

wo? · wohin? · woher?

— WECHSELPRÄPOSITIONEN

The questions wo?, wohin? and woher? ask about place and direction: with nine “two-way” prepositions, wohin? takes the Akkusativ (in die Küche) and wo? takes the Dativ (in der Küche).

“Ich gehe in der Park.” — place or direction, which one is it? English quietly keeps the two apart (*in* vs. *into*, *on* vs. *onto*). German uses one and the same preposition and lets the case decide: Dativ or Akkusativ.

CONTENTS

- 01 You already do half of this in English 02 The one question that decides it
- 03 The nine prepositions — the table to save 04 The verb changes too: put ≠ be
- 05 The part nobody teaches: movement ≠ boundary
- 06 Three places where the rule does not work at all 07 Each of the nine has its own page
- 08 Change how you keep your notebook 09 Test yourself

01 00:12

You already do half of this in English

⚡ **SHORTCUT** wo? → Dativ (it stays) · wohin? → Akkusativ (it goes). Same preposition, two faces.

You never stop to think about the difference between **into** the kitchen and **in** the kitchen. One is *arrival*, the other is *being there*. Jump **onto** the table · sit **on** the table. Nobody taught you this as a table; the little word told you.

German asks for exactly the same reflex. There is one difference: **the signal is not a separate word, it sits on the article**. The preposition itself never changes — the only thing that changes is the article that follows it.

✓ **Ich gehe in die Küche.**

I'm going **into** the kitchen. → arrival, Akkusativ

✓ **Ich bin in der Küche.**

I'm **in** the kitchen. → being there, Dativ

English only does this for a couple of words (*in/into*, *on/onto*) and shrugs at the rest: *behind the house* means both. German has **nine** prepositions that split, and every one of them behaves the same way — the pairs below show it.

ENGLISH PAIR	PREPOSITION	WOHIN? · WHERE TO	WO? · WHERE
into · in	in	in die Küche	in der Küche
onto · on	auf	auf den Tisch	auf dem Tisch
(to) under · under	unter	unter das Bett	unter dem Bett
(to) in front of · in front of	vor	vor die Tür	vor der Tür
(to) behind · behind	hinter	hinter das Haus	hinter dem Haus

ENGLISH PAIR	PREPOSITION	WOHIN? · WHERE TO	WO? · WHERE
(to) beside · beside	neben	neben den Stuhl	neben dem Stuhl
(in)between · between	zwischen	zwischen die Bücher	zwischen den Büchern
(to) above · above (in the air)	über	über das Sofa	über dem Sofa
(touching) onto · at	an	an die Wand	an der Wand

So you are not learning a new kind of logic from scratch. You are taking a reflex you already have and moving it **onto the article**. The difficulty is not the rule, it is the moving.

- ① These nine prepositions are called **Wechselpräpositionen** in German — “switching prepositions”. Every other preposition has a fixed case; there you have no choice, and nothing to think about.

02 00:55

The one question that decides it

You ask the sentence a single question: **“wohin?” or “wo?”** Is something going somewhere, or is it just sitting somewhere? Once you have the answer, you have the case.

- **wohin? · where to?** → something *arrives* somewhere new, a boundary is crossed → **Akkusativ**
- **wo? · where?** → the place where it already is is *described*, no boundary → **Dativ**

✓ Ich stelle die Tasse auf **den** Tisch.

I’m putting the cup on the table. → the cup wasn’t on the table, now it arrives there: Akkusativ

✓ Die Tasse steht auf **dem** Tisch.

The cup is (standing) on the table. → it isn’t going anywhere, we’re giving its location: Dativ

✗ Ich stelle die Tasse auf **dem** Tisch.

Wrong — there is a putting action, the cup is heading for a target. It has to be **auf den Tisch**.

Now the real work: you have answered the question, so what does the article become? The four rows below are the engine of this page. **der** is masculine, **die** feminine, **das** neuter — and in the plural it is **die** again.

WORD	WOHIN? → AKKUSATIV	WO? → DATIV
der Tisch — masculine	auf den Tisch	auf dem Tisch
die Wand — feminine	an die Wand	an der Wand
das Bett — neuter	unter das Bett	unter dem Bett
die Bücher — plural	zwischen die Bücher	zwischen den Büchern
ein Tisch — indefinite	auf einen Tisch	auf einem Tisch
eine Wand — indefinite	an eine Wand	an einer Wand
mein Garten — possessive	in meinen Garten	in meinem Garten
meine Tasche — possessive	in meine Tasche	in meiner Tasche

In the Akkusativ only the **masculine** changes: **der → den**. Feminine, neuter and plural stay the same. In the Dativ all four change, and in the plural the noun gets an extra **-n**: **die Bücher → den Büchern**.

