

der, die, das — A Complete Guide to German Noun Genders

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Every German noun carries a gender — masculine, feminine or neuter — and that gender decides which article it takes. There is no way to work it out from the object itself: a *table* is masculine, a *lamp* is feminine, a *window* is neuter, and none of that follows from what the things are. The gender is a property of the word, not the object, which is why native speakers learn it as part of the noun rather than as a rule.

The practical advice: never learn a noun on its own. Learn *der Tisch*, not *Tisch*. The article is part of the word.

The three articles

German has one definite article that changes shape by gender, and it changes again by case. In the nominative — the form you meet first — it looks like this:

GENDER	DEFINITE	INDEFINITE	EXAMPLE
masculine	<i>der</i>	ein	der Tisch — the table
feminine	<i>die</i>	eine	die Lampe — the lamp
neuter	<i>das</i>	ein	das Fenster — the window
plural	<i>die</i>	—	die Tische — the tables

Notice that masculine and neuter share the same indefinite article, *ein*. That is not laziness on German's part: the two genders overlap in several places, and telling them apart often depends on the ending of the word rather than the article in front of it.

Endings that give the gender away

Roughly forty per cent of German nouns announce their gender through their ending. These patterns are reliable enough to be worth memorising, and they cover a large share of the vocabulary you meet at A1 and A2.

Almost always feminine

ENDING	EXAMPLE	MEANING
-ung	<i>die Wohnung</i>	flat
-heit	<i>die Freiheit</i>	freedom
-keit	<i>die Möglichkeit</i>	possibility
-schaft	<i>die Freundschaft</i>	friendship
-ion	<i>die Nation</i>	nation
-tät	<i>die Universität</i>	university
-ei	<i>die Bäckerei</i>	bakery
-ie	<i>die Energie</i>	energy

The *-ung* group alone accounts for hundreds of nouns, and it is fully productive: any verb can be turned into an *-ung* noun, and the result is always feminine. *wohnen* gives *die Wohnung*, *rechnen* gives *die Rechnung*, *meinen* gives *die Meinung*.

Almost always neuter

ENDING	EXAMPLE	MEANING
-chen	<i>das Mädchen</i>	girl
-lein	<i>das Fräulein</i>	young lady
-ment	<i>das Dokument</i>	document
-um	<i>das Museum</i>	museum
-ma	<i>das Thema</i>	topic

das Mädchen is the classic example of grammatical gender overriding meaning. A girl is obviously female, but *-chen* is a diminutive ending and every diminutive is neuter. The ending wins.

Almost always masculine

ENDING	EXAMPLE	MEANING
-er (agent)	<i>der Lehrer</i>	teacher
-ling	<i>der Frühling</i>	spring
-ismus	<i>der Kapitalismus</i>	capitalism
-or	<i>der Motor</i>	engine
-ant	<i>der Elefant</i>	elephant

Days, months and seasons are masculine — *der Montag, der Januar, der Sommer* — as are most weather words: *der Regen, der Schnee, der Wind*.

Compound nouns take the gender of the last word

This is the single most useful rule in the whole topic, because German builds compounds constantly and the rule has almost no exceptions.

die Hand + *der Schuh* gives **der Handschuh** — a glove is masculine because *Schuh* is. *der Tisch* + *die Lampe* gives **die Tischlampe**. However long the compound, only the final element matters: *die Donaudampfschiffahrtsgesellschaft* is feminine because *Gesellschaft* is.

This means learning one noun's gender often gives you dozens for free.

How the article changes with case

The article is not fixed. It shifts depending on the noun's job in the sentence, and this is where most learners feel the ground move. The full picture:

CASE	MASCULINE	FEMININE	NEUTER	PLURAL
Nominativ	<i>der</i>	die	das	die
Akkusativ	<i>den</i>	die	das	die
Dativ	<i>dem</i>	der	dem	den (+n)
Genitiv	<i>des</i> (+s)	der	des (+s)	der

The good news is how little actually changes. Feminine and neuter are identical in the nominative and accusative, so the only difference in the accusative is masculine *der* becoming ***den***. If you learn one thing about the accusative, learn that.

Words that follow the same pattern

ein, kein and the possessives *mein, dein, sein, ihr, unser, euer* all take the same endings as the definite article, with one wrinkle: in the masculine nominative and the neuter nominative and accusative they take no ending at all. *ein Tisch, ein Fenster* — but *einen Tisch* in the accusative.

How to actually learn them

Gender is not learned by rule alone. The endings above cover a good share of the vocabulary, compounds cover more, and the rest is exposure. What works:

Learn the article with the noun, every time. Write *die Tür* in your notes, never *Tür*. If you learn the bare noun you will have to relearn it later with the article attached.

Say the noun in a short phrase. *Ich sehe den Tisch* fixes both the gender and the accusative form in one go, and phrases stick better than isolated words.

Drill the ones you get wrong, not the ones you know. Repetition of things you already have right feels productive and is not. The practice app tracks which nouns you miss and brings them back.