To my great-uncle

Learning German: A beginner's guide for our friends in England

Contents

German Grammar

Learning grammatical rules is boring.

It's especially boring if those rules are as complex as in the German language.

Where English has dropped a lot of its more complex rules over time, German has mostly retained them. For example, German still features three genders and four cases, as well as a verb-second word order.

One could write whole books about German grammar (and many scholars have), but that's not what this book is about. I'd prefer if you start speaking German asap, even if you don't get it 100% right. That's the best way to learn.

That said, I still need you to understand some basic rules or you'll just get confused when you read through this book. So let's just get it out of the way…

The German alphabet (das Alphabet) includes an extra letter: β (sz).

It also includes three Umlaute: ä (ae), ö (oe) and ü (ue).

Nouns

All nouns start with a Capital letter, eg Mann (man), Frau (woman) and Kind (child).

The plural of a noun is often formed by:

- adding n, en, e, er, r or s to the end of the noun.
- changing the a, o or u to its corresponding Umlaut.

So Mann becomes Männer (men), Frau becomes Frauen (women) and Kind becomes Kinder (children).

Articles

The word for **the** is:

- der (masculine) eg der Mann.
- die (feminine) eg die Frau.
- das (neutral) eg das Kind.
- die (plural) eg die Männer, die Frauen und die Kinder.

The words for **a** is ein (masculine/neutral) or eine (feminine) eg ein Mann, eine Frau und ein Kind.

Object

If the person or thing is directly affected by the action, then the masculine article changes:

- der becomes den (eg wir wollen den Hund kaufen = we want to buy the dog)
- ein becomes einen (eg wir wollen ihm einen Kuss geben = we want to give him a kiss)

Prepositions

Prepositions usually go before a noun:

Preposition	Example	
an	Ich denke an dich.	I am thinking of you.
auf	Diese Runde geht auf mich.[1]	This round is [lit. goes] on me.
bei	Ich bin bei der Arbeit.	I am at [the] work.
in	Ich wohne in Deutschland.	I live in Germany.
über/unter	Er wohnt über/unter mir.	He lives above/below me.
von	Das Geschenk ist von mir.	The present is from me.
zu	Ich gehe zu meiner Mutter.	I am going to my mother.

The words for **the** and **a/an** change after the preposition:

- der/das becomes dem (eg auf dem Land = on the countryside)
- die (feminine) becomes der (eg auf der See = on the sea)
- die (plural) becomes den (eg über den Wolken = above the clouds)
- ein becomes einem (eg auf einem Berg = on a mountain)
- eine becomes einer (eg auf einer Kreuzfahrt[2] = on a cruise)

These words can then be shortened too:

- an dem = am (eg am ersten Tag = on the first day)
- bei dem = beim (eg beim Zahnarzt[3] = at the dentist)
- in dem = im (eg im Keller = in the basement)
- von dem = vom (eg vom Flughafen[4] = from the airport)
- zu dem = zum (eg zum Bahnhof[5] = to the train station)
- zu der = zur (eg zur Grenze = to the border)

Ownership

Add **s** to a name to denote ownership, eg Alfreds Buch (Alfred's book).

Add **es** to a masculine/neutral noun. The article becomes des or eines.

- das Buch [**des** / ein**es**] Mann**es** = the book of [the / a] man.
- der Hund [**des** / ein**es**] Kind**es** = the dog of [the / a] child.

You do not change feminine nouns (or plural), but the article becomes der.

- das Kind [**der** / ein**er**] Frau = the child of [the / a] woman
- die Kinder **der** [Frau / Frauen / Männer] = the children of the [woman / women / men].

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[1] Lit. This round goes on me.
[2] das Kreuz (cross) + die Fahrt (drive) = die Kreuzfahrt (cruise)
[3] der Zahn (tooth) + der Arzt (physician)
[4] der Flug (flight) + der Hafen (harbour) = der Flughafen (airport)
[5] die Bahn (train) + der Hof (yard) = der Bahnhof (train station). See photo on page 1.

Adjectives

Their endings change depending on the article and gender:

	the good man	the smart woman	the tall child	the little children
Subject	der gute Mann	die kluge Frau	das große Kind	die kleinen Kinder
Object	den guten Mann	- II -	- II -	- II -
Preposition	dem guten Mann	der klugen Frau	dem großen Kind	den kleinen Kindern
Ownership	des guten Mannes	- II -	des großen Kindes	der kleinen Kinder

	a good man	a smart woman	a tall child
Subject	ein guter Mann	eine kluge Frau	ein großes Kind
Object	einen guten Mann	- II -	- II -
Preposition	einem guten Mann	einer klugen Frau	einem großen Kind
Ownership	eines guten Mannes	- II -	eines großes Kindes

Verbs

All regular verbs with an -en ending (eg gehen = to go) follow the same conjugation patterns:

ich gehe	I go
du gehst	you (single) go
er geht	he goes
sie geht	she goes
es geht	it goes
wir gehen	we go
ihr geht	you (plural) go
sie gehen	they go

Normally, if the subject goes first, the verb goes second:

- Richard reist nach England = Richard travels to England.

