

Saying no politely in German

— NEIN SAGEN

A polite no in German has three steps: a thank-you, a clear refusal with *leider*, and an open door with *gerne*. Leaving someone hanging is ruder than saying no.

In English we often hide the no in the **tone**: “we’ll see”, “let me see what I can do”. Translate that into German and the tone vanishes; what is left is **Mal sehen** — a “maybe” that gets written into the other person’s calendar. In German a clear answer is not rude; leaving someone waiting is. Three steps, two words, four tones.

CONTENTS

- 01 Right now: three sentences that cover every situation
- 02 You already do this in English: hiding the no in the tone
- 03 Table: the same no, four tones
- 04 Six real situations, ready-made sentences
- 05 Two traps: “Mal sehen” and the long excuse
- 06 The part nobody tells you: a lone “danke” means no
- 07 The engine of politeness: *würde* · *könnte* · *hätte* · *wäre*
- 08 One level up: setting a limit without refusing
- 09 What to do this week
- 10 Test yourself

01 00:10

Right now: three sentences that cover every situation

 **SHORTCUT**

A polite no in German has **three steps**: thanks → a clear refusal with *leider* → an open door with *gerne*. The “no” is not the rude part; **leaving it vague** is.

You said “**Ja, kein Problem.**” Then you got home and kicked yourself: you didn’t really have time, you didn’t feel like it, it was the third time this week. Courage is not the problem. The problem is that you have never built “no” in German as **one single sentence**.

STEP	GERMAN	IN ENGLISH	WHAT IT DOES
1 - thanks	Danke , dass du fragst .	Thanks for asking .	honours the person who asked , not the offer
2 - clear no	Das schaffe ich diese Woche leider nicht .	Unfortunately I can’t manage that this week .	the answer is in this sentence — no way out
3 - open door	Nächste Woche gerne .	Next week , gladly .	keeps the relationship , limits the no to today

Say all three back to back and don't wedge a long explanation in between. If you want a reason, one word is enough: **zeitlich** ("time-wise"), **diese Woche, heute**. Why a long reason backfires is in the traps section below.

- ✗ ~~Ja, kein Problem.~~
Yes, no problem. → Said when you have no time, this “yes” costs you an evening and gives the other person wrong information.
- ✓ **Das schaffe ich diese Woche leider nicht.**
Unfortunately I can't manage that this week. → Clear, short, offends nobody.
- ✓ **Danke, dass du fragst. Das schaffe ich diese Woche leider nicht. Nächste Woche gerne.**
Thanks for asking. Unfortunately I can't manage that this week. Next week, gladly. → All three steps together.

02 01:10

You already do this in English: hiding the no in the tone

In English we refuse **indirectly** so nobody gets hurt: “We’ll see.” “Let’s catch up soon.” “I’ll try to make it.” “Let me have a look.” The sentence says yes, the tone says no — and the listener reads the tone and understands. So you already say no politely every day; you just put the “no” into your **voice** instead of the sentence.

The trouble starts in translation. Put the same sentence into German and **the tone disappears**; only the words are left. And the words say “maybe”. That “maybe” goes straight **into the other person’s calendar**.

WHAT YOU'D SAY IN ENGLISH	WORD FOR WORD IN GERMAN	WHAT A GERMAN HEARS	CLEAR AND POLITE VERSION
We'll see .	Mal sehen .	maybe yes — will ask again in a few days	Diesmal nicht , aber nächstes Mal gerne .
Let's set something up .	Lass uns mal was ausmachen .	a meeting was promised , waiting for a date	Im Moment klappt es bei mir leider nicht .
Hopefully I can come .	Hoffentlich komme ich .	wants to come , will come unless something gets in the way	Ich kann leider nicht kommen .
Let me have a look .	Ich schaue mal .	will check and get back to you	Das schaffe ich leider nicht .

Honesty note: this is a **cultural tendency**, not a law — people differ. But in work, appointments and **Amt** correspondence the expectation of a clear answer is real.

In German **clear = polite**. In appointments and at work what people expect is an open answer: no + a short reason + a door. Saying “no” doesn't damage the relationship; leaving it vague does — because the other side is **planning around you**. So in German you can be politer with fewer words.

- ✗ — **Kommst du am Samstag zu meiner Geburtstagsfeier?** — ~~Mal sehen.~~
— Are you coming to my birthday party on Saturday? — We’ll see. → You said “no”; they put you on the guest list.
- ✓ **Danke für die Einladung, aber diesmal schaffe ich es nicht.**
Thanks for the invitation, but I can't make it this time. → Clear, warm, done.

Table: the same no, four tones

“No” has no single formula; the **tone** changes with who you are talking to. Notice what changes: not the length of the sentence, but the **choice of words**. Save this — one sentence is enough for all four situations.

TO WHOM	WHAT YOU SAY	IN ENGLISH
friend	Nee , heute lieber nicht .	Nah , not today .
neighbour · acquaintance	Das passt mir heute leider nicht .	Unfortunately today doesn't suit me .
work · boss	Ich schaffe das bis Freitag leider nicht .	Unfortunately I can't get that done by Friday .
formal · email	Leider ist mir das nicht möglich .	Unfortunately that isn't possible for me .

