Introduction

German is a language of huge cultural and economic significance. It is the language of some of the greatest writers, scientists, composers, theologians and philosophers. Those who gain fluency in German gain access to cultural and academic riches beyond measure. It is also the language of one of the world’s most vibrant and important economies and is an official language of the European Union. The ability to speak and write German with precision is essential for those who wish to be influential and effective in European business and political spheres. And, indeed, the greater the fluency in a language, the easier and more pleasurable it is to communicate with native speakers. Approximately 100 million people speak German as their first language, and many more across Eastern Europe speak it as a lingua franca. Linguistic competence is one thing, but real confidence and effectiveness come with the ability to understand the subtleties of a language and to express one’s ideas accurately.

Grammar is not usually associated with glamour, though the two words have the same root. Getting to grips with the complexities of a language may feel at times like trying to master a never-ending and definitely unglamorous maze of new structures. The user of this volume will be relieved to know that the author’s aim is, if not to make German grammar glamorous, then at least to make it as straightforward and accessible as possible. Learners are often surprised to discover that the grammar of German is simpler than that of many other languages and has fewer exceptions to the ‘rules’. Its main structures can be gathered under just three headings:

- verbs and tenses
- prepositions and cases
- word order (especially verb position).

Almost everything else is a subdivision of one of these.

This book, which covers all the grammar required by undergraduates and other intermediate and advanced learners, has been written to help the student of the language to develop fluency and accuracy. It takes as its basis modern standard German (Hochdeutsch), but it also includes differences between spoken and written language, as well as variations found in German-speaking countries such as Austria and Switzerland, where these differences are significant and common. Although the emphasis is on contemporary usage, older forms that may still be encountered with some regularity are also noted.
The main features of *A Student Grammar of German* are as follows:

- **Overview** Each chapter starts with an outline of the contents, and with definitions and examples of the terms and structures described in the following pages.
- **‘TIP’ boxes** Short summaries of difficult points, or useful ways of remembering patterns appear throughout the text.
- **The main rules** are printed in **bold**, to highlight the key points.
- **Examples** Each point is illustrated by several examples, with translations, to enable the reader to get a feel for current usage. They are drawn from a wide variety of sources, including the press and the internet.
- **List of strong and irregular verbs**
- **Summary of tenses**
- **Glossary** A list of grammatical terms used, with brief definitions and examples.
Cases

OVERVIEW

What are cases?

Cases show how certain classes of words, such as nouns, pronouns and determiners (such as articles) function within a sentence or clause. In English, case is unmarked on nouns and determiners, but is clearly marked on the forms of the pronoun:

She likes me  I like her  but not: Her like I

• The group (or case, to give it its proper name) of personal pronouns we can use in the subject (or ‘doer’) position is:
  I, you, he, it, she, we, they

  They are said to be in the nominative case.

• The group of pronouns we can use in the object (or ‘done to’) position is:
  me, you, him, her, it, us, them

  These are said to be in the accusative case. Only you and it have identical forms in both nominative and accusative cases.

Cases in German

The marking of case is vital to the structure of German. Changes to the forms of words affect not only personal pronouns, as in English, but also articles (der, die, das; ein, eine, ein), adjectives and other words. There are four cases: nominative, accusative, genitive and dative.

However, it is not quite as complicated as it at first looks.

• There are many similarities between the endings in each group of words:
  e.g. masculine accusative: den, einen, meinen, ihn, welchen?

• Because the role of a pronoun or noun phrase is usually clear from its case ending, other aspects of the language, such as word order, are often more flexible than in English (once some basic rules have been mastered).
The four cases

Here is a summary of the main functions of cases (excluding their use with prepositions):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case</th>
<th>Function</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nominative</td>
<td>Subject (‘doer’) of the verb</td>
<td>Der Mann läuft über die Straße *The man is crossing the street*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accusative</td>
<td>Object (‘done to’) of the verb</td>
<td>Ich kenne den Mann *I know the man*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Genitive</td>
<td>Possession between two nouns</td>
<td>Das Haus meines Freundes *My friend’s house*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dative</td>
<td>Indirect (additional) object of the verb</td>
<td>Ich schicke meinem Freund einen Brief *I’m sending a letter to my friend*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1.1 The cases

You will find grids of the case endings in the chapters on determiners (Chapter 3), pronouns (Chapter 4) and adjectives (Chapter 5).