❶ It is the **target, not the verb**, that decides. “If the verb shows movement, use the Akkusativ” works in week one and misleads you in week two — you will see why in section 5.

03 01:50

The nine prepositions — the table to save

The list is closed and short: **nine**. No other preposition offers this choice. What you need to memorise is not “which preposition takes which case” — it is *which* prepositions are on this list of nine.

PREPOSITION	MEANING	WOHIN? + AKKUSATIV	WO? + DATIV
in	into - in	in den Park	im Park
an	touching: at a vertical surface, an edge	an die Wand	an der Wand
auf	onto - on (horizontal surface)	auf den Tisch	auf dem Tisch
über	above (not touching) - over	über das Sofa	über dem Sofa
unter	under	unter das Bett	unter dem Bett

PREPOSITION	MEANING	WOHIN? + AKKUSATIV	WO? + DATIV
vor	in front of	vor die Tür	vor der Tür
hinter	behind	hinter das Haus	hinter dem Haus
neben	next to - beside	neben den Stuhl	neben dem Stuhl
zwischen	between	zwischen die Stühle	zwischen den Stühlen

The cheapest way to keep the list in your head: **three + two + four. in-an-auf** (contact), **über-unter** (above-below), **vor-hinter-neben-zwischen** (surroundings). If you can stand in a room and point to each one, you have the list.

One row in the table looks odd: next to **in den Park** it says **im Park**. That is because some preposition + article pairs **fuse** in German, and writing them apart sounds wrong.

SPELLED OUT	FUSED FORM	WHICH CASE	EXAMPLE
in + das	ins	Akkusativ	Ich gehe ins Kino .
in + dem	im	Dativ	Ich bin im Kino .
an + das	ans	Akkusativ	Ich gehe ans Fenster .
an + dem	am	Dativ	Ich stehe am Fenster .
auf + das	aufs	Akkusativ	Ich freue mich aufs Wochenende .

These are the ones that are required in writing. In speech you will also hear **unterm • unters • vorm • vors • hinterm • übers** — that is everyday talk; on an exam paper write out **unter dem • vor das** in full.



TRAP 01

ins or im — one letter flips everything

- ✓ Ich gehe **ins** Bad.

I'm going to the bathroom. → **in das**, Akkusativ, there is an arrival

- ✓ Ich bin **im** Bad.

I'm in the bathroom. → **in dem**, Dativ, it gives the location

Both are short, both start with **in** — which is why this is the pair people mix up most when speaking. The free way to tell them apart is the last letter: **ending in -s means Akkusativ** (it comes from **das**), **ending in -m means Dativ** (it comes from **dem**).

- ① Fusing only happens with **das** and **dem**. **den** and **die** never fuse — which is why **in den Park** and **in die Küche** are always written apart.



TRAP 02

an, auf or über?

In English all three come out as “above” or “on”; in German they paint three different scenes. It is very common to get the case rule right and still slip up here.

✓ **Das Bild hängt an der Wand.**

The picture is hanging on the wall. → **an** = **touching** a vertical surface

✓ **Das Buch liegt auf dem Tisch.**

The book is on the table. → **auf** = **on top of** a horizontal surface

✓ **Die Lampe hängt über dem Tisch.**

The lamp is hanging over the table. → **über** = in the air, **not touching**

The best proof is the same table: **Wir sitzen am Tisch.** means you are sitting at the table, eating. **Die Katze sitzt auf dem Tisch.** means the cat has climbed *on top of* the table. Change the preposition and the scene changes; the case is Dativ in both.

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04 03:00

The verb changes too: put ≠ be

English uses two different verbs as well: *I put the book on the table* and *the book is on the table* — and the famous pairs *lay/lie* and *set/sit*, which even native speakers mix up. German does the same thing in pairs, and **the case of each pair is fixed**: the left side is always Akkusativ, the right side always Dativ.

