativ	Kannst du mir helfen?
danken	to thank	Dativ	Ich danke dir .
folgen	to follow	Dativ	Folge mir .
antworten	to answer (a person)	Dativ	Ich antworte dir morgen .
glauben	to believe (a person)	Dativ	Ich glaube ihm nicht .
vertrauen	to trust	Dativ	Ich vertraue ihr .
gratulieren	to congratulate	Dativ	Ich gratuliere dir zum Geburtstag .
zuhören	to listen to	Dativ	Hör mir zu .
gehören	to belong to	Dativ	Der Mantel gehört ihr .
gefallen	to please / to like	Dativ	Das Lied gefällt mir .
schmecken	to taste good to	Dativ	Das Essen schmeckt uns .
passen	to fit / to suit	Dativ	Die Jacke passt dir gut .
fehlen	to be missed by	Dativ	Du fehlst mir .
wehtun	to hurt	Dativ	Der Rücken tut mir weh .
verzeihen	to forgive	Dativ	Ich verzeihe dir .
ähneln	to resemble	Dativ	Sie ähnelt ihrer Mutter .
begegnen	to run into	Dativ	Ich bin ihm gestern begegnet .
schaden	to harm	Dativ	Rauchen schadet dir .

Four of these — **gefallen** • **schmecken** • **fehlen** • **wehtun** — also flip the sentence around. The thing is the subject, you are the dative object. **Du fehlst mir** is literally «you are missing to me», which is why «I miss you» comes out backwards so often.

Now the mirror image. These feel like they should take the dative in English — *ask someone, call someone, support someone* — but German treats the person as a plain direct object.

✓ **Ich frage dich.**

I am asking you. → Akkusativ, not **dir**

✓ **Ich rufe dich später an.**

I will call you later. → **anrufen** + Akkusativ

✗ **Ich unterstütze ~~dir~~ dich.**

I support you — **unterstützen** takes the accusative, even though «help» next to it takes the dative.

Same group: **treffen** (to meet), **verstehen** (to understand), **brauchen** (to need), **bitten** (to ask a favour of), **erreichen** (to reach). All accusative. **Ich verstehe euch nicht.** · **Sie braucht uns.**

And the third group, the easy one: verbs of giving take **both**. The person is dative, the thing is accusative — **geben** · **schenken** · **zeigen** · **erklären** · **schicken** · **bringen** · **erzählen** · **empfehlen** · **leihen**.

- ✓ **Ich schenke dir eine Uhr.**
I am giving you a watch. → dir = person (Dativ), eine Uhr = thing (Akkusativ)
- ✓ **Sie erklärt uns die Regel.**
She is explaining the rule to us.

① Honest version of the rule: there is no test that predicts the dative verbs. Duden lists the case next to the verb; that is where the information actually lives. Everything above is a list to be met often, not a system to be derived.

05 04:05

After a preposition, the preposition decides

If a preposition comes first, the verb stops having an opinion. **für** always takes the accusative — no matter what the sentence is doing. So the pronoun table you just learnt gets re-used, driven by a different switch.

PREPOSITION	CASE	WITH A PRONOUN	EXAMPLE
für	Akkusativ	für mich	Ich mache das für dich .
ohne	Akkusativ	ohne dich	Ohne dich gehe ich nicht .
gegen	Akkusativ	gegen ihn	Er ist gegen mich .
um	Akkusativ	um uns	Er kümmert sich um uns .
durch	Akkusativ	durch sie	Ich habe es durch sie erfahren .
mit	Dativ	mit mir	Kommst du mit mir?
von	Dativ	von dir	Das ist ein Geschenk von ihr .
bei	Dativ	bei ihm	Ich wohne bei ihnen .
zu	Dativ	zu ihr	Ich gehe zu ihm .
nach	Dativ	nach uns	Du kommst nach mir dran .
außer	Dativ	außer mir	Alle außer mir waren da .
gegenüber	Dativ	mir gegenüber	Sie sitzt mir gegenüber .

With **gegenüber** the pronoun normally goes *in front* of the preposition. It is the one entry on this list you should learn as a fixed phrase.



TRAP 04

For things, German does not use a pronoun at all

This is the rule that makes learner German sound instantly foreign. If what follows the preposition is a **thing** and not a person, the pronoun is not used — the preposition fuses with **da-** instead.

✓ **Ich warte auf meinen Bruder. → Ich warte auf ihn.**

A person: preposition plus normal pronoun.

✓ **Ich warte auf den Bus. → Ich warte darauf.**

A thing: **auf + es** is impossible — it becomes **darauf**.

✗ **Ich warte auf es.**

Never said. This form simply does not exist in German.

The question word does the same thing with **wo-**: **Womit schreibst du?** (with what) versus **Mit wem sprichst du?** (with whom). An **-r-** slides in whenever the preposition starts with a vowel: **worauf** · **darauf** · **worüber** · **darüber**.