**TIP** Deciding which case to use

- Whenever a noun phrase or a pronoun is used, a decision must be made about which case it is in.
- If the noun phrase or pronoun is not in the plural, you will need to know the gender of the noun.
- For the plural, there is a single set of endings for all genders.

Then ask yourself this question, which will serve in most instances:

*Does the noun or pronoun come after a preposition (e.g. auf, in)?*

**If YES**
- *the preposition* determines the case

**If NO**
- check whether it is the *subject* (Nominative) or the *object* (Accusative) of the verb

Other factors which determine the case

- Certain verbs and adjectives are used with a particular case; see 13.3 (verbs) and 5.3 (adjectives).
1.1 The cases

1.1.1 The nominative case

a The nominative case indicates the subject of the verb (the ‘doer’ of the action)

Meine Mutter hört Musik  
My mother is listening to music
Der Lehrer unterrichtet Deutsch  
The teacher teaches German
Was hat er gesagt?  
What did he say?
Woher kommst du?  
Where do you come from?

Remember that the subject does not necessarily stand before the verb (as happens in English); see 18.1.

Diesen Wein finde ich nicht so gut  
I don’t think this wine is all that good

b The nominative is used after certain verbs

The nominative is used after the ‘copular’ verbs: sein (to be), werden (to become), bleiben (to stay, remain) and a few other verbs. This is because the noun phrase after the verb refers to the same person (or thing) as the subject.

Peter ist mein bester Freund  
Peter is my best friend
Er ist ein berühmter Politiker  
He became a famous politician
geworden
Sie ist und bleibt die Größte  
She is and will remain the best

Note Other verbs require als before the nominative – (see also 1.1.2c):

Er erwies sich als ein guter Freund  
He proved himself a good friend
Er bezeichnet sich als freier  
He describes himself as an
Photograph

1.1.2 The accusative case

a The accusative case indicates the direct object (the thing or person on the receiving end of the action)

Ich kenne ihn seit Jahren  
I’ve known him for years
Sie hat den Ball hart geschlagen  
She hit the ball hard
Ich suche meinen Schlüssel, aber ich finde ihn nicht  
I’m looking for my key, but I can’t find it

Note The direct object does not have to stand after the verb. (See also the note about the position of the subject in 1.1.1a above.)

Diesen Wein finde ich nicht so gut  
I don’t think this wine is all that good

b The accusative is used after certain prepositions (see 9.1 and 9.3)

Dieser Brief ist für dich  
This letter is for you
Sie ist ohne ihn in Urlaub gefahren  
She went on holiday without him
Ich gehe in die Stadt  
I’m going into town
Bitte stell die Flasche auf den Tisch  
Please put the bottle on the table

Endlich sind wir den Hund los  
At last we’re rid of the dog
Ich bin die Arbeit satt  
I’m fed up with work
Ich bin das Stadtleben nicht gewohnt  
I’m not used to city life
d  Certain verbs, sometimes of naming and calling, have a second accusative (see 13.3.3)

Ich nannte ihn einen Idioten  I called him an idiot
Sie schimpfte ihn einen Faulpelz  She called him a lazybones
Das hat ihn das Leben gekostet  It cost him his life

e  The accusative after als is used with certain verbs of regarding, considering, etc.

Damals sah ich ihn als meinen besten Freund  At that time I saw him as my best friend
Jetzt betrachte ich ihn als meinen Feind  Now I regard him as my enemy
But halten für to consider to be
Ich halte ihn für einen Faulpelz  I think he’s a lazybones

f  The accusative is used in certain phrases

•  After es gibt:
  In meinem Zimmer gibt es einen Tisch und einen Fernseher  In my room there’s a table and a television

•  Greetings and wishes (i.e. short for „Ich wünsche dir/Ihnen …“ ’I wish you …‘):
  Guten Tag!  Hello!
  Herzlichen Glückwunsch!  Congratulations!
  Schön en Tag noch!  Have a nice day!

