

Word order

SATZSTELLUNG

German word order puts the conjugated verb in second position, whatever comes first: Heute gehe ich ins Kino.

“Heute ich gehe einkaufen.” — it sounds natural to an English ear, and it is wrong. English keeps subject-then-verb no matter what opens the sentence; in German the verb has to sit in second position.

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01 00:12

The verb sits in slot two — no exceptions

 **SHORTCUT** Whatever you put first, **the conjugated verb never leaves slot two**. The subject drops in behind it.

TRY IT — WHATEVER YOU PUT FIRST, THE VERB STAYS PUT

Ich

Heute

Ins Kino

Ich gehe heute ins Kino

Normal order: subject → verb → time → place. “Ich gehe heute ins Kino.”

That is the one real law of the German sentence: **the conjugated verb always stands in slot two**. Whatever you put in front — the subject, a time, a place, a whole subordinate clause — the verb does not budge.

✓ Ich gehe heute ins Kino.

I'm going to the cinema today.

✓ Heute **gehe** ich ins Kino.

Same meaning, the stress is on “today”.

✗ Heute ~~ich~~ **gehe** ins Kino.

Wrong — this is what comes out when you build the sentence the English way.

Put anything other than the subject first and **the subject drops behind the verb**. Grammar books call this **Inversion**; you can simply remember it as “they swap places”. English does it only in questions (“Are you...?”); German does it in every statement that doesn’t open with the subject.

① “Second position” counts **slots**, not words. **Mein kleiner Bruder** is three words but one slot: **Mein kleiner Bruder geht heute ins Kino**. The verb is still right behind it.

SENTENCE TYPE	WHERE THE VERB IS	EXAMPLE
Statement	in slot two	Ich fahre morgen nach Köln .
Something else in front	still slot two	Morgen fahre ich nach Köln .
W-question	still slot two	Wann fährst du nach Köln?
Yes/no question	jumps to the front	Fährst du morgen nach Köln?
Command	jumps to the front	Fahr morgen nach Köln!
Subordinate clause	goes to the very end	... , weil ich morgen nach Köln fahre .

The position of the verb tells you the **type** of sentence. That is why you can tell a German question from its first word: verb first means someone asked something.

02 00:55

Whatever you put first: four openings, one sentence

The first slot — the **Vorfeld** — takes **exactly one element**, and which one you choose changes the **emphasis**, not the meaning. All four are perfectly grammatical:

WHAT COMES FIRST	SENTENCE	WHAT CHANGES
subject	Ich fahre morgen mit dem Zug nach Köln .	neutral statement
time	Morgen fahre ich mit dem Zug nach Köln .	stress : tomorrow
manner	Mit dem Zug fahre ich morgen nach Köln .	stress : by train
place	Nach Köln fahre ich morgen mit dem Zug .	stress : to Cologne

Careful: you can’t put **two** elements in front. **Morgen mit dem Zug fahre ich...** doesn’t work — one goes into the Vorfeld, the other has to stay in the middle.

The middle: TeKaMoLo

The area after the verb is called the **Mittelfeld**, and it isn't random either. The default order of the four kinds of adverbial is named after their first syllables: **Te-Ka-Mo-Lo**.

SLOT	QUESTION	EXAMPLES	IN ENGLISH
Temporal	wann? wie oft? wie lange?	heute · morgen · um 8 Uhr · jeden Tag · seit einem Jahr	time
Kausal	warum?	wegen der Arbeit · wegen des Wetters · aus Angst	reason
Modal	wie? womit?	mit dem Bus · schnell · gern · zu Fuß · allein	manner
Lokal	wo? wohin? woher?	in Berlin · nach Hause · zu Hause · aus der Türkei	place

All four rarely show up in one sentence. The one clash you really need to memorise is this: **time comes before place**.

- ✓ Ich fahre **heute** wegen der Arbeit mit dem Bus **nach Berlin**.

I'm going to Berlin by bus today because of work.

- ✓ Ich fahre **jeden Tag** mit dem Fahrrad **zur Arbeit**.

I cycle to work every day.



TRAP 01

Sending the time to the end

In English, "I'm going to the cinema **today**" is perfectly normal — place first, time last. German turns that order around, and a German ear hears the English order as clearly wrong.

- ✗ Ich gehe ~~ins Kino~~ heute.

Wrong.

- ✓ Ich gehe **heute ins Kino**.

Right — time first, then place.

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Pronouns never join the queue

If you have memorised TeKaMoLo and your sentence still sounds off without you knowing why, this is almost always the reason: **pronouns ignore that order and jump right behind the verb** — even in front of the time.

- ✓ Ich habe **gestern** dem Mann das Buch gegeben.

Nouns stay in their normal slots: time → objects.

- ✓ Ich habe **es ihm** gestern gegeben.

The pronouns jumped forward — in front of the time.

- ✗ Ich habe ~~gestern es ihm~~ gegeben.

Wrong.

When two objects meet, there is a fixed order too. One-sentence rule: **the shorter one goes first**. A pronoun is short; a long noun phrase comes last.

WHAT YOU HAVE	ORDER	EXAMPLE
two nouns	Dativ → Akkusativ	Ich gebe dem Kind das Buch .
Akkusativ pronoun	pronoun → noun	Ich gebe es dem Kind .
Dativ pronoun	pronoun → noun	Ich gebe ihm das Buch .
two pronouns	Akkusativ → Dativ	Ich gebe es ihm .

Watch out: with two nouns the **person comes first** (Dativ), with two pronouns the order **flips** — **es ihm, ihn mir**. Few learners know this one exception.

