

The 7 most important German grammar rules

— DIE WICHTIGSTEN GRAMMATIKREGELN

The seven skeleton rules you need to build German sentences: verb position, subordinate clauses, articles, cases, verb endings and negation. Once these seven are in place you can build sentences; the rest is vocabulary.

Heute ich gehe ins Kino. — every word is right, the sentence is wrong. In German it is not the words that build a sentence but **seven skeleton rules**: verb position, articles, cases, verb endings and negation. Once these seven are in place you can build sentences — the rest is vocabulary.

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01 00:10

Right now: you have the words, so why won't the sentence come?

SHORTCUT ⚡ The verb goes in **2nd place**, a second verb goes **last**, the article **changes with its job**, a noun gets **kein**, everything else gets **nicht**. Once these seven are in place you can build sentences — the rest is vocabulary.

You know hundreds of words, yet you get stuck when you try to build a sentence. The cause is not missing vocabulary. In English, **word order** tells you who does what: “the man sees the dog” is not “the dog sees the man”. German hands that job to the **article** and to fixed **verb positions**. Put a correct word in the wrong place and the sentence falls apart.

The seven rules on this page were picked by one test: **can you build a single correct sentence without knowing this?** Structure, not vocabulary. All seven are short enough to sink in within the first two weeks.

✓ Heute **gehe ich** ins Kino.

I'm going to the cinema today.

× Heute ~~ich gehe~~ ins Kino.

Every word is right, the sentence is wrong: rule 1 is broken.

- ① This page is a map. Each rule is explained briefly and, at the end of its section, **linked to its full topic**. Click the link for the rule you get stuck on and study the details there.

02 00:50

The table: 7 rules that build sentences

The whole page is in this table. Save it; when you get stuck building a sentence, come back here first. In the right-hand column, the bold part is the job that rule does in the sentence.

RULE	WHAT IT MEANS	EXAMPLE
1 - the verb is always in 2nd place	whatever comes first	Heute trinke ich Kaffee .
2 - a second verb goes last	modal - Perfekt - separable prefix	Ich kann heute nicht kommen .
3 - weil - dass → verb last	in a subordinate clause the verb drops to the end	... , weil ich krank bin .
4 - article + capital letter	learn the article with the word	der Tisch · die Tür · das Buch
5 - the article changes with its job	him → den - to him → dem	Ich sehe den Mann .
6 - the verb takes an ending for each person	the pronoun stays	ich komme · du kommst
7 - kein or nicht?	noun → kein - anything else → nicht	Ich habe keine Zeit .

English bridge: in English, word order does the work (“the man sees the dog”), and only pronouns change form (*he* → *him*). German lets **position** and the **article** carry the meaning. With few words but these seven in place, you can still build sentences — never the other way round.

The seven rules fall into three families: **1-3 verb position**, **4-5 nouns and articles**, **6-7 verb endings and negation**. Each family has its own section below. In a single sentence, all three work at once:

✓ Ich kann heute nicht **kommen**.

I can’t come today. → rules 1, 2 and 7 in one sentence: verb in 2nd place, second verb last, nicht with the verb.

× ~~Heute ich kann~~ nicht kommen.

After a time word at the start, the subject still moves behind the verb: Heute kann ich nicht kommen.

Rules 1 and 2: the verb has two places

A German sentence gives the verb **two places**. The **conjugated verb**, the one that changes with the person, always stands in **2nd place**. If there is a **second verb** in the sentence, it goes **last**. Whatever you put at the start, these two places do not change.

1ST PLACE	2ND PLACE	MIDDLE	END
Ich	trinke	heute Kaffee .	—
Heute	trinke	ich Kaffee .	—
Ich	kann	heute nicht	kommen .
Ich	habe	gestern	gearbeitet .
Ich	stehe	um 7 Uhr	auf .
—	Wohnst	du in Köln?	—

A “place” counts a **phrase**, not a word: **Mein kleiner Bruder** is three words but one place. The last row is the exception: in a yes/no question, 1st place is empty and the verb jumps to the front.

Rule 1. Put anything other than the subject first — a time, a place, a question word — and the subject moves **behind** the verb. Question words work the same way: **Wo wohnst du?** The verb is still in 2nd place.

✓ Heute **trinke** ich Kaffee.

I’m drinking coffee today. → a time word came first, the verb stayed in 2nd place.

✗ Heute ~~ich trinke~~ Kaffee.

The English habit: *Today I drink*. In German the subject moves behind the verb.

Rule 2. The second verb comes in three disguises, and in all three it goes last: **modal** + infinitive (**kann ... kommen**), **Perfekt** + participle (**habe ... gearbeitet**), **separable prefix** (**aufstehen** → **stehe ... auf**). Whatever slips in between stays in the middle: **Ich kann heute leider nicht kommen**.

✓ Ich möchte einen Kaffee **trinken**.

I’d like to drink a coffee. → in English “drink” follows “would like”; in German it goes to the end.

✗ Ich möchte ~~trinken~~ einen Kaffee.

The second verb was left in the middle. The object slips in between; the infinitive goes last.