All four do the same job. The only thing that changes is the **tone** — not the sentence length. Even the formal line is a single sentence.

The whole system is **two words**. **leider** (“unfortunately”) takes the personal edge off the refusal: it doesn’t say “I don’t want you”, it says “it doesn’t work for me”. **gerne** (“gladly”) saves the relationship: what you are turning down is **today**, not the person. German makes this distinction with a single word.

① **gern** and **gerne** are the same word — both are correct, and **gerne** is more common in speech. Mid-sentence you will usually hear the short one: **Ich würde gern, aber ...**

× ~~Ich will nicht kommen.~~

I don’t want to come. → **wollen** states a wish; as a refusal it comes across as personal and harsh.

✓ Ich kann **leider** nicht kommen.

Unfortunately I can't come. → The same refusal, no harshness: the obstacle is the situation, not you.

ADVERTISEMENT

728 × 90

04 03:20

Six real situations, ready-made sentences

Knowing the rule isn't enough; you need the **sentence** that comes out of your mouth in the moment. Here are the six situations you will meet most often in Germany, with one sentence each — you'll need them tomorrow:

SITUATION	WHAT YOU SAY	IN ENGLISH
Your boss hands you extra work	Ich mache das gern — aber dann schaffe ich den Bericht nicht . Was hat Vorrang?	Happy to do it — but then I won't finish the report . Which comes first?
A neighbour asks for help	Tut mir leid , heute geht es leider nicht .	Sorry , today isn't possible , unfortunately .
An invitation you don't want to accept	Danke für die Einladung , aber diesmal schaffe ich es nicht .	Thanks for the invitation , but I can't make it this time .
A salesperson on the phone	Kein Interesse , danke . Auf Wiederhören .	Not interested , thanks . Goodbye .
Someone asks to borrow money	Geld leihe ich grundsätzlich nicht . Bitte nimm es nicht persönlich .	As a matter of principle I don't lend money . Please don't take it personally .
No time , but you don't want to offend	Ich würde gern , aber ich schaffe es zeitlich nicht .	I'd love to , but time-wise I can't manage it .

The first row is the one that works best at the office: you are not refusing, you are **making your boss set the priority**.

Two small details. Row four has **Auf Wiederhören**, not **Auf Wiedersehen**: on the phone you don't **see** each other, you hear each other. And **grundsätzlich** (“as a matter of principle”) in row five moves the refusal from the person to a rule: “not you, everybody gets a no”. The single most useful word for loans, guarantees and signatures.

✗ — Haben Sie kurz Zeit für ein Angebot? — ~~Vielleicht später, ich weiß nicht ...~~

— Do you have a moment for an offer? — Maybe later, I don't know... → The salesperson takes that as the start of a “yes” and calls again tomorrow.

✓ **Kein Interesse, danke. Auf Wiederhören.**

Not interested, thanks. Goodbye. → Not rude; the shortest polite answer on the phone.

Two traps: “Mal sehen” and the long excuse

One comes from translating, the other from politeness habits. Both send the other person **exactly the opposite** message.



TRAP 1

Mal sehen. is not a no

In English “we’ll see” is often a polite no. In German **Mal sehen** is **open-ended**: the other person asks again in a few days, or even counts you in.

✗ — **Kommst du mit ins Kino? — ~~Mal sehen.~~**

— Are you coming to the cinema? — We’ll see. → They buy a ticket for you, too.

✓ **Diesmal nicht, aber nächstes Mal gerne.**

Not this time, but next time, gladly.

If you really don’t know yet, put **a date** on the uncertainty: **Ich sage dir bis Donnerstag Bescheid.** — “I’ll let you know by Thursday.” That is an answer; it is not **Mal sehen**.



TRAP 2

A long excuse is an invitation to negotiate

Many of us soften a refusal with an **explanation**: the more reasons you list, the more polite you feel. In German every reason reads like **a problem the other person can solve** — and they solve it.

✗ ~~Ich kann nicht, weil meine Schwester zu Besuch kommt und ich noch einkaufen muss und ...~~

I can’t, because my sister is visiting and I still have to go shopping and... → Answer: **Dann komm doch einfach danach!** — “Then just come afterwards!”

✓ **Ich kann heute leider nicht. Nächstes Mal gerne.**

Unfortunately I can’t today. Next time, gladly. → You don’t even need a reason.

The rule: the reason is **one word** or **none at all**. A polite German no is measured by **leider**, not by the length of the apology.

Both traps have the same cure: **short and clear**. Don’t leave it vague, don’t drag it out.

✓ **Heute nicht, danke. Nächstes Mal gerne.**

Not today, thanks. Next time, gladly. → No “we’ll see”, no long apology.

The part nobody tells you: a lone “danke” means no

Textbooks teach **danke** = “thank you” and stop there. What they leave out: in reply to an **offer**, a bare **Danke.** means **no**. It is the number-one reason people go hungry at the table in their first months in Germany.