WOHIN? + AKKUSATIV (YOU PUT IT)	WO? + DATIV (IT STAYS)	IN ENGLISH
legen — <i>legte · hat gelegt</i>	liegen — <i>lag · hat gelegen</i>	to lay something flat · to be lying
stellen — <i>stellte · hat gestellt</i>	stehen — <i>stand · hat gestanden</i>	to stand something upright · to be standing
setzen — <i>setzte · hat gesetzt</i>	sitzen — <i>saß · hat gesessen</i>	to seat someone · to be sitting
hängen — <i>hängte · hat gehängt</i>	hängen — <i>hing · hat gehangen</i>	to hang something up · to be hanging
stecken — <i>steckte · hat gesteckt</i>	stecken — <i>steckte · hat gesteckt</i>	to stick in · to be stuck in

The left column **needs an object** (you are putting something somewhere), the right column does not (something is just there). Grammar calls this transitive vs. intransitive; the practical version: the left column has two things in the sentence, the right column has one.

✓ **Ich lege das Buch auf den Tisch.**

I'm laying the book on the table. → a putting action: Akkusativ

✓ **Das Buch liegt auf dem Tisch.**

The book is lying on the table. → it gives the location: Dativ

✓ **Ich stelle die Flasche in den Kühlschrank.**

I'm putting the bottle in the fridge. → something that stands upright: **stellen**

✓ **Die Flasche steht im Kühlschrank.**

The bottle is (standing) in the fridge.

✓ **Ich hänge die Jacke in den Schrank.**

I'm hanging the jacket in the wardrobe.

✓ **Die Jacke hängt im Schrank.**

The jacket is hanging in the wardrobe.

If you get stuck between **legen** and **stellen**, look at how the object **sits**: lying down means **legen/liegen**, upright means **stellen/steht**. A plate lies on the table (**liegt**), a glass stands on it (**steht**). Germans really do make this distinction.



TRAP 03

legte or lag — in the past they split apart

In the present the pairs look alike; in the past they become unrecognisable. The putting verbs are **regular**, the staying verbs **change their stem**. Learn this table once and the rule runs by itself.

PRÄSENS	PRÄTERITUM	PERFEKT
Ich lege das Buch hin .	Ich legte ...	Ich habe ... gelegt .
Das Buch liegt da .	Das Buch lag da .	Das Buch hat da gelegen .
Ich stelle es hin .	Ich stellte ...	Ich habe ... gestellt .
Es steht da .	Es stand da .	Es hat da gestanden .
Ich setze mich hin .	Ich setzte mich hin .	Ich habe mich gesetzt .
Ich sitze da .	Ich saß da .	Ich habe da gesessen .

All of them take **haben** in the Perfekt. In southern Germany and Austria you will also hear **ist gelegen** • **ist gestanden** • **ist gesessen** — regional, not wrong, but write **haben** on an exam.



TRAP 04

hängen: one word, two conjugations

This is the sneakiest row on the list. In the present, **hängen** looks identical in both uses — **ich hänge • du hängst • er hängt**. Only the case tells them apart. But the moment you move to the past, they split in two.

- ✓ **Ich hängte** das Bild an **die** Wand.

I hung the picture on the wall. → the act of hanging, regular verb, Akkusativ

- ✓ Das Bild **hing** an **der** Wand.

The picture was hanging on the wall. → a state, the stem changes, Dativ

- ✓ **Ich habe** das Bild an die Wand **gehängt**. • **Das Bild hat** an der Wand **gehangen**.

They split in the Perfekt too: **gehängt** (to hang something up) ↔ **gehangen** (to be hanging).



TRAP 05

setzen wants a reflexive pronoun

- ✗ **Ich setze** auf den Stuhl.

Wrong — the question “whom are you seating?” is left hanging; a German ear hears the gap.

- ✓ **Ich setze** **mich** auf den Stuhl.

I’m sitting down on the chair. → with no other object you are seating yourself: the reflexive pronoun is required

- ✓ **Ich sitze** auf dem Stuhl.

I’m sitting on the chair. → once you are seated, the pronoun drops

The same logic works for the other pairs: **Ich lege mich ins Bett**. (I lie down in bed) ↔ **Ich liege im Bett**. (I’m in bed) • **Ich stelle mich an die Kasse**. (I go and stand at the till) ↔ **Ich stehe an der Kasse**. (I’m at the till).

- ① Shortcut: if you use a verb from the left column without an object, slip **mich • dich • sich** in. If there is an object, there is no pronoun: **Ich setze das Kind auf den Stuhl**.

05 04:15

The part nobody teaches: movement ≠ boundary

The “movement means Akkusativ” rule falls apart right here. In both sentences below you are running — so there is movement all the way — but the cases differ.