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Rule 3: weil and dass push the verb to the end

A conjunction like **weil** • **dass** • **wenn** opens a **subordinate clause**, and in it the **conjugated verb drops to the end** too. Rule 1 stops here: a subordinate clause has no 2nd place, the verb is last.

This is where English speakers trip most. In English the order never changes: “because I am sick” looks just like “I am sick”. German rearranges the clause: *because I sick am*. It feels wrong at first, but it works the same way every time.

CONJUNCTION	ENGLISH	EXAMPLE
weil	because	Ich bleibe zu Hause , weil ich krank bin .
dass	that	Ich weiß , dass er heute kommt .
wenn	if - when	Wenn ich Zeit habe , komme ich .
weil + modal	both verbs at the end	... , weil ich heute nicht kommen kann .

Look at the last row: if a subordinate clause has two verbs, **the conjugated one goes last**: kommen kann. In the third row the subordinate clause came first; the main clause verb is again in 2nd place: ..., komme ich.

✓ **Ich komme nicht, weil ich krank bin.**

I’m not coming because I’m sick.

✗ **Ich komme nicht, weil ich bin krank.**

Wrong in writing and in exams. You may hear it in speech — see the honesty note below.

① There is also a “because” that does not throw the verb to the end: **denn**. **Ich komme nicht, denn ich bin krank**. The order stays normal, but in speech you hear **weil** far more often. The difference between the two is on the subordinate-clause page.

Rules 4 and 5: the article does the job of endings

Rule 4. Every German noun has an article — **der**, **die** or **das** — and the noun is written with a **capital letter**, even in the middle of a sentence: **Ich lese das Buch**. The article is usually not something you can work out by logic; you learn it **together** with the word. In your notebook, write the word with its article and its plural:

- **der** Tisch, **die** Tische — table
- **die** Tür, **die** Türen — door
- **das** Buch, **die** Bücher — book

A small help: some endings give the article away. **-ung** • **-heit** • **-keit** → **die**, **-chen** → **das**. The full list is on the article page.

Rule 5. In English only pronouns change form to show a role: *he sees him*, *I* → *me*, *they* → *them*. German does the same thing to the **article**, and to every noun: **der Mann** → **den Mann** → **dem Mann**. The noun itself usually stays put; the article shows the job.

WORD	NOMINATIV (WHO?)	AKKUSATIV (WHOM?)	DATIV (TO WHOM?)
der Mann — masculine	der Mann	den Mann	dem Mann
die Frau — feminine	die Frau	die Frau	der Frau
das Kind — neuter	das Kind	das Kind	dem Kind
die Kinder — plural	die Kinder	die Kinder	den Kindern
ein Hund — masculine	ein Hund	einen Hund	einem Hund

In the **Akkusativ** only the masculine changes: **der** → **den** • **ein** → **einen**. Lock that in first; the Dativ comes later. In the plural Dativ the noun takes *-n* too: **den Kindern**. If the noun already ends in *-n*, or its plural is *-s*, nothing is added: **den Frauen** • **den Autos**.

- ✓ **Ich sehe **den** Mann.**
I see the man. → the object (whom?): den
- ✓ **Ich gebe **dem** Mann das Buch.**
I give the man the book. → the recipient (to whom?): dem
- ✗ **Ich sehe ~~der~~ Mann.**
The article stayed in the subject form. A masculine noun that is the object turns der into den.

06 04:50

Rules 6 and 7: person endings, kein and nicht

Rule 6. The verb **takes an ending for each person**. English has only one left (*he comes*); German still uses almost all of them. Find the stem (**kommen** → **komm-**) and add the ending for the person.

PERSON	ENGLISH	GERMAN
ich	I come	ich komme
du	you come	du kommst
er • sie • es	he • she • it comes	er kommt
wir	we come	wir kommen
ihr	you (plural) come	ihr kommt
sie • Sie	they come • you (formal) come	sie kommen • Sie kommen

The difference: English has one ending (*-s*) and it is easy to overlook. German has a different ending for nearly every person, and you have to say them. The pronoun stays, as in English: **Ich komme**. That is good news, because **kommen** can mean “we come” and “they come”, so the pronoun helps show who.

The only exception you will meet in week one: **sein** and **haben** are irregular. **ich bin • du bist • er ist — ich habe • du hast • er hat**. Both are so common that you memorise them separately.

✓ **Ich wohne in Köln.**

I live in Cologne.

✗ ~~Wohne~~ in Köln.

You dropped the pronoun. In quick messages you will see clipped sentences like **Bin gleich da.**; when you speak and write, keep the subject.

Rule 7. For negation there is one question: **is a noun being negated?** A noun with no article or with **ein** takes **kein** — “no ... , not any”. A verb, an adjective or a noun with a definite article takes **nicht** — “not”.

WHAT IS NEGATED	WORD	EXAMPLE
noun with no article	kein	Ich habe keine Zeit .
noun with ein	kein	Ich habe keinen Hund .
verb	nicht	Ich komme heute nicht .
adjective	nicht	Das ist nicht teuer .
noun with a definite article (der - mein)	nicht	Das ist nicht mein Buch .

kein is declined just like **ein**: **einen Hund** → **keinen Hund**. **ein** has no plural, but **kein** does: **keine Kinder**.

