

Präteritum

— DAS PRÄTERITUM

The Präteritum is the German simple past, used mostly in writing and with a handful of very common verbs: war, hatte, konnte, musste.

In conversation you say “ich habe gemacht”; in writing you say “ich machte”. English lets the simple past do almost everything. German has two past tenses that mean the same thing, and the Präteritum is the stamp of the written language.

CONTENTS

- 01 Right now: two past tenses, one meaning 02 Six verbs to memorise — Präteritum even in speech
03 The Präteritum of regular verbs: stem + -te 04 Which tense where — one table
05 The part nobody tells you: two tenses in one sentence 06 What to do this week 07 Test yourself

01 00:10

Right now: two past tenses, one meaning

⚡ SHORTCUT Use the **Perfekt** when you speak — but for **sein · haben · können · müssen · wollen · dürfen** use the **Präteritum**. Those six are the verbs you use most anyway.

In English, “I worked” and “I have worked” do different jobs. German has two past tenses too, but they **mean exactly the same thing**. That surprises almost everyone: the answer to “what is the difference?” is “none in meaning” — the difference is *where you use them*.

Both are correct and both say the same thing. But if you say **Ich arbeitete gestern** to a German friend, it sounds **read out of a book** — that is the form used in fairy tales, news reports and novels.

- ① This split is **different in the north and the south** of Germany: in the north the Präteritum is also heard in speech, in the south (Bavaria, Austria) it is hardly used at all. Stand in the middle: Perfekt when you speak, except for the six verbs below.

Six verbs to memorise — Präteritum even in speech

These six are the exception to the rule. And it is no accident: they are the **most frequently used verbs** in German. Their Perfekt is both long and heavy on the ear, so the language took the shortcut.

PERSON	SEIN (TO BE)	HABEN (TO HAVE)
ich	war	hatte
du	warst	hattest
er / sie / es	war	hatte
wir	waren	hatten
ihr	wart	hattet
sie / Sie	waren	hatten

Notice: **the ich and er rows are identical** — ich war / er war, ich hatte / er hatte. That is the general rule of the Präteritum, and it is where it differs from the Präsens, where **ich bin / er ist** were split apart.

MODAL VERB	PRÄSENS	PRÄTERITUM	EXAMPLE
können	kann	konnte	Ich konnte nicht kommen .
müssen	muss	musste	Ich musste arbeiten .
wollen	will	wollte	Ich wollte dich anrufen .
dürfen	darf	durfte	Ich durfte nicht rauchen .
sollen	soll	sollte	Ich sollte früher gehen .
mögen	mag	mochte	Ich mochte das nicht .

Shortcut: a modal verb's Präteritum **loses its umlaut and takes -te**. können → konnte, müssen → musste, dürfen → durfte. The only irregular one is mögen → mochte — the g turns into ch.

Modal verbs also **take no ending in the ich and er rows** in the Präteritum: **ich konnte / er konnte**. The others take the normal endings — **du konntest • wir konntet • ihr konntet**.

The Präteritum of regular verbs: stem + -te

You will need this once you move into writing. Regular verbs are easy: **add -te to the stem, then put the personal ending on top**.

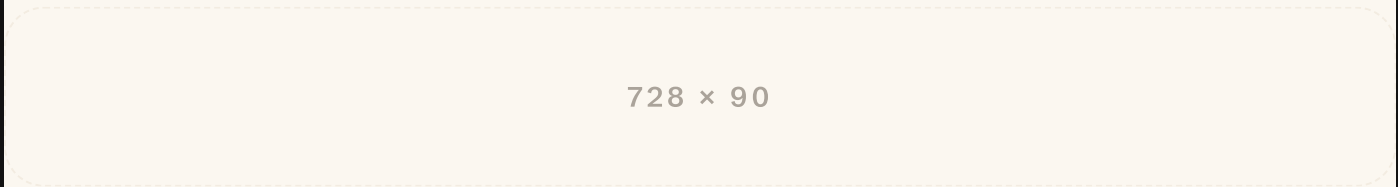
PERSON	ENDING	MACHEN → MACH-	ARBEITEN → ARBEIT-
ich	-te	machte	arbeitete
du	-test	machtest	arbeitetest
er / sie / es	-te	machte	arbeitete
wir	-ten	machten	arbeiteten
Ihr	-tet	machtet	arbeitetet
sie / Sie	-ten	machten	arbeiteten

If the stem ends in **-t, -d or -n**, an **e** slips in between: **arbeitete • redete • öffnete**. The reason is pronunciation — nobody can say **arbeits**. It is exactly the same rule as **du arbeitest** in the Präsens.

Irregular verbs, on the other hand, **change their stem vowel** and take no -te. You learn them as a list, but the ones you need at A2 are a handful:

① For these six, **recognising them is enough for now** — you don’t have to produce them. When you meet them in a news article or a fairy tale, it is enough to think “that’s a past tense”.

