

The verb sollen

— DAS MODALVERB SOLLEN

sollen is a German modal verb that expresses what someone else wants from you, or a piece of advice: ich soll, du sollst, er soll.

müssen comes from the inside, **sollen** comes from **the outside**. English squeezes “I have to go” and “I’m supposed to go” into similar-sounding phrases; German uses two separate verbs.

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Conjugation — and the one oddity



SHORTCUT

Of the six modals, sollen is the **only one whose stem never changes: soll**, no vowel shift.

The others change their vowel in the singular: können → kann, müssen → muss. sollen doesn’t; only the usual modal rule applies: **ich and er are identical, and neither takes an ending**.

PERSON	SOLLEN	EXAMPLE
ich	soll	Ich soll früher kommen .
du	sollst	Du sollst mehr schlafen .
er / sie / es	soll	Er soll warten .
wir	sollen	Wir sollen leise sein .
ihr	sollt	Ihr sollt aufräumen .
sie / Sie	sollen	Sie sollen unterschreiben .

Three jobs of sollen

JOB	WHO WANTS IT	EXAMPLE
1 - What someone else wants	A person or an institution	Der Arzt sagt, ich soll mehr schlafen. THE DOCTOR SAYS I'M SUPPOSED TO SLEEP MORE.
2 - Advice	The speaker	Du sollst nicht so viel arbeiten. YOU SHOULDN'T WORK SO MUCH.
3 - Offer of help	As a question	Soll ich dir helfen? SHALL I HELP YOU?

The third one will be the most useful in daily life. The pattern **Soll ich...?** means “Shall I...?” or “Do you want me to...?”, and you will hear it in Germany constantly.

- ① The form **solltest / sollte** softens advice: **Du sollst mehr schlafen** sounds like an instruction, **Du solltest mehr schlafen** like friendly advice. When Germans give advice, they almost always use this form.

sollen or müssen – who wants it?



SHORTCUT

If the obligation comes from the inside, **müssen**; if it comes from the outside, **sollen**. The question is: who asked for this?

English blurs the two a little — “I have to go to the doctor” and “I’m supposed to go to the doctor” sound close, and “should” covers a lot of ground. German is strict: a sentence shows **where the obligation comes from**, and the wrong choice changes the meaning.

- ✓ **Ich muss zum Arzt.**
I have to go to the doctor. (my own decision, I have no choice)
- ✓ **Ich soll zum Arzt.**
I’m supposed to go to the doctor. (someone told me to)

	MÜSSEN	SOLLEN
Source	Inside - circumstances	Outside - a person
Force	Necessity	Wish, instruction, advice
Example	Ich muss arbeiten .	Ich soll arbeiten .
Meaning	I have to work	I’ve been told to work

In the negative the gap gets even bigger: **Ich muss nicht** means “I don’t have to”, while **Ich soll nicht** means “I’ve been told not to”. The müssen page covers the negative side in detail.

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Traps

⚠

TRAP 01

Making an offer of help with müssen

When you ask “Shall I...?”, the right verb is *sollen*. Ask with *müssen* and you are saying “Do I have to...?”.

✗

Muss ich dir helfen?

this means “Do I have to help you?”

✓

Soll ich dir helfen?

Shall I help you?



TRAP 02

ich solle · er sollt

Modal verbs don't take a personal ending; **ich** and **er** are identical.

× **Er sollt** um acht kommen.

no -t ending on a modal

✓ **Er soll** um acht kommen.

He's supposed to come at eight.



TRAP 03

Giving advice too bluntly

Telling a friend **Du sollst...** sounds like an order. The soft form is **solltest**.

× **Du sollst** zum Arzt gehen.

sounds like an instruction

✓ **Du solltest** zum Arzt gehen.

I think you should see a doctor.

05 05:30

The other modal verbs

06 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

06 05 : 50

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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