If something else goes first, the verb still goes second and the subject third:

- Heute reist Richard nach England = Richard travels to England today.

In a question, the verb can go first:

- Geht Richard nach Hause? = Is Richard going home?

Commands are usually made using just the verb stem:

- Geh nach Hause! = Go home!

OK, that's it… Do you remember all of that? No, of course not.
Don't worry about it though. Just come back to this section as required.
Now let's get started…

Chapter 1 : Britannia and Germania

The original Kaiser

This story begins with the Roman statesman (and bestselling author) Julius Caesar (100-44 BC).

When he conquered Gaul (now France), he wanted to go further and invade the neighbouring lands too, but he first had to name them. Caesar could see that there was land east of the river Rhine (der Rhein), which he named Germania. Then there was more land north across the Channel, which he named Britannia. So far, so good.

Caesar then personally led invasions into both these new lands, but the inhabitants there were tough and fought hard to keep the Romans out. Caesar's two campaigns remained mostly unsuccessful. So he did just what a modern influencer would do and left some bad reviews about his stay. In the books that he published, he complained about everything: the weather (too cold), the people (just savages), their clothes (too revealing), the food (too much meat) and even about the Germans swimming naked in rivers. He made it plain that France (Gaul) was much nicer; and that the Romans should just be grateful that he had conquered it for them and shut up about Britannia and Germania already. He went on to spend the rest of his life well away from those new lands, which was probably for the best.

> ***A bit more about Caesar…***
> - Caesar was not a healthy man. He suffered from seizures, possibly due to an infection in the brain by a tapeworm. Whatever the cause, he did not let it stop him.
> - Caesar enjoyed unchallenged power and influence. He was in charge of the Roman Republic and commanded the strongest military of his time. During a triumphal procession, a slave was charged with repeatedly reminding Caesar that he was not a god, so he wouldn't forget.
> - Caesar was so powerful that his name survives in the German word for emperor (Kaiser), even though he was not technically an emperor, just a humble dictator (Diktator).
> - Caesar was a womaniser too. He was married three times and had many mistresses. The most famous of them was Cleopatra VII of Egypt, who also had a villa (eine Villa) in Rome.
> - Caesar died at the age of 55 when he was stabbed to death by a group of angry senators on the Ides of March (15 March). You will probably know that the man behind this murder was Caesar's best friend, Brutus, whose name (like Judas) is now synonymous with traitor.
> - Caesar's last words (*Et tu, Brute?*) are widely believed to express Caesar's surprise and dismay at the betrayal by his best friend. They translate as: *And you, Brutus?* (Und du, Brutus?). However, Caesar probably did not say these iconic words. It was actually William Shakespeare who made them up.

Caesar's death caused several civil wars, which claimed the lives of all the conspirators, including Brutus. Cleopatra too met her end. She had been fond of snakes, so when her army was defeated, she killed herself using snake poison to avoid being captured.

When all the fighting was done, Caesar's nephew (Neffe) Augustus (63–14 AD) took over as ruler of Rome. Unlike Caesar, he did become a Kaiser, but Rome's favourite dictator had left unfinished business in both Germania and Britannia.

Now let's speak some German in the chatroom…

[Admin]	Hallo sagen!	Saying hello!
J.Cäsar	Hey, Leute!	Hi, people!
J.Bach	Grüß dich.[6]	Hello!
Alfred	Hallo. Lange nicht gesehen.[7]	Hello. Long time no see.
Ludwig2	Grüß Gott![8]	Hello!
S.Graf	Na du.	Hey you.
HSchmidt	Moin![9]	Hello!
Brutus	Hallo mein Freund.	Hello my friend.
J.Cäsar	Hey Brutus. Was geht?[10]	Hi Brutus. What's up?
Alfred	Willkommen im Chat.	Welcome in the chat.
J.Cäsar	Danke Alfred. Es freut mich, dich zu sehen.	Thanks Alfred. I am pleased to see you.
Cleo7	Hallo mein Schatz! <3 Ich habe dich vermisst.	Hello my treasure! <3 I have missed you.
J.Cäsar	Hallo Liebling. Ich dich auch.	Hello darling. I [have missed] you too.
EisenH	Guten Morgen Cäsar. Grüße aus Amerika!	Good morning Caesar. Greetings from America!
J.Cäsar	Hier in Rom ist es schon Nachmittag[11]. Also guten Tag[12]!	Here in Rome it is already afternoon. So good afternoon!
EisenH	Guten Tag Cäsar.	Good afternoon Caesar.
Alfred	Eigentlich ist es schon Abend.	It is actually evening already.
J.Cäsar	Na dann… guten Abend, Alfred.	Well then… good evening, Alfred.
Alfred	Guten Abend.	Good evening.

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[6] Lit. Greet you. This is informal.
[7] Lit. Long not seen.
[8] Lit. Greet God! Used in Southern Germany.
[9] Used in Northern Germany informally.
[10] Lit. What goes?
[11] nach (after) + die Mitte (middle) + der Tag (day) = der Nachmittag (afternoon).
[12] Lit. good day.