•  Many phrases of time which denote a definite period of time or a point in time (cf. 1.1.3d below) not governed by a preposition:
  Sie blieb den ganzen Tag zu Hause  She stayed at home all day
  Hast du nächsten Dienstag Zeit?  Are you free next Tuesday?
  Ich war nur einen Tag in München  I only spent one day in Munich
  Einen Augenblick mal, bitte!  Just a moment, please!

•  Distance covered or direction with verbs denoting motion, and prices and measures:
  Sie ging einen Schritt weiter  She went a step further
  Er stieg den Berg hinauf  He climbed the mountain
  Dieses Stück ist einen Meter lang  This piece is one metre long
  Das hier kostet nur einen Euro  This one only costs a euro

1.1.3  The genitive case

a  The genitive indicates possession (= whose?) between two nouns

Das ist das Büro meines Vaters  That’s my father’s office
Dieser Teil der Aufgabe ist leicht  This part of the task is easy
Peters Haus, Goethes Werke  Peter’s house; Goethe’s works

b  The genitive is used after certain prepositions (see 9.4)

während der Sommerferien  during the summer holidays
trotz des Wetters  despite the weather
fünf Kilometer außerhalb der Stadt  five kilometres outside town
1.1 The cases

Note Colloquial German often prefers the dative (often after von) both to indicate possession and after prepositions:

das Büro von meinem Vater
trotz dem Wetter
fünf Kilometer außerhalb von der Stadt

c The genitive is used with certain adjectives and verbs (see 5.3.2 and 13.3.4)

Ist er dieses Verbrechens fähig? Is he capable of this crime?
Es ist nicht der Mühe wert It’s not worth the trouble
Haustiere bedürfen der täglichen Pflege Animals require daily care

But simpler constructions or vocabulary are often preferred:

Ist er zu diesem Verbrechen fähig? Is he capable of this crime?
Haustiere brauchen tägliche Pflege Animals require daily care

d The genitive is used in certain expressions

• Phrases of indefinite time not governed by a preposition (cf. 1.1.2f above):
    eines Tages one day
    eines schönen Morgens one beautiful morning
    dieser Tage recently; soon

Note Nacht, though feminine, takes masculine/neuter genitive endings:

    eines Nachts one night
    Des Nachts konnte er nicht schlafen He couldn’t sleep at night

• Other phrases, often involving opinions:
    Ich bin der Meinung, dass … I’m of the opinion that …
    Ich bin der Ansicht, dass … It’s my view that …
    meines Erachtens in my opinion
    Ich fahre erster Klasse I travel first class

1.1.4 Genitive replaced by dative

Even in formal German, there are instances when the genitive cannot be used; invariably, its place is taken by the dative, often after von.

a The genitive cannot be used with personal pronouns and some other constructions

    ein Freund von mir a friend of mine
    viele von ihnen many of them
    Welches von diesen Bildern gefällt dir am besten? Which of these pictures do you like best?

But a genitive construction is possible if no pronoun is used:

    einer meiner Freunde one of my friends

Note also the genitive construction:

    viele derer, die … many of those who …

b The genitive cannot be used if the case of the noun would be unclear (because it or the word it stands with does not add a case ending):

    der Verkauf von Häusern the sale of houses
    (der Verkauf Häuser would be so unclear as not to make sense)
1.1.5 The dative case

a The dative indicates the indirect object of the verb (see 13.3.2)

Er schickte seinem Bruder das Buch. He sent his brother the book
Reichst du mir bitte das Salz? Could you please pass me the salt?
Ich habe meiner Schwester eine CD gekauft. I bought my sister a CD
Du musst es mir kaufen! You must buy it for me!
Sie hat mir Geld gestohlen. She stole money from me

b The dative is used with some prepositions (see 9.2 and 9.3)

