

German Verb Conjugation — A Complete Guide

Deutsch Üben · free practice, no account needed

German verbs change their ending according to who is doing the action. English does this too, but barely — *I work, you work, he works* — where German changes the ending for almost every person. The endings are consistent enough that once you have the regular pattern, most verbs follow it.

The regular present tense

Take the infinitive, remove the *-en*, and add the ending. *machen* becomes the stem *mach-*:

PERSON	ENDING	MACHEN	MEANING
ich	-e	mach	I do
du	-st	machst	you do
er / sie / es	-t	macht	he/she/it does
wir	-en	machen	we do
ihr	-t	macht	you do (plural)
sie / Sie	-en	machen	they / you do (formal)

Notice: *wir* and *sie/Sie* are always identical to the infinitive, and *er* and *ihr* are always identical to each other. That is four of the six forms accounted for by two patterns.

When a spelling change is needed

If the stem already ends in *-t*, *-d* or a difficult consonant cluster, an *-e-* slips in to make the word pronounceable. *arbeiten* would give the unsayable *arbeitst*, so it becomes **du arbeitest**, **er arbeitet**, **ihr arbeitet**. The same applies to *finden*, *reden*, *öffnen* and *rechnen*.

If the stem ends in *-s*, *-ß*, *-z* or *-x*, the *du* ending loses its *s*, because you cannot hear two in a row: *heißen* gives **du heißt**, not *heißst*. *tanzen* gives **du tanzt**.

Stem-changing verbs

A group of common verbs change their stem vowel — but only in the *du* and *er/sie/es* forms. Everywhere else they behave normally, which is why the change is easy to miss.

CHANGE	INFINITIVE	DU	ER / SIE / ES
e → i	<i>sprechen</i>	sprichst	spricht
e → i	<i>geben</i>	gibst	gibt
e → ie	<i>sehen</i>	siehst	sieht
e → ie	<i>lesen</i>	liest	liest
a → ä	<i>fahren</i>	fährst	fährt
a → ä	<i>schlafen</i>	schläfst	schläft
au → äu	<i>laufen</i>	läufst	läuft

These have to be learned individually — there is no way to predict from the infinitive whether a verb changes. The consolation is that they are among the most frequent verbs in the language, so exposure does most of the work.

The verbs that break every rule

Three verbs are irregular enough to be worth learning as complete paradigms on day one, because you cannot say much without them.

	SEIN (TO BE)	HABEN (TO HAVE)	WERDEN (TO BECOME)
ich	<i>bin</i>	habe	werde
du	<i>bist</i>	hast	wirst
er/sie/es	<i>ist</i>	hat	wird
wir	<i>sind</i>	haben	werden
ihr	<i>seid</i>	habt	werdet
sie/Sie	<i>sind</i>	haben	werden

Separable verbs

Many German verbs carry a prefix that detaches in a main clause and moves to the end. *aufstehen* becomes *ich stehe um sieben auf*. The prefix is still part of the verb — it has simply travelled.

Common separable prefixes: *ab-*, *an-*, *auf-*, *aus-*, *ein-*, *mit-*, *nach-*, *vor-*, *zu-*, *zurück-*. Inseparable prefixes never move: *be-*, *emp-*, *ent-*, *er-*, *ge-*, *ver-*, *zer-*. *Ich besuche dich* keeps its prefix; *ich rufe dich an* does not.

The Präteritum

The simple past. In speech, German mostly uses the Perfekt instead, so you meet the Präteritum more in writing and narrative — with the important exception of *sein*, *haben* and the modal verbs, which use it constantly even in conversation.

Regular verbs insert *-te-* before the ending: *ich machte*, *du machtest*, *er machte*. Strong verbs change their vowel instead and take no ending in the *ich* and *er* forms: *ich ging*, *du gingst*, *er ging*.

Even if you plan to speak in the Perfekt, learn *war* and *hatte* early. *Ich war müde* is far more natural than *ich bin müde gewesen*.

Konjunktiv II

The would-form, used for politeness and hypotheticals. For most verbs it is built with *würde* plus the infinitive: *ich würde gern kommen*. A handful of high-frequency verbs have their own form and sound stilted with *würde*: *wäre*, *hätte*, *könnte*, *müsste*, *möchte*.

Ich hätte gern einen Kaffee is how you order politely. *Könnten Sie mir helfen?* is how you ask for help without sounding brusque. These two sentences alone repay learning the form.

Which tense at which level

LEVEL	WHAT YOU NEED
A1	<i>Präsens, including the stem-changers and sein/haben</i>
A2	<i>Präteritum of sein, haben and the modals</i>
B1	<i>Konjunktiv II for politeness and hypotheticals</i>
B2	<i>Konjunktiv I for reported speech</i>