

Relative clauses

— RELATIVSÄTZE

Relative clauses (Relativsätze) are subordinate clauses that describe a noun and start with a relative pronoun: *der*, *den*, *dem*, *dessen*.

“Der Mann, den ich sehe” — why **den**? English uses one word for everything (*who* · *whom* · *that*). German picks the pronoun by gender *and* by the job it does inside the clause.

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01 00:10

Right now: two questions, two different places

⚡ SHORTCUT The relative pronoun = **the article itself**. It differs in only two places: Dativ plural **denen** and Genitiv **dessen** / **deren**. The rest is a table you already know.

You want to say: “*The man standing over there is my brother.*” German does not say it in one piece. It splits it in two — first the man, then the description **hung on behind him**.

✓ **Der Mann, *der* dort *steht*, ist mein Bruder.**

The man who is standing over there is my brother.

Three things happen at once in this sentence, and you need to see all three: **(1)** there is a comma, **(2)** the pronoun **der** appears, **(3)** the verb **steht** jumps to the end of the clause. All three are compulsory.

02 01:10

English is halfway there — but it has only one word for it

Good news: English also puts the description **after the noun** — *the man who comes* · *the book I read* · *the woman I talk to*. German does the same thing, but it needs a separate pronoun that **agrees with the noun**, and the verb goes last.

ENGLISH	POSITION	GERMAN
the man who comes	after the noun	der Mann , der kommt
the book (that) I read	after the noun	das Buch , das ich lese
the woman I talk to	the preposition trails at the end	die Frau , mit der ich spreche → the preposition moves to the front

English gets away with **who / that / nothing at all**. German has a table with sixteen cells, and you can **never leave the pronoun out**. That is where the difficulty comes from: in English you choose almost nothing, in German you choose every time.

- ① Practical consequence: if you translate word for word from English, the pronoun goes missing and the preposition ends up in the wrong place. The reflex to build: say the noun, stop, put a comma, choose the pronoun, add the description, and put the verb last.

03 02:10

The table: sixteen cells, and most of them you already know

The relative pronoun table is **almost identical to the definite article table**. Only a few cells differ — I have marked them.

CASE	DER (MASC .)	DIE (FEM .)	DAS (NEUT .)	DIE (PLURAL)
Nominativ who / what	der	die	das	die
Akkusativ whom / what	den	die	das	die
Dativ to whom	dem	der	dem	denen
Genitiv whose	dessen	deren	dessen	deren

Apart from the five marked cells, the table is **identical to the article table**. So the new material to memorise is **denen** · **dessen** · **deren** — three words.

Now, how to use the table. **The main clause picks the column, the relative clause picks the row.** The same noun gets three different pronouns in three different relative clauses:

- ✓ **Der Mann, der dort steht, ...**
He is standing there → subject → Nominativ.
- ✓ **Der Mann, den ich kenne, ...**
I know him → object → Akkusativ.
- ✓ **Der Mann, dem ich helfe, ...**
I'm helping him → Dativ (helfen takes the Dativ).

① In all three sentences the noun is **der Mann** — masculine, singular. **The column never changed.** The only thing that changed is the row: what the man does inside the relative clause.

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04 03:30

The one place people go wrong



TRAP 1

Taking the case from the main clause

This is the most common mistake, and nearly everyone makes it. The noun is in the Akkusativ in the main clause, so you assume the pronoun is Akkusativ too. **It has nothing to do with it.** The case in the main clause does not matter to the relative clause at all.

✗ **Ich kenne den Mann, ~~den~~ dort steht.**

The noun is Akkusativ in the main clause, so den was used — wrong.

✓ **Ich kenne den Mann, der dort steht.**

In the relative clause the man IS STANDING, so he is the subject → der.

How to check: **read the relative clause as a sentence on its own.** “... er steht dort” → er is Nominativ, so **der**.
“... ich kenne ihn” → ihn is Akkusativ, so **den**.



TRAP 2

Forgetting the preposition

If the verb in the relative clause needs a preposition, **that preposition goes in front of the pronoun**, and it decides the case. English lets the preposition dangle at the end (“the woman I talk *to*”), so it keeps getting dropped.

✗ Die Frau, ~~die~~ ich spreche, ...

sprechen needs “mit” — the preposition is missing.

✓ Die Frau, **mit der** ich spreche, ...

The woman I’m talking to. — mit takes the Dativ → der.

✓ Das Thema, **über das** wir reden, ...

The topic we’re talking about. — über takes the Akkusativ here.

① Which verb takes which preposition is laid out in a table on the [verb + preposition page](#). You will not get out of this trap without that table.



TRAP 3

Leaving out the comma

In German a relative clause is **always** set off with a comma. There is no English-style choice between a comma and none (“the book that I read” vs. “the book, which I read”). In a written exam, this costs you points directly.

✗ Das ist das Buch ~~das~~ ich lese.

No comma.

✓ Das ist das Buch, **das** ich lese.

This is the book I’m reading.

05 05:00

dessen and deren: the “whose” question

English has one word for it: *whose* (“the man whose car is broken”). German has two, and after either of them **no article follows**.

NOUN	PRONOUN	EXAMPLE
masculine - neuter	dessen	Der Mann, dessen Auto kaputt ist, ... — the man whose car is broken
feminine - plural	deren	Die Frau, deren Sohn hier wohnt, ... — the woman whose son lives here

Careful: the choice depends on the gender of the **owner**, not of the thing owned. **Der Mann, dessen Tochter...** — “daughter” is feminine, but the owner is masculine, so it is still **dessen**.

✗ Die Frau, **deren der** Sohn hier wohnt.

No article after deren.

✓ Die Frau, **deren** Sohn hier wohnt.

The woman whose son lives here.

06 06:00

The part nobody tells you: the clause that lands in the middle of the sentence

Textbooks always show the relative clause **at the end of the sentence**, because that is easy. In real German it often **lands in the middle** and splits the main clause in two — that is the real difficulty. (English does this too: “The man who is standing there is my brother.”)

✓ **Der Mann, der dort steht, ist** mein Bruder.

The main verb *ist* comes AFTER the relative clause.

The rule here: the relative clause **does not count as a slot**. **Der Mann** is in the first slot, the inserted clause is a parenthesis, and when it closes the verb carries on as normal in the **second slot**.

✗ Der Mann, der dort steht, **er ist** mein Bruder.

The subject was repeated — wrong.

This structure is hard when you speak: you start the sentence, squeeze a description in the middle, and then you have to **remember the main verb**. That is why Germans pause briefly when they speak. You can pause too — it is not a mistake, it is rhythm.

① Escape route in conversation: split the sentence in two. **Da steht ein Mann. Das ist mein Bruder.** Correct German, zero risk. But in a written exam the relative clause is a structure that **earns points** — don’t dodge it there.

07 06:45

What to do this week

This topic sticks by **joining two sentences**, not by memorising a table. Five minutes a day:

- Write two short sentences: **Ich habe einen Freund. Er wohnt in Berlin.**
- Find the repeated word in the second one (**er**) and work out its **case** — here Nominativ.
- Pick the pronoun from the table: masculine + Nominativ → **der**.
- Join them and throw the verb to the end: **Ich habe einen Freund, der in Berlin wohnt.**

- Now break the pair and change the second sentence: **Ich kenne ihn** → ..., **den ich kenne**. · **Ich helfe ihm** → ..., **dem ich helfe**.

① Next up is the infinitive with zu: the second way to lengthen a sentence without a conjunction — **um ... zu** and friends.

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.

+7

Take the full test

13 questions · timed · rule breakdown at the end



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