Ich habe bei Freunden gewohnt. I stayed with friends
seit meinem Besuch. Since my visit
Die Kirche steht unserem Haus gegenüber. The church stands opposite our house.
Ich arbeite in der Stadt. I’m working in town
Die Flasche ist auf dem Tisch. The bottle is on the table

c The dative is used after certain verbs (see 13.3.1)

Verbs such as danken, folgen, gefallen and helfen are followed by the dative; their English equivalents are followed by the accusative:
1.2 Apposition

Dieser Musik gefällt meinem Vater gut, aber nicht mir.
Kann ich Ihnen helfen?

My father really likes this music.
but I don’t
Can I help you?

The dative is used after certain adjectives (see 5.3.3)
The adjective usually follows the noun or pronoun in these constructions:
Kann ich Ihnen behilflich sein?
Ist es dir klar?

May I help you?
Is that clear to you?

The dative object is often used to indicate possession
For the possessive, especially with parts of the body or items of clothing, German often uses a dative pronoun (as an indirect object) plus the definite article, where English usually uses a possessive determiner (see also 3.2.3a):
Ich habe mir das Bein gebrochen
Sie haben sich die Hände gewaschen
Sie hat ihm die Hände gewaschen
Er schlug dem Mann ins Gesicht

I broke my leg
They washed their hands
She washed his hands
He hit the man in the face

The dative is also used to indicate the person affected by the verb
This is often an event to their advantage or disadvantage. This is sometimes called a ‘free dative’, meaning that the dative pronoun or phrase, though still an indirect object, is not essential to the construction of the predicate:
Die Tasse ist ihm beim Abwaschen zerbrochen
Der Bus ist ihr vor der Nase weggefahren

The cup broke while he was washing it
She missed the bus by a whisker

Other expressions with the dative
Wie geht es Ihnen/dir?
Mir geht’s gut/schlecht
Es geht mir gut/schlecht
Es ist mir viel zu warm/kalt
Es ist mir egal
Mir ist, als ob ich ihm schon mal begegnet wäre

How are you?
I’m fine/not so good
I’m fine/not so good
It’s much too warm/cold for me
It’s all the same to me
I have the feeling that I may have met him somewhere before

A noun or noun phrase in apposition explains or adds information about the noun or pronoun which precedes it; it therefore appears in the same case to establish the grammatical link:
Helmut Schmidt, der große Staatsmann
Ich besuchte Richard, meinen Freund aus Berlin
Sie wohnen in Lübeck, einer schönen Stadt an der Ostsee

Helmut Schmidt, the great statesman
I visited Richard, my friend from Berlin
They live in Lübeck, a pretty town on the Baltic
### 1 CASES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Besucher bestaunen die Fossilien eines Argentinosaurus huinculensis, des größten Sauiers aller Zeiten</td>
<td>Visitors marvel at the fossil remains of an Argentinosaurus huinculensis, the largest dinosaur of all time</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Note** The case use in the noun phrase in apposition is often ignored in colloquial German:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>„Er wohnt im Adler, ein bescheidenes Hotel“</td>
<td>‘He’s staying at the Adler, a modest hotel’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

b Days and dates: phrases with am + weekdays may be followed by the dative or the accusative

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>am Mittwoch, dem (or den) 19. Juli</td>
<td>on Wednesday 19 July</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

c With names and titles that include an article, the article does not change its case in apposition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>in der Zeitschrift Der Spiegel</td>
<td>in Der Spiegel magazine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>in Manns Roman Der Zauberberg</td>
<td>in Mann’s novel Der Zauberberg</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

d With geographical and other names, German often uses apposition where English uses of

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>die Hansestadt Lübeck</td>
<td>the Hanseatic city of Lübeck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>die Universität Tübingen</td>
<td>the University of Tübingen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>die Insel Poehl</td>
<td>the Island of Poehl</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>die Regierung Angela Merkel</td>
<td>the government of Angela Merkel</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>