

# German Pronouns — Personal, Reflexive, Possessive and Relative

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Pronouns stand in for nouns, and like nouns they carry a case. You use them in almost every sentence you speak, which means an error here is far more visible than one in a rarer structure. This guide covers the four groups that cause the most trouble.

## Personal pronouns

The case comes from the verb or the preposition, exactly as it would for a noun. *Ich sehe **ihn*** is accusative because *sehen* takes a direct object; *ich helfe **ihm*** is dative because *helfen* governs the dative.

| NOMINATIV | AKKUSATIV   | DATIV | POSSESSIV |
|-----------|-------------|-------|-----------|
| ich       | <i>mich</i> | mir   | mein      |
| du        | <i>dich</i> | dir   | dein      |
| er        | <i>ihn</i>  | ihm   | sein      |
| sie (sg)  | <i>sie</i>  | ihr   | ihr       |
| es        | <i>es</i>   | ihm   | sein      |
| wir       | <i>uns</i>  | uns   | unser     |
| ihr       | <i>euch</i> | euch  | euer      |
| sie (pl)  | <i>sie</i>  | ihnen | ihr       |
| Sie       | <i>Sie</i>  | Ihnen | Ihr       |

The formal *Sie* is always capitalised, in every case. That capital is the only thing distinguishing it from *sie* meaning *she* or *they*.

## Reflexive pronouns: mich or mir?

This is the one worth learning properly, because the rule is exact and the error is common.

A reflexive pronoun is **accusative** by default. It becomes **dative** as soon as the sentence already has a direct object — because that slot is taken.

*Ich wasche **mich**.* — Nothing else is being washed. Accusative.

*Ich wasche **mir** die Hände.* — *die Hände* is the direct object, so the reflexive moves to the dative.

The same pattern runs through a whole family of everyday sentences: *ich putze **mir** die Zähne*, *ich ziehe **mir** eine Jacke an*, *ich kaufe **mir** ein Buch*.

|              | AKKUSATIV   | DATIV |
|--------------|-------------|-------|
| ich          | <i>mich</i> | mir   |
| du           | <i>dich</i> | dir   |
| er/sie/es    | <i>sich</i> | sich  |
| wir          | <i>uns</i>  | uns   |
| ihr          | <i>euch</i> | euch  |
| sie (pl)/Sie | <i>sich</i> | sich  |

In the third person the distinction is invisible — *sich* covers both. That is precisely why learners miss the rule: it only shows itself in the first and second person singular.

## Possessive determiners

Two decisions at once. The stem says *whose*; the ending says *which case*. The endings are the same as for *ein* and *kein*.

The stems are in the last column of the personal pronoun table above. Whichever one you need, the endings below are the same.

|                  | MASCULINE     | FEMININE | NEUTER | PLURAL |
|------------------|---------------|----------|--------|--------|
| <b>Nominativ</b> | <i>mein</i>   | meine    | mein   | meine  |
| <b>Akkusativ</b> | <i>meinen</i> | meine    | mein   | meine  |
| <b>Dativ</b>     | <i>meinem</i> | meiner   | meinem | meinen |
| <b>Genitiv</b>   | <i>meines</i> | meiner   | meines | meiner |

*euer* drops its second *e* when an ending is added: *euer Zimmer*, but **eure** Zimmer and **euren** Vorschlägen.

Standing alone without a noun, a possessive takes the *der/die/das* endings instead: *Ist das dein Buch?* — *Nein, das ist **meins**.*

## Relative pronouns

The rule people get wrong: gender and number come from the noun the clause refers back to, but the **case comes from the relative clause itself**. Look at what the verb inside the clause needs.

Der Mann, **der** dort steht — subject of *steht*, so nominative.

Der Mann, **den** ich sehe — direct object of *sehen*, so accusative.

Der Mann, **dem** ich helfe — *helfen* takes the dative.

|                  | MASCULINE     | FEMININE | NEUTER | PLURAL |
|------------------|---------------|----------|--------|--------|
| <b>Nominativ</b> | <i>der</i>    | die      | das    | die    |
| <b>Akkusativ</b> | <i>den</i>    | die      | das    | die    |
| <b>Dativ</b>     | <i>dem</i>    | der      | dem    | denen  |
| <b>Genitiv</b>   | <i>dessen</i> | deren    | dessen | deren  |

The genitive forms mean *whose*: *der Mann, **dessen** Auto vor der Tür steht*. If a preposition is involved it comes first and sets the case: *das Projekt, **an dem** wir arbeiten*.

## da-Wörter: damit or mit ihm?

When a preposition points at a **thing**, German merges the two into one word — **da-** plus the preposition, with an *r* inserted if the preposition begins with a vowel. When it points at a **person**, the preposition keeps a normal pronoun.

| PREPOSITION | A THING        | A PERSON       |
|-------------|----------------|----------------|
| <b>auf</b>  | <i>darauf</i>  | auf ihn / sie  |
| <b>an</b>   | <i>daran</i>   | an ihn / sie   |
| <b>über</b> | <i>darüber</i> | über ihn / sie |
| <b>für</b>  | <i>dafür</i>   | für ihn / sie  |
| <b>mit</b>  | <i>damit</i>   | mit ihm / ihr  |
| <b>vor</b>  | <i>davor</i>   | vor ihm / ihr  |

*Ich warte auf den Bus* → *Ich warte **darauf**.*

*Ich warte auf meinen Bruder* → *Ich warte **auf ihn**.*

English uses *for it* and *for him* in the same shape, which is exactly why this is easy to get wrong. Animals are usually treated as things.

## Other pronouns worth knowing

*man* is the impersonal subject — *man kann hier nicht rauchen* — and exists only in the nominative. In the other cases it borrows from *ein*: *einen* in the accusative, *einem* in the dative.

|                | NOMINATIV      | AKKUSATIV | DATIV     | GENITIV |
|----------------|----------------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| <b>man</b>     | <i>man</i>     | einen     | einem     | —       |
| <b>jemand</b>  | <i>jemand</i>  | jemanden  | jemandem  | —       |
| <b>niemand</b> | <i>niemand</i> | niemanden | niemandem | —       |
| <b>wer</b>     | <i>wer</i>     | wen       | wem       | wessen  |

*dieser, welcher, jeder* and *keiner* all follow the der/die/das endings.