Where exactly does nicht go

The most-asked piece of word order. One-sentence rule: **nicht stands right in front of the part that goes to the end**. If nothing goes to the end, it goes to the end of the sentence.

WHAT IS NEGATED	SENTENCE	WHERE NICHT IS
the whole sentence	Ich komme heute nicht .	at the end
separable prefix	Ich rufe dich nicht an .	before the prefix
Perfekt	Ich habe ihn nicht gesehen .	before the participle
modal verb	Ich kann heute nicht kommen .	before the infinitive
place	Ich fahre nicht nach Berlin .	before the place
adjective / predicate	Ich bin nicht müde .	before the adjective
a single element	Nicht heute , sondern morgen .	in front of that element

The last row is special: if you negate one single element, **nicht** goes **right in front of it** and **sondern** usually follows — **Ich fahre nicht mit dem Bus, sondern mit dem Zug.**

- ① You decide between **kein** and **nicht** on the [negation page](#), not here; this table only asks where **nicht** goes.

06 04:35

Subordinate clauses: the rule suddenly changes

The moment you meet **weil** • **dass** • **wenn** • **obwohl** • **damit** • **ob**, the “verb second” rule is switched off for that little clause: **the conjugated verb goes to the very end**. The TeKaMoLo in the middle stays exactly as it was; only the verb piles up at the end.

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

I’m not coming because I’m ill.

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

Wrong — the most common mistake, because English keeps “I am ill”.

There is a lifesaver: **denn**. It still means “because”, but it **breaks nothing** — a normal sentence follows it. When you’re unsure, use **denn**.

- ✓ **Ich komme nicht, denn ich bin krank.**

Same meaning, order untouched.



TRAP 02

If the subordinate clause comes first, the main clause flips too

Put the subordinate clause up front and the whole clause counts as **one single slot**. So right after the comma comes the main clause’s verb — the subject stays behind it.

- ✓ **Wenn ich Zeit habe, komme ich vorbei.**

If I have time, I’ll drop by.

- ✗ **Wenn ich Zeit habe, ~~ich komme~~ vorbei.**

Wrong — English would say “I’ll drop by”, German can’t.

Quick check: if **two verbs stand side by side** around the comma, you built it right — **...Zeit habe, komme ich...**

07 05:30

Three places where TeKaMoLo doesn’t work

A word of honesty: TeKaMoLo is not a law, it’s a **default**. It applies when you aren’t stressing anything in particular. Germans bend it all the time when they talk, and there are three deviations you should know.

- **Fronting for emphasis.** Whatever you move to the front is what you're stressing: **Nach Berlin fahre ich nur einmal im Jahr.** — I only go to Berlin once a year. The only thing that changed is the Vorfeld; the verb is still in slot two.
- **Two time expressions: general to specific.** **Ich komme morgen um 8 Uhr.** — not "um 8 Uhr morgen". The same goes for places: big to small.
- **If the reason is a subordinate clause, it doesn't go into the Ka slot.** It gets added at the end: **Ich fahre morgen nach Berlin, weil ich arbeiten muss.** In the same way **deshalb** usually sits in the Vorfeld: **Ich bin krank. Deshalb komme ich nicht.**

- ① So don't memorise this page and then mark Germans' sentences as "wrong". Know the default, and when you hear a deviation, work out **what is being emphasised**.

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08 06:00

What to do this week

This topic is a matter of **reflex**, not rules; you won't get it by reading. The one exercise that builds the reflex: write the same sentence with four different openings. It takes five minutes, and it sinks in within a week.

- Build an everyday sentence: **Ich fahre morgen mit dem Auto nach Izmir.**
- Start the same sentence with the time: **Morgen fahre ich...**
- Start the same sentence with the manner: **Mit dem Auto fahre ich...**
- Start the same sentence with the place: **Nach Izmir fahre ich...**
- Last step: turn the same sentence into a subordinate clause with **weil** — the verb goes to the end.

- ① If you get stuck while writing, **read the sentence out loud**. If the verb isn't in slot two, the rhythm of a German sentence breaks, and your ear catches it before your eye does.

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

TIPS

Know this before the test

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

01

The verb stays **SECOND**
— whatever happens

Whatever the sentence starts with (time, place, object), the conjugated verb stays in second position; the subject moves behind it if it has to.

Heute gehe ich ins Kino.

02

Two objects: nouns
Dativ first, pronouns
Akkusativ first

Ich gebe dem Kind das Buch but Ich gebe es ihm.
In a mix, the pronoun goes first.

Ich habe es ihm
gestern gegeben.

03

In a subordinate clause
everything piles up at
the end

After **weil** • **dass** • **wenn** the conjugated verb goes to the very end; with a modal, the infinitive comes first and the modal last.

..., weil ich morgen
arbeiten muss.

04

TeKaMoLo: time →
reason → manner
→ place

Adverbials line up in this order. All four together are rare, but even with just two the order holds: time first, then place.

Ich fahre morgen mit dem
Zug nach Berlin.

✗ ~~Heute ich gehe ins Kino.~~

✓ Heute gehe ich ins Kino.

✗ ~~Ich trinke nicht Kaffee.~~

✓ Ich trinke keinen Kaffee.

When an adverb fills slot one, the subject drops **behind** the verb.

A noun without an article is negated with **kein**.

✗ ~~..., weil ich muss morgen arbeiten.~~

✓ ..., weil ich morgen arbeiten muss.

In a subordinate clause the modal goes last:
arbeiten muss.

✗ ~~Ich fahre nach Berlin morgen.~~

✓ Ich fahre morgen nach Berlin.

Time comes before place — TeKaMoLo.

09 06:30

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+7

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