

The Four German Cases

Part 1: Summary

Werfall | Wenfall | Wemfall | Wesfall
Nominativ | Akkusativ | Dativ | Genitiv

English also has cases, but they are only apparent with pronouns, not with nouns, as in German. When "he" changes to "him" in English, that's exactly the same thing that happens when **der** changes to **den** in German (and **er** changes to **ihn**). This allows German to have more flexibility in word order, as in the examples below, in which the nominative (subject) case is **red**:

Der Hund beißt den Mann.
Den Mann beißt **der Hund**.
Beißt der Hund den Mann?
Beißt den Mann der Hund?

The **dog** bites the man.
The **dog** bites the man.
Is the **dog** biting the man?
Is the **dog** biting the man?

Since English does not have the same case markers (**der/den**), it must depend on word order. If you say "Man bites dog" in English, rather than "Dog bites man," you change the meaning. In German the word order can be changed for emphasis (as above)—without altering the basic meaning.

The following charts show the four cases with the **definite article** (der, die, das), the **indefinite article** and the **third-person pronouns** (er, sie, es). Changes from the nominative (subject) case are indicated in **red**.

Definite Articles (the)				
Fall Case	Männlich Masculine	Sächlich Neuter	Weiblich Feminine	Mehrzahl Plural
Nom	der	das	die	die
Akk	den	das	die	die
Dat	dem	dem	der	den
Gen	des	des	der	der
Indefinite Articles (a/an)				
Fall Case	Männlich Masculine	Sächlich Neuter	Weiblich Feminine	Mehrzahl Plural
Nom	ein	ein	eine	keine*
Akk	einen	ein	eine	keine*
Dat	einem	einem	einer	keinen*
Gen	eines	eines	einer	keiner*

***Note:** *keine* is the negative of *eine*, which has no plural form. But *keine* (no/none) can be used in the plural: "Er hat **keine** Bücher." (He has no books.) - "In Venedig gibt es **keine** Autos." (In Venice there are no cars.)

The Germanic word for each case reflects how that case functions in the use of forms of **wer**(who): **der Werfall** (nom.), **der Wenfall** (acc.), **der Wemfall** (dat.) and **der Wesfall** (gen.).

The Nominative Case

Der Nominativ • Der Werfall

The **nominative** case—in German and in English—is the subject of a sentence. The term *nominative* is from Latin and means to name (think of "nominate").

All German nouns have one of three possible genders: masculine (**der**), feminine (**die**) or neuter (**das**). The nominative plural of any gender is always **die** (*pron.* DEE). These gender words are also called **definite articles** ("the").

The most common gender in German is the masculine. (Keep that in mind the next time you're guessing.) These gender forms—**der, die, das**—are the nominative forms. They are the article or gender that is found in a German dictionary, but they may change form (be "declined") when in one of the other three German cases.

In English, only persons and personal pronouns have gender, with rare exceptions ("she's a good ship"). In German, every noun (person, place or thing), whether it refers to a tree, a thought, a planet, a car or a man (all masculine nouns in German), has a gender. However, it is the **word** (*das Wort*), not the object or concept itself, that has gender. For more about German gender, see the article [Gender Hints](#) and Lektion 3 of [German for Beginners - Nouns and Gender](#).

In the examples below, the nominative word or expression is in **red**:

Der Hund beißt den Mann. The **dog** bites the man.
Dieser Gedanke ist blöd. This **thought** is stupid.
Meine Mutter ist **Architektin**. My **mother** is an **architect**.

The nominative case can also be found in the predicate, as in the last example. The verb "is" acts like an equal sign (my mother = architect). But the nominative is most often the subject of a sentence.

Definite Articles (the)				
Fall Case	Masc.	Fem.	Neu.	Plur.
<i>Nom</i>	der the	die the	das the	die the
Third Person Pronouns (he, she, it, they)				
<i>Nom</i>	er	sie	es	sie

	he	she	it	they
Notice that each pronoun ends in the same letter as its corresponding definite article? (der/er, r/e/s/e)				
Interrogative Pronouns (questions)				
Nom (people)	wer? who?	wer?	wer?	wer?
Nom (things)	was? what?	was?	was?	was?
Indefinite Articles (a, an)				
Fall Case	Masc.	Fem.	Neu.	Plur.
Nom	ein a/an	eine a/an	ein a/an	keine* no/none
* Note: <i>keine</i> is the negative of <i>eine</i> , which has no plural form. But <i>keine</i> (no/none) can be used in the plural: " Keine Autos dürfen hier fahren." (No cars can be used here.)				

The Germanic word for the nominative case, **der Werfall**, reflects the **der** gender and the question word **wer** (who): **Wer hat mich gestern gesehen?** (Who saw me yesterday?)

The Accusative Case

Der Akkusativ • Der Wenfall

If you misuse the **accusative** case in German, it could be very similar to saying something like "him has the book" or "her saw he yesterday" in English. With the confusion this might cause, you can see this is not something to take lightly! It's not just some esoteric grammar point; it impacts whether people will understand your German or not (and whether you'll understand them).

In English the **accusative** case is known as the objective case (direct object). In German you can tell that a noun is in the accusative case by the masculine article, which changes from **der/ein** to **den/einen**. (Since the accusative only changes in the masculine gender, you don't need to worry about the feminine, neuter or plural.) The masculine pronoun **er** (he) changes to **ihn** (him), in much the same way as English. In the examples below, the accusative (direct object) word is in **red**:

Der Hund beißt **den Mann**.
Er beißt **ihn**.
Den Mann beißt der Hund.
 Beißt