✗ Ich habe ~~nicht~~ Zeit.

What is being negated is a noun, so **nicht** cannot be used.

✓ Ich habe **keine** Zeit.

I have no time. → noun: **kein**

✓ Ich komme heute **nicht**.

I’m not coming today. → verb: **nicht**

07 06:00

What nobody tells you: German is less strange than it looks

What makes German look hard is supposed to be the “odd” verb positions. In truth only one thing is odd for an English speaker: **2nd place**. The rest is one simple shape: the **main verb** very often sits at the end, and only the conjugated part hops forward to 2nd place.

WORD FOR WORD	GERMAN
I can today not come	Ich kann heute nicht kommen .
I have yesterday worked	Ich habe gestern gearbeitet .
I stand at 7 o'clock up	Ich stehe um 7 Uhr auf .
... , because I sick am	... , weil ich krank bin .

The left column is not English, of course — it only shows the **shape**. Everything that carries meaning piles up at the end; only the conjugated part steps out to 2nd place in a main clause. Do not memorise “why it goes last”: put the conjugated part second and park the rest at the end.

In practice, build it like this: first line the sentence up with the verbs at the end — *ich heute nicht kommen kann*. Then take the conjugated part (**kann**) and move it to 2nd place: **Ich kann heute nicht kommen**. The nice part: the order you lined up first is exactly the subordinate clause — ..., **weil ich heute nicht kommen kann**.

✓ **Ich kann heute nicht kommen.**

I can't come today. → “come” stays at the end; only “kann” stepped forward.



HONESTY

In speech, the verb can come early after weil

When Germans speak, they sometimes put the verb early after **weil**: **weil ich bin müde**. You hear it on the street and in TV series. In writing and in exams the verb goes last: **weil ich müde bin**. Build the written form yourself; when you hear the other one, do not be surprised.

“The verb is always in 2nd place” is not 100% true either: in yes/no questions and commands the verb goes to the **front**. **Kommst du?** · **Komm!** Rule 1 describes the plain statement.

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08 06:50

Three traps that give you away

A German speaker's ear catches these three within the first second. All three are habits carried over from English, and each is fixed by one of the rules above.



TRAP 01

The subject does not stay put after a time word

✗ Heute ~~ich~~ ~~gehe~~ ins Kino.

Wrong order.

✓ Heute **gehe** **ich** ins Kino.

I'm going to the cinema today.

Everyone who speaks English falls for this: the pattern *Today I go* is ready in your head. In German, when a time, a place or a question word comes first, the subject moves **behind** the verb (rule 1).



TRAP 02

The second verb does not stay in the middle

✗ Ich möchte ~~trinken~~ einen Kaffee.

The infinitive was left in the middle.

✓ Ich möchte einen Kaffee **trinken**.

I'd like to drink a coffee.

In English you say "I'd like to **drink** a coffee" and the infinitive follows the modal. In German **trinken** goes last, and everything that comes in between stays in the middle (rule 2).



TRAP 03

A masculine noun turns ein into einen

✗ Ich habe ~~ein~~ Hund.

The article did not change for the object.

✓ Ich habe **einen** Hund.

I have a dog.

Hund is masculine (**der** Hund) and **haben** takes the Akkusativ: **ein** → **einen**. Feminine and neuter do not change: Ich habe **eine** Katze. · Ich habe **ein** Auto. (rule 5)

When the three fixes meet in one sentence, it looks like this:

✓ Heute **möchte** ich **einen** Kaffee **trinken**.

Today I'd like to drink a coffee. → verb in 2nd place, einen, infinitive last.

Test yourself: six sentences, seven rules

Six English sentences, each testing one rule. Build them aloud first, then check the answers below. The number on the right tells you which rule is being tested.

- 1 • I'm staying home today. — rule 1
- 2 • I can't come tomorrow. — rule 2
- 3 • I'm not coming because I'm sick. — rule 3
- 4 • I have a dog. — rule 5
- 5 • Where do you live? — rule 6
- 6 • I have no time. — rule 7

✓ Heute **bleibe** ich zu Hause.

1 • time word first, verb in 2nd place

✓ Ich kann morgen nicht **kommen**.

2 • second verb last

✓ Ich komme nicht, weil ich krank **bin**.

3 • verb last after weil

✓ Ich habe **einen** Hund.

4 • masculine noun, ein → einen

✓ Wo **wohnst** du?

5 • du → -st, verb in 2nd place

✓ Ich habe **keine** Zeit.

6 • a noun is negated: kein

6/6 → the skeleton is in place, go and load up on vocabulary. 3-5 → go back to the section for the rule you missed and open the linked page. 0-2 → save the table above and study one rule a day; in seven days you have all seven.

- ① The whole thing in one sentence: the conjugated verb goes to 2nd place, the rest of the verb goes last — everything else is articles and endings.

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 08 : 30

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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