

Separable verbs

— DIE TRENNBAREN VERBEN

Separable verbs are German compound verbs whose prefix splits off and moves to the end of the sentence: Ich rufe dich an.

Ich rufe dich an — the verb split in two and one half ran to the end of the sentence. English has a few of these (“I’ll *call* you *up*”), but German does it constantly and with a fixed rule. Which prefixes split, the stress clue that tells you, and the separable verbs you will meet every day.

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01 00:12

The verb splits in two

 **SHORTCUT** If the prefix is **stressed**, it **splits off** and goes to the end of the sentence: anrufen → ich rufe dich an.

In the dictionary it is one word: **anrufen** — “to call (by phone)”. Once you build a sentence it comes apart: **the conjugated part sits in second position, the prefix goes to the very end.**

✓ **Ich rufe dich morgen an.**

I’ll call you tomorrow.

✗ **Ich anrufe dich morgen.**

Wrong — the prefix does not stay in place.

You have already seen this frame with modal verbs: one end opens in second position, the other end closes the sentence (**Satzklammer**). The difference: there the last word was *a second verb*; here it is **the other half of the same verb**.

- ① That is why, when you listen to German, you have to wait for the end of the sentence. **Ich rufe dich...** could be shouting (**rufen** = to call out) or phoning (**anrufen**). The **last word** decides.

Which prefixes split, which never do

There are two short lists to memorise. The prefixes that never split are only **seven or eight** — learn those, and everything else splits.

SPLITS	EXAMPLE	NEVER SPLITS	EXAMPLE
an-	anrufen · to call	be-	bekommen · to get
auf-	aufstehen · to get up	ge-	gehören · to belong
aus-	ausgehen · to go out	er-	erklären · to explain
ein-	einkaufen · to shop	ver-	verstehen · to understand
mit-	mitkommen · to come along	zer-	zerstören · to destroy

SPLITS	EXAMPLE	NEVER SPLITS	EXAMPLE
ab-	abfahren · to depart	ent-	entscheiden · to decide
zu-	zumachen · to close	emp-	empfehlen · to recommend
vor-	vorstellen · to introduce	miss-	missverstehen · to misunderstand
zurück-	zurückkommen · to come back		
weg- · los- · hin- · her-	weggehen · losfahren		

The ones that never split are all **syllables that mean nothing on their own**: **be- · ge- · er- · ver- · zer- · ent- · emp- · miss-**. The ones that split are prepositions and adverbs you already know: **an · auf · aus · ein · mit · ab · zu · vor**.

Use your ear: where is the stress?

You can know it without memorising a list — **the prefix that splits is stressed**. When you hear a German speaker, notice which part of the word they lean on.

WORD	STRESS	SPLITS?	IN A SENTENCE
anrufen	AN·rufen	yes	Ich rufe an .
aufstehen	AUF·stehen	yes	Ich stehe auf .
verstehen	ver·STE·hen	no	Ich verstehe .
bekommen	be·KOM·men	no	Ich bekomme .

Two verbs from the same root: **aufstehen** (to get up, splits) and **verstehen** (to understand, does not split). English does the same with stress — *REcord* vs. *reCORD*. It is not a rule you look up; the **stress** tells you.

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04 02:15

The prefix rewrites the meaning

Do not treat the prefix as a “detail” — it decides what the word means. English does this with *give up* · *give in* · *give away* · *give back*. From one verb you get five different ones:

ROOT	+ PREFIX	MEANING	EXAMPLE
kommen · to come	ankommen	to arrive	Der Zug kommt um 8 an .
	mitkommen	to come along	Kommst du mit?
	zurückkommen	to come back	Ich komme gleich zurück .
machen · to make , to do	aufmachen	to open	Mach bitte das Fenster auf .
	zumachen	to close	Ich mache die Tür zu .
	mitmachen	to join in	Machst du mit?
stehen · to stand	aufstehen	to get up	Ich stehe um 6 auf .
fangen · to catch	anfangen	to begin	Der Kurs fängt an .

In your vocabulary notebook write the **whole verb**, not the root — **ankommen, mitkommen**. If you try to work it out as “kommen + an”, you will freeze mid-sentence.

Four traps — when it does not split



TRAP 01

With a modal verb, it stays whole

- ✓ Ich muss dich **anrufen**.

I have to call you. → the verb stays whole, at the end

- ✗ Ich muss dich ~~rufe an~~.

Wrong.

The reason is simple: a verb that is **not conjugated** does not split. In a modal sentence the conjugated verb is **muss**; **anrufen** goes to the end as an infinitive and stays in one piece.



TRAP 02

In a subordinate clause, it does not split either

- ✓ Ich weiß nicht, ob er heute **ankommt**.

I don't know whether he's arriving today.

- ✓ ..., weil ich früh **aufstehe**.

...because I get up early.

In a subordinate clause the conjugated verb goes to the end anyway — and there the prefix **joins** it again: **an + kommt = ankommt**. It is not written apart.



TRAP 03

In the Perfekt, -ge- goes in the middle

- ✓ Ich habe dich **angerufen**.

I called you.

- ✓ Ich bin um 6 **aufgestanden**.

I got up at 6.

In the Partizip II the syllable **-ge-** is squeezed in **between the prefix and the root**: **an-ge-rufen** · **ein-ge-kauf**t · **mit-ge-bracht**. Inseparable verbs have no **-ge-** at all: **verstanden**, **bekommen**.



TRAP 04

zu goes in the middle, too

- ✓ Ich habe vergessen, dich **anzurufen**.

I forgot to call you.

- ✓ Es ist Zeit, **aufzustehen**.

It's time to get up.

In a **zu + infinitive** construction, **zu** also slips into the middle and the verb is written **as one word**: **anzurufen**, **einzukaufen**. With an inseparable verb, the **zu** stays in front as usual: **zu verstehen**.

06 04:20

15 verbs you will need ten times a day

VERB	MEANING	IN A SENTENCE
aufstehen	to get up	Ich stehe um 7 auf .
anfangen	to begin	Der Film fängt um 8 an .
aufhören	to stop , to quit	Hör auf!
anrufen	to call (by phone)	Ruf mich an!
einkaufen	to shop	Ich kaufe heute ein .
ankommen	to arrive	Wann kommst du an?
abfahren	to depart	Der Bus fährt gleich ab .
mitkommen	to come along	Kommst du mit?

VERB	MEANING	IN A SENTENCE
mitbringen	to bring along	Bring bitte Brot mit .
aufmachen · zumachen	to open · to close	Mach das Fenster auf .
anziehen · ausziehen	to put on · to take off	Zieh die Jacke an .
einschlafen	to fall asleep	Ich schlafe schnell ein .
fernsehen	to watch TV	Ich sehe abends fern .
vorstellen	to introduce · <i>sich</i> : to introduce yourself	Ich stelle mich vor .
zurückkommen	to come back	Ich komme später zurück .

It splits in the imperative too, and the prefix goes to the end: **Ruf mich an!** · **Steh auf!** · **Mach die Tür zu!**

07 05:30

What to do this week

This topic is a **reflex**, not a rule. The one exercise that builds the reflex: describe your day with separable verbs — most of a morning routine is made of them.

- **Ich stehe um ... auf.** — what time do you get up
- **Ich kaufe ... ein.** — what did you buy today
- **Ich rufe ... an.** — who did you call
- **Ich komme um ... zurück.** — when are you back

① If you keep forgetting to put the prefix **at the very end** when you write, read the sentence out loud. Your ear notices before your eye — a German sentence sounds unfinished when the end is empty.

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 06:00

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+16

Take the full test

22 questions · timed · rule breakdown at the end



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