PREPOSITION	THING (STATEMENT)	THING (QUESTION)	PERSON
mit	damit	womit	mit ihm / mit wem
für	dafür	wofür	für ihn / für wen
von	davon	wovon	von ihm / von wem
auf	darauf	worauf	auf ihn / auf wen
an	daran	woran	an ihn / an wen
über	darüber	worüber	über ihn / über wen
zu	dazu	wozu	zu ihm / zu wem
nach	danach	wonach	nach ihm / nach wem
bei	dabei	wobei	bei ihm / bei wem
gegen	dagegen	wogegen	gegen ihn / gegen wen

- ① The rule has a gap, and you should know it: **ohne** and **außer** build no **da-** form. For those you fall back on a demonstrative — **Ich kann nicht ohne das leben**. You will also hear speakers say **mit dem** instead of **damit** when they are pointing at something. That is normal spoken German; the **da-** form is what you write.

The part nobody teaches: which pronoun goes first

Here is the section most A1 books leave out entirely. You can know every cell of the table and still build the sentence in the wrong order — and this is the mistake that marks a sentence as learner German faster than a wrong case does.

WHAT YOU HAVE	ORDER	EXAMPLE
two nouns	Dativ first	Ich gebe dem Mann das Buch.
one pronoun, one noun	the pronoun moves up front	Ich gebe es dem Mann. · Ich gebe ihm das Buch.
two pronouns	Akkusativ first — the order flips	Ich gebe es ihm.

One line to remember it by: **the lighter word goes first**. Pronouns outrank nouns, and among two pronouns the accusative outranks the dative.



TRAP 05

Ich gebe ihm es

✗ **Ich gebe ihm es.**

The single most common learner sentence in this topic. Native speakers do not say it.

✓ **Ich gebe es ihm.**

I give it to him. → two pronouns, accusative first.

Why does it happen? Because with nouns the dative genuinely does come first — **Ich gebe dem Mann das Buch** — and you carry that order over. The moment both objects become pronouns, German reverses it.

And you already do the same thing in English, which is why this is easier than it looks. *I gave him the book* is fine. *I gave him it* is not — you say *I gave it to him*. English reorders too when both objects shrink to pronouns. German just does it without adding *to*.

The rule survives every sentence shape, because the pronouns simply sit at the front of the middle field and the verb parts move around them:

✓ **Ich habe es ihm gegeben.**

I gave it to him. → perfect tense

✓ **Morgen gebe ich es ihm.**

I will give it to him tomorrow. → after inversion

✓ **Ich kann es dir erklären.**

I can explain it to you. → with a modal verb

✓ **Er sagt, dass er es uns schickt.**

He says he is sending it to us. → subordinate clause

✓ Zeig es mir.

Show it to me. → imperative

One step further, and this is genuinely B1 territory: an object pronoun can jump in front of a **noun subject**. **Gestern hat mir mein Vater das Auto geliehen.** The version with the subject first — **Gestern hat mein Vater mir das Auto geliehen** — is also correct. Both are said; the pronoun-early one is the one you hear more.

- ① What this page does not cover: reflexive pronouns. **Ich wasche mich** versus **Ich wasche mir die Hände** runs on the same accusative/dative split but has its own logic, and it deserves its own page rather than three lines here.

07 06:20

How to put this in your notebook

This topic does not get solved by studying the table longer. It gets solved by changing **how you record verbs** — because the pronoun is never the problem, the verb in front of it is.

- ✗ **helfen** = to help
- ✓ **helfen + Dativ** = to help — **Kannst du mir helfen?**
- ✗ **warten auf** = to wait for
- ✓ **warten auf + Akk** — person: **auf ihn** · thing: **darauf**

Three boxes per entry: **the verb** · **the case it forces** · **one sentence about someone you actually know**. A textbook sentence disappears in a week. A sentence about your own brother does not.

- Say the dative line out loud until it is one word: **mir · dir · ihm · ihr · uns · euch · ihnen**. Thirty seconds a day, one week.
- Take the eighteen dative verbs above and write one true sentence for each. True, not correct — the sentence has to be about your real life.
- Once a week, take five sentences you already wrote and replace every noun with a pronoun. This is where **dem Mann** → **ihm** and **das Buch** → **es** stop needing thought.
- Then do it twice: replace *both* objects and check the order. **Ich gebe dem Mann das Buch** → **Ich gebe es ihm**. That single drill is the whole word-order section.
- Whenever you hesitate mid-sentence, write down which verb caused it. That verb is tomorrow's list.

- ① Realistic pace: the table is one afternoon, the traps are one week, the dative verbs are about six weeks of noticing them in the wild. The word-order rule is the fastest of all — most people fix it permanently after being corrected once.

08 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

08 07:10

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+4

Take the full test

10 questions · timed · rule breakdown at the end



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