

Time conjunctions

— TEMPORALE KONJUNKTIONEN

Time conjunctions say when something happens: **als**, **wenn** and **wann** all mean “when”, but each one is used differently.

Say **wenn** when you talk about your childhood and a German ear snags — that needs **als**. English has one little word, “when”, and German splits it in three. Once in the past, every single time, or a question — plus the conjunctions that put two events in order.

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01 00:10

Right now: three words, one question

⚡ SHORTCUT A single event in the past? → **als**. Repeated, present or future? → **wenn**. Asking a question? → **wann**.

The English for all three is very often just “when”, and that is the problem. “*When I was little*” and “*when the weather is nice*” look identical in English — you sort them out from context. German makes you **say which one you mean**.

✓ **Als** ich klein **war**, wohnten wir in Izmir.

When I was little, we lived in Izmir. — one period in the past.

✓ **Wenn** das Wetter schön **ist**, gehe ich spazieren.

When the weather is nice, I go for a walk. — every time.

✓ Wann kommst du?

When are you coming? — a question.

02 01:20

als or wenn: a two-question flow

Here is the flow that lets you make this call in three seconds — and **the order matters**: check the time first.

1ST QUESTION	2ND QUESTION	RESULT
Past?	Did it happen once?	als — Als ich ankam , regnete es .
Past?	Every single time?	immer wenn — Immer wenn ich kam , regnete es .
Present / future	—	wenn — Wenn ich Zeit habe , rufe ich an .
A question	—	wann — Wann hast du Zeit?

Watch out: for a **repeated event in the past** German uses **wenn** — not **als**. To keep them from being confused, people usually put **immer** in front: **immer wenn**.



TRAP 1

Using wenn for “when I was a child”

The classic mistake for English speakers, precisely because English has only “when”. “*When I was a child*” is one period, in the past, not repeated — so it needs **als**.

✗ ~~Wenn~~ ich ein Kind war, ...

Sounds wrong in German.

✓ Als ich ein Kind war, ...

When I was a child...

The same mistake shows up in these phrases: **als ich nach Deutschland kam** (when I came to Germany) · **als ich sie kennenlernte** (when I met her) · **als der Krieg begann** (when the war began). All of them are **one-off** events.



TRAP 2

Using wann inside a statement

wann is only a **question** word. In an ordinary statement it is not used as a time conjunction — but it **is** used in an indirect question, because there is still a question inside.

✗ ~~Wann~~ ich nach Hause komme, esse ich.

Not a question, just a statement — wann is wrong.

✓ Wenn ich nach Hause komme, esse ich.

When I get home, I eat.

✓ Ich weiß nicht, wann er kommt.

I don't know when he's coming. — there is still a question inside.

① The structure of that second sentence is covered in detail on the [indirect questions page](#).

03 03:20

Conjunctions that set the order: before or after

The **als/wenn** pair answers “when?”. The second group sets **the order of two events** — this is the backbone of the B1 writing exam.

CONJUNCTION	IN ENGLISH	EXAMPLE
bevor	before	Bevor ich gehe , räume ich auf .
nachdem	after	Nachdem ich gegessen hatte , ging ich los .
während	while	Während ich koche , höre ich Musik .
seitdem / seit	since	Seitdem ich hier wohne , bin ich glücklich .
bis	until	Warte , bis ich fertig bin .
sobald	as soon as	Sobald ich ankomme , rufe ich an .
solange	as long as	Solange es regnet , bleiben wir hier .

All of them are **subordinating conjunctions**: the verb goes to the end. If the subordinate clause comes first, the main clause **starts with the verb** — **Bevor ich gehe, räume ich auf.**

The **only tricky one is nachdem**, because it needs a shift in tense: the subordinate clause has to be **one step further back** than the main clause.

SUBORDINATE CLAUSE (NACHDEM)	MAIN CLAUSE	EXAMPLE
Plusquamperfekt	Präteritum	Nachdem er gegessen hatte , ging er .
Perfekt	Präsens	Nachdem er gegessen hat , geht er .

The whole shift, and how **hatte/war + Partizip II** is built, is on the [Plusquamperfekt page](#).

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04 05:00

The part nobody tells you: the second face of während

Textbooks always give **während** as “while”. But in written German it is used **much more often** in a second sense: **contrast** — the English “whereas” or “while” in the sense of “on the other hand”.

- ✓ **Während** ich koche, hört sie Musik.

While I cook, she listens to music. — time.

- ✓ **Während** mein Bruder gern liest, sehe ich lieber fern.

While my brother likes reading, I prefer to watch TV. — contrast.

Both are correct, and both use the same structure. **What the sentence says** tells you which one it is. In exam texts, a student who cannot recognise the second meaning reads the passage backwards.

The second unspoken thing: with **als**, the **Präteritum is preferred**, not the Perfekt. In everyday speech you use the Perfekt everywhere, but after **als** it sounds wrong.

- ✗ **Als** ich klein ~~gewesen bin~~, ...

Grammatically possible, but Germans do not say it that way.

- ✓ **Als** ich klein **war**, ...

This is the natural one.

- ① Take this as a rule: **wherever you see als, think war · hatte · konnte · ging · kam**. This is one of the few places where the Präteritum survives in spoken German.

05 06:20

What to do this week

This topic sticks by **telling your own life** — not by solving exam questions. Five minutes a day:

- Write down a one-off memory from your childhood, starting with **als**: **Als ich sechs war, ...**
- **Turn the same memory into a habit** and build it with **immer wenn**: **Immer wenn wir nach Izmir fahren, ...**

- Put two things you will do tomorrow in order with **bevor** and **nachdem**.
- Describe your day with **während**: a moment when you did two things at once.
- Once a week, build one sentence **three times: als · wenn · wann** — and write down why the other two do not work.

① Next up is the Plusquamperfekt: the second half of a **nachdem** sentence and “the past of the past”.

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 06 : 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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