✓ **Ich laufe im Park.**

I'm running around in the park. → you are in the park from start to finish, no boundary is crossed: Dativ

✓ **Ich laufe in den Park.**

I'm running into the park. → you were outside, now you are entering: Akkusativ

The real name of the rule is not movement, it is **boundary**. The right question is: *are you entering the area the preposition draws?* If not, it is Dativ, however fast you move; if you are, it is Akkusativ, even when you cannot see any movement at all.

SENTENCE	IN ENGLISH	WHY
Ich schwimme im See .	I'm swimming in the lake .	you are in the lake , you do not cross its edge → Dativ
Ich springe in den See .	I'm jumping into the lake .	you go from outside to inside → Akkusativ
Wir tanzen in der Küche .	We're dancing in the kitchen .	dancing is movement , but you never leave the kitchen → Dativ
Wir gehen in die Küche .	We're going into the kitchen .	you change rooms → Akkusativ
Das Kind rennt auf dem Spielplatz .	The child is running around on the playground .	inside the playground → Dativ
Das Kind rennt auf den Spielplatz .	The child is running onto the playground .	entering the area → Akkusativ
Die Katze läuft unter dem Tisch .	The cat is walking around under the table .	already underneath → Dativ
Die Katze läuft unter den Tisch .	The cat is running under the table .	going underneath → Akkusativ

Same verb, same preposition, same noun — the only thing that changes the answer is **whether a boundary is crossed**. English makes the same cut: “I run in the park” versus “I run into the park”.

There is a flip side too: sentences that look as if nothing moves can take the Akkusativ. Because something **reaches a target** there.

✓ **Ich hänge das Bild an die Wand.**

I'm hanging the picture on the wall. → the picture wasn't on the wall, now it arrives there: Akkusativ

✓ **Der Lehrer schreibt das Wort an die Tafel.**

The teacher writes the word on the board. → the word “arrives” on the board: Akkusativ

✓ **Das Wort steht an der Tafel.**

The word is on the board. → it is there now: Dativ

① Bonus: with **über**, the difference between the two cases changes the meaning completely. **Wir fahren über die Brücke.** = we *cross* the bridge (Akkusativ, we get to the other side). **Die Wolken sind über der Brücke.** = the clouds are *above* the bridge (Dativ, they just hang there).

Three places where the rule does not work at all

Everything so far is logic for sentences that describe a place. In three spots that logic **never even comes into play** — go in knowing that, or the rule you know will mislead you.



EXCEPTION 01

When the verb has fixed the case, there is no logic

Some verbs are locked to one particular preposition and that combination sets the case. There is no place and no movement; if you try to apply the rule, you will get it wrong. This is a separate topic: **memorising verb + preposition**.

PATTERN	EXAMPLE	IN ENGLISH
denken an + Akk	Ich denke an dich .	I'm thinking of you
warten auf + Akk	Ich warte auf den Bus .	I'm waiting for the bus
sich freuen auf + Akk	Ich freue mich auf das Wochenende .	I'm looking forward to the weekend
sich erinnern an + Akk	Ich erinnere mich an den Tag .	I remember that day
sich vorbereiten auf + Akk	Ich bereite mich auf die Prüfung vor .	I'm preparing for the exam

A striking pattern: **an • auf • über** patterns mostly take the **Akkusativ**, while **unter • vor** and **teilnehmen an • arbeiten an** take the **Dativ**. But that is an observation, not a rule — when you learn a verb, write down its preposition and its case *as one piece*.

PATTERN	EXAMPLE	IN ENGLISH
sich ärgern über + Akk	Ich ärgere mich über den Lärm .	the noise annoys me
teilnehmen an + Dat	Ich nehme am Kurs teil .	I'm taking part in the course
arbeiten an + Dat	Ich arbeite an einem Projekt .	I'm working on a project
leiden unter + Dat	Sie leidet unter dem Stress .	she suffers from stress
Angst haben vor + Dat	Ich habe Angst vor dem Hund .	I'm afraid of the dog

A striking pattern: **an • auf • über** patterns mostly take the **Akkusativ**, while **unter • vor** and **teilnehmen an • arbeiten an** take the **Dativ**. But that is an observation, not a rule — when you learn a verb, write down its preposition and its case *as one piece*.

A small but frequently asked distinction: **sich freuen auf** is for something to come (**Ich freue mich auf den Urlaub**. — I'm looking forward to the holiday), **sich freuen über** is for something that has happened (**Ich freue mich über dein Geschenk**. — I'm happy about your gift). Both take the Akkusativ; the only thing that changes is the time.