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Which tense where — one table

This is what the textbooks call “Zeitengebrauch” (tense usage). The decision tree is actually very short:

SITUATION	WHICH TENSE	EXAMPLE
You tell a friend what you did yesterday	Perfekt	Ich habe gestern gearbeitet .
The verb is <i>sein</i> / <i>haben</i>	Präteritum	Ich war müde . Ich hatte Zeit .
The verb is a modal verb	Präteritum	Ich musste arbeiten .
You are writing an email , a report , an essay	Präteritum	Er kam um acht und ging um zehn .
A fairy tale , a novel , a news text	Präteritum	Es war einmal ein König...
Something that is still going on right now	Präsens + seit	Ich wohne seit 2020 hier .

The last row is a big trap for English speakers. English says “I **have lived** here since 2020”, but German uses the **present tense** — not the Perfekt. The “have lived” reflex is exactly what causes the mistake here.



TRAP 01

Ich habe gewesen — the most common mistake

The Perfekt of **sein** **does exist** grammatically (**ich bin gewesen**) and is common in speech in southern Germany, Austria and Switzerland; in standard German and in the north, **war** is far more common. **habe gewesen**, on the other hand, is never used anywhere, because **sein** takes **sein** as its auxiliary.

✗ **Ich habe in Berlin gewesen.**

Wrong twice over.

✓ **Ich war in Berlin.**

I was in Berlin. — The correct and natural one.

The same goes for **haben**: the most common form is **Ich hatte keine Zeit**. **Ich habe keine Zeit gehabt** is also correct and common in the south, just longer.



TRAP 02

Trying to put a modal verb into the Perfekt

A modal verb does have a Perfekt, but it has a **double infinitive** and is hard to build: **Ich habe arbeiten müssen**. Nobody talks like that. The Präteritum is short and correct.

✓ **Ich musste gestern arbeiten.**

I had to work yesterday.

✗ **Ich habe gestern arbeiten müssen.**

Correct but heavy — not preferred in speech.

The part nobody tells you: two tenses in one sentence

Textbooks say “Perfekt in speech, Präteritum in writing” and leave it there. What really happens is this: **the two sit side by side in the same sentence**, and that is completely normal.

- ✓ Ich **war** gestern krank, deshalb **habe** ich nicht **gearbeitet**.

I was sick yesterday, so I didn't work.

- ✓ Ich **konnte** nicht kommen, weil ich **gearbeitet habe**.

I couldn't come because I was working.

The rules don't get tangled — **each verb follows its own rule**. **sein** and the modal verbs take the Präteritum, the rest take the Perfekt. When you use both in one sentence, a German ear doesn't blink; it hears it as natural.

- ① In the **weil** clause of the second example, notice that the verb goes to the end — and that **both parts** of the Perfekt go there together: **gearbeitet habe**. If you have forgotten the verb order in subordinate clauses, go back to [the weil page](#).

What to do this week

You don't need to learn to produce the Präteritum — you just need to **make the six verbs a reflex**. Once they are in place, your German suddenly sounds more natural.

- Every evening, describe your day in three sentences, but **the first one must start with war or hatte**: Ich war müde. Ich hatte viel Arbeit.
- Build the other sentences with the Perfekt: Ich habe zwei Stunden gelernt.
- Add one “had to” sentence: Ich musste früh aufstehen.
- Once a week, write out the Präteritum of the six modal verbs — konnte • musste • wollte • durfte • sollte • mochte.
- Read a German news headline and mark the Präteritum verbs in it. You are not producing them, you are **recognising** them.

- ① Next up is place: [wo or wohin](#) — German's “where / where to” split, and how it shows the difference with case.

07 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

TIPS

Know this before the test

The core of the topic in three lines, then the mistakes people make most often.

01

The six verbs take the **Präteritum** even in speech

sein · **haben** and the four modals are used in the **Präteritum**, not the **Perfekt**, when you talk about the past. Even in everyday speech.

war · hatte · konnte · musste
· wollte · durfte

02

Regular verb: stem + **-te**

Drop the **-en** of the infinitive, add **-te**, then the personal ending, **ich** and **er** are again the same, both bare.

machen → machte · wohnen
→ wohnte

03

If it is still going on, it is not past

A situation that started with **seit** and continues is **Präsens** in German. Unlike English, which says “I have lived here since 2020”.

Ich wohne seit 2020 in Köln.

✗ ~~Ich habe gestern in Berlin gewesen.~~

✓ Ich war gestern in Berlin.

sein neither takes **haben** nor wants the **Perfekt** in speech. Two mistakes in one sentence.

✗ ~~Ich wohne seit 2020 in Köln gewohnt.~~

✓ Ich wohne seit 2020 in Köln.

If you still live there, it is a present tense, not a past one. The moment you see **seit**, it is **Präsens**.

✗ ~~Er gabte mir das Buch.~~

✓ Er gab mir das Buch.

✗ ~~Gestern ich arbeitete lange.~~

✓ Gestern arbeitete ich lange.

An irregular verb takes no **-te**; its stem vowel changes. **geben** → **gab**.

Once the time expression moves to the front, the verb has to stay in second position — the subject gets pushed behind it. The tense changed, the word-order rule did not.

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Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+16

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