

The German Cases — Nominativ, Akkusativ, Dativ, Genitiv

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German marks what a noun is doing in a sentence by changing the article in front of it. English does this only with pronouns — *he* versus *him* — while German does it with every noun. There are four cases, and the article shifts in each.

The four cases

CASE	ASKS	ROLE	EXAMPLE
Nominativ	<i>wer? was?</i>	the subject	Der Mann liest.
Akkusativ	<i>wen? was?</i>	the direct object	Ich sehe den Mann .
Dativ	<i>wem?</i>	the indirect object	Ich helfe dem Mann .
Genitiv	<i>wessen?</i>	possession	das Auto des Mannes

The article table

Everything in this topic rests on one table. It is worth learning by heart, and it is smaller than it looks — many of the cells repeat.

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

The shortcut: feminine and neuter never change between nominative and accusative. The only difference in the accusative is masculine *der* → **den**. If you learn one cell, learn that one.

Where the case comes from

Three things decide the case, and knowing which one is in play is most of the skill.

1. The verb

Most verbs take a direct object in the accusative: *Ich trinke **den** Kaffee*. But a specific group takes the dative instead, and these have to be learned as a list because nothing about them looks different:

helfen, danken, gefallen, gehören, antworten, folgen, passen, schmecken, gratulieren, vertrauen, widersprechen.

*Ich helfe **dem** Mann* — not *den*. The verb decides.

2. A fixed preposition

Some prepositions always force the same case, whatever the meaning.

ALWAYS AKKUSATIV	ALWAYS DATIV	ALWAYS GENITIV
durch, für, gegen, ohne, um	<i>aus, bei, mit, nach, seit, von, zu</i>	wegen, während, trotz
bis, entlang	<i>gegenüber, ab, außer</i>	innerhalb, außerhalb, statt

These are worth drilling until they are automatic. *mit* is always dative; there is nothing to think about.

3. A two-way preposition

Nine prepositions take either case, and the choice carries meaning. This is the part learners find hardest, and the rule is genuinely simple once stated:

Movement into a new place → Akkusativ. Ask *wohin?*
Position, staying put → Dativ. Ask *wo?*

The nine: *an, auf, hinter, in, neben, über, unter, vor, zwischen*.

*Ich gehe in **die** Küche.* — I go into the kitchen. Movement, accusative.

*Ich bin in **der** Küche.* — I am in the kitchen. Position, dative.

The test is not whether anything is moving in general, but whether the thing is *crossing into* the place named. Someone can be running hard — *ich laufe in **dem** Park* — and still take the dative, because the running happens inside the park rather than into it.

When the verb overrides the rule

At B1 and beyond, some verbs fix the case of their preposition regardless of movement. *warten auf* always takes the accusative even though nothing moves: *Ich warte auf **den** Bus*. Likewise *sich freuen auf, denken an, sich erinnern an* — all accusative — while *bestehen auf, leiden unter* and *zweifeln an* take the dative.

These are learned as verb-plus-preposition pairs, not derived from meaning.

Contractions

Some preposition-article pairs merge, and in writing the merged form is the standard one.

FULL FORM	WRITTEN AS	FULL FORM	WRITTEN AS
in dem	im	an dem	am
in das	ins	an das	ans
zu dem	zum	bei dem	beim
zu der	zur	von dem	vom

Others — *aufs, fürs, durchs* — are common in casual writing but optional. A few, like *übers* and *unters*, belong to speech only; in writing keep *über das*.

When to learn what

LEVEL	FOCUS
A2	<i>Nominativ, Akkusativ, Dativ; the everyday prepositions; movement vs position</i>
B1	<i>Dative plural -n, the dative verbs, possessive Genitiv, wegen/während/trotz</i>
B2	<i>Verb-preposition governance, the wider Genitiv prepositions</i>

Genitiv is not part of the A2 syllabus and does not need to be rushed. It appears far less in speech than the other three, and the possessive can usually be expressed with **von** plus the dative instead.