

The German Perfekt — Partizip II and haben vs sein

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The Perfekt is the past tense Germans actually speak in. Where English distinguishes *I went* from *I have gone*, spoken German uses one form for both: *ich **bin** gegangen*. Getting the Perfekt right is what lets you talk about yesterday, and it needs two things — the right participle, and the right auxiliary verb.

The shape of the sentence

The auxiliary takes the normal verb position; the participle goes to the very end. Everything else sits in between.

*Ich **habe** gestern einen Film **gesehen**.*
I watched a film yesterday.

This bracket is a defining feature of German word order, and the participle waiting at the end is what gives spoken German its distinctive shape.

Building the Partizip II

Weak verbs — the regular ones — take *ge-* at the front and *-t* at the end. *machen* gives **gemacht**, *kaufen* gives **gekauft**, *spielen* gives **gespielt**.

Strong verbs take *ge-* and *-en*, and usually change their stem vowel. *sehen* gives **gesehen**, *trinken* gives **getrunken**, *gehen* gives **gegangen**. These have to be memorised, but the list of genuinely common ones is shorter than it looks.

TYPE	INFINITIVE	PARTIZIP II	MEANING
weak	<i>machen</i>	gemacht	made / done
weak	<i>arbeiten</i>	gearbeitet	worked
strong	<i>trinken</i>	getrunken	drunk
strong	<i>sprechen</i>	gesprochen	spoken
strong	<i>schreiben</i>	geschrieben	written
mixed	<i>denken</i>	gedacht	thought
mixed	<i>bringen</i>	gebracht	brought

When ge- is left out

Two groups of verbs never take *ge-*, and this trips up almost everyone at first.

Verbs ending in -ieren. *studieren* gives **studiert**, not *gestudiert*. The same for *telefonieren*, *fotografieren*, *reparieren*, *organisieren*.

Verbs with an inseparable prefix — *be-*, *emp-*, *ent-*, *er-*, *ge-*, *miss-*, *ver-*, *zer-*. *besuchen* gives **besucht**, *verstehen* gives **verstanden**, *erzählen* gives **erzählt**.

The reason is stress. German only adds *ge-* when the first syllable of the verb is stressed. In *stud**ie**ren* and *be**s**uchen* the stress falls later, so there is nowhere for *ge-* to attach.

Separable verbs put ge- in the middle

When a separable prefix is involved, *ge-* slots in between the prefix and the stem. *aufstehen* gives **aufgestanden**, *einkaufen* gives **eingekauft**, *mitbringen* gives **mitgebracht**.

haben or sein?

Most verbs take *haben*. Use *sein* only in three cases, and the first is by far the most common.

1. Movement from one place to another. *gehen*, *kommen*, *fahren*, *fliegen*, *laufen*, *reisen* — *ich **bin** nach Berlin gefahren*.

2. A change of state. *aufstehen, einschlafen, aufwachen, wachsen, sterben* — er **ist** eingeschlafen.

3. Three exceptions to memorise: *sein, bleiben, werden*. Ich **bin** zu Hause geblieben.

AUXILIARY	WHEN	EXAMPLE
haben	<i>everything else, and all verbs with a direct object</i>	Ich habe das Buch gelesen.
sein	<i>movement to a new place</i>	Ich bin nach Hause gegangen.
sein	<i>change of state</i>	Sie ist aufgewacht.
sein	<i>sein, bleiben, werden</i>	Er ist Arzt geworden.

The same verb can take either

A few verbs switch auxiliary depending on whether they have a direct object. *fahren* with an object means *to drive something* and takes *haben*; without one it means *to travel* and takes *sein*.

Ich **bin** nach Köln gefahren. — I travelled to Cologne.

Ich **habe** das Auto gefahren. — I drove the car.

The same applies to *fliegen, schwimmen* and *ziehen*. If there is a direct object, it takes *haben*.

Perfekt or Präteritum?

In conversation, use the Perfekt for almost everything. The exceptions are *sein, haben* and the modal verbs, where the simple past is more natural: say *ich war müde* rather than *ich bin müde gewesen*, and *ich hatte keine Zeit* rather than *ich habe keine Zeit gehabt*.

In writing — particularly narrative and journalism — the Präteritum dominates. Both are correct; the difference is register, not meaning.