- ×

— Möchtest du noch Kaffee? — ~~Danke.~~
— Would you like some more coffee? — Thanks. → You actually wanted one; your cup stays empty.
- ✓

— Möchtest du noch Kaffee? — Ja, **bitte.**
— Would you like some more coffee? — Yes, please. → The cup gets filled.

IN REPLY TO AN OFFER	MEANING	NOTE
Danke .	no	often comes with a wave of the hand
Nein, danke .	no , thank you	the clearest version
Ja, bitte .	yes , please	accepting
Ja, gerne .	yes , gladly	accepting — a bit warmer

This is not grammar, it is a **cultural code**: in reply to an offer **danke** declines and **bitte** accepts.

The second unspoken thing: in many households, and in English too, the first offer is often politely waved away and the host **insists**. In Germany there is often no insisting — your first answer **counts as the real answer**. If you want it, say yes the first time; a second round may not come.

The same works in reverse: when you offer something and your German guest says “no”, **don’t insist**. For them that wasn’t a round of politeness, it was the answer.

The engine of politeness: würde • könnte • hätte • wäre

Every sentence so far was in the plain mood. To be one step more polite, German doesn’t add words — it **pulls the verb back**. Four words do that, and all four are Konjunktiv II. English does the same with “would”, “could” and “I’d”.

PLAIN	POLITE	IN ENGLISH	WHAT HAPPENED
Ich will nicht .	Ich würde gern , aber es geht nicht .	I’d love to , but it’s not possible .	wish + obstacle
Wir verschieben das .	Könnten wir das verschieben?	Could we postpone this?	order → question
Ich habe einen Termin .	Ich hätte da leider schon einen Termin .	I’m afraid I already have an appointment then .	the reason got softer
Das ist zu viel .	Das wäre mir zu viel .	That would be too much for me .	the blame is gone

These four are Konjunktiv II. Learn the rule later — **use the sentences today**; both roads lead to the same door.

Look at row three: **hätte** doesn’t mean “if I had” here; the appointment **really exists**. In German Konjunktiv II is used not only for daydreams but also for **distance**: it pulls the sentence one step back from the other person’s face.

✗ ~~Wir verschieben das.~~

We're postponing this. → You made the decision and didn't even ask the other person.

✓ **Könnten wir das verschieben?**

Could we postpone this? → The same wish; the decision is shared.

To soften the tone one notch more, add a particle: **Eigentlich gern, aber heute geht es leider nicht.** — “I'd actually love to, but today isn't possible, unfortunately.” **eigentlich** carries the “I'd like to, but” feeling in one word.

ADVERTISEMENT

728 × 90

08 07:20

One level up: setting a limit without refusing

At work the most useful sentence is often not even a no. There are three ways to set a limit without saying no, and none of them has **any anger in it**: the limit comes from the clarity of the sentence, not from the tone of your voice.

WAY	GERMAN	IN ENGLISH	WHAT YOU GAIN
priority question	Ich mache das gern. Was soll ich dafür liegen lassen?	Happy to do it. What should I drop for it?	you hand the decision back to whoever gave the job
set a time limit	Heute nur bis 17 Uhr, danach geht es leider nicht.	Today only until 5 p.m., after that unfortunately not.	a half yes is stronger than a vague yes
set a condition	Das schaffe ich, wenn der Bericht bis Montag warten kann.	I can manage that if the report can wait until Monday.	you make the price visible

What all three share: you aren't saying no, you are putting the **price** on the table. At German workplaces this often earns more respect than a flat “yes”.

✗ — **Können Sie das bis heute Abend noch machen?** — ~~Ja, kein Problem.~~

— Can you still do this by this evening? — Yes, no problem. → It's 4:30 pm and your report isn't finished. Your evening is gone, and the boss thinks the job was easy.

✓ **Ich mache das gern. Was soll ich dafür liegen lassen?**

Happy to do it. What should I drop for it? → You didn't say no; you gave the decision back to your boss.

09 08:20

What to do this week

This topic doesn't stick by reading, it sticks with **your first “no”**. Try these for one week:

- Say the three sentences out loud three times: **Danke, dass du fragst.** · **Das schaffe ich leider nicht.** · **Nächstes Mal gerne.**

- Ban the answer **Mal sehen** for one week. If you don't know, give a date: **Ich sage dir bis Donnerstag Bescheid.**
- Never answer an offer with a bare **Danke**. If you want it: **Ja, gerne.**; if you don't: **Nein, danke.**
- The first time extra work lands on you at the office, try the priority question: **Was soll ich dafür liegen lassen?**
- Think of the last time you said “yes” when you meant no, and write in German what you would say now — whichever of the four tones fits.

✓ **Diesmal nicht, aber nächstes Mal gerne.**

Not this time, but next time, gladly. → This week's sentence.

① Do this for a week: after your first “no” you will see that nobody is offended.

10 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

10 09:10

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+4

Take the full test

10 questions · timed · rule breakdown at the end



ADVERTISEMENT

728 × 250

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