EXCEPTION 02

When it tells time, always Dativ

When **an** • **in** • **vor** describe time, they give you no choice: **always Dativ**. Do not ask “is it heading toward a time?” — there is no such question.

✓ **am Montag** • **am Wochenende** • **am Abend**

on Monday • at the weekend • in the evening → **an dem**, Dativ

✓ **im Sommer** • **im Januar** • **in der Nacht**

in summer • in January • at night → **in dem / in der**, Dativ

✓ **vor drei Jahren** • **vor dem Essen**

three years ago • before the meal → Dativ

① The plural **-n** rule works here too: **drei Jahre** → **vor drei Jahren**. It is the letter people forget most when writing.



EXCEPTION 03

The case of all the other prepositions is fixed anyway

The most expensive wrong generalisation is this one: “if it shows direction, use the Akkusativ”. No — the rule exists only for **those nine prepositions**. The moment you see any other preposition, the case is already decided.

ALWAYS DATIV	EXAMPLE	ALWAYS AKKUSATIV	EXAMPLE
nach	Ich fahre nach Berlin .	durch	Wir gehen durch den Park .
zu	Ich gehe zum Arzt .	um	Wir gehen um den See .
aus	Ich komme aus der Türkei .	gegen	Das Auto fährt gegen den Baum .
von	Ich komme von der Arbeit .	für	Das ist für meinen Bruder .
bei	Ich bin bei meiner Schwester .	ohne	Ich komme ohne meinen Mantel .

nach Berlin and **zum Arzt** are about as clearly directional as sentences get — and still Dativ. Because **nach** and **zu** are not among the nine.

Two more expressions fall into the same trap, so note them separately: **Ich bin zu Hause**. (I’m at home) and **Ich gehe nach Hause**. (I’m going home). There is neither **in dem Haus** nor **in das Haus** here — both are frozen phrases.

07 05:50

Each of the nine has its own page

Everything so far covers **the rule**: Dativ for the wo? question, Akkusativ for wohin?. But every preposition also has its own story — **an** points to days too (**am Montag**), **über** meaning “about” breaks the pattern and **always takes the Akkusativ**, **vor** means “ago/before” in time and the case never changes there. Each of the pages below opens up one single preposition all the way.

- ① Prepositions with a fixed case (**für • mit • aus • bei...**) are not part of this group; their list and their individual pages are on the [prepositions page](#).

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08 06:10

Change how you keep your notebook

This topic is not solved by “studying”, it is solved by **changing how you write things down**. As long as you write the verb on its own, you will guess the case again in every sentence.

- Instead of: **legen** = to put
- Write: **legen (+ Akk) ↔ liegen (+ Dat) = to put ↔ to be lying**

Write the verb as a pair and put its case next to it. German has no single box called “put”: the verb that *puts* and the verb that *stays* are two different words with two different cases.

- **Step 1** — In the sentence, look at the **target** first, not the verb. Is something arriving at a new place?
- **Step 2** — Ask the sentence **wohin?** If you get an answer, it is Akkusativ; if the question sounds silly, ask **wo?** and the answer is Dativ.
- **Step 3** — Find the article: masculine **den / dem**, feminine **die / der**, neuter **das / dem**, plural **die / den + -n**.
- **Step 4** — Once a day, build a pair of sentences for five objects in your room: **Ich stelle die Tasse auf den Tisch. — Die Tasse steht auf dem Tisch.** After two weeks you make the call without thinking.

- ① The check nobody tells you: **every article ending in -m is Dativ. dem • einem • meinem • ihrem** — no exceptions. The reverse is not true (the feminine Dativ is **der**), but the moment you see an **-m** while reading your sentence, you can confirm “this one gives a location”.

One last door: in everyday speech Germans split **wohin** and **woher** in two. You will not see it in the textbook, but you will hear it on the street on day one.

- ✓ **Wohin gehst du? = Wo gehst du hin?**

Where are you going? → both are correct, the second is heard far more often

✓ **Woher** kommst du? = **Wo** kommst du **her**?

Where are you from? / Where do you come from?

- ① The same particle **hin** sticks to verbs too and gives you a free signal: if **hin** is inside **hinlegen** • **hinstellen** • **hinsetzen**, the sentence is going to a target — so Akkusativ. **Setz dich hin!** • **Leg dich hin!**

09 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

09 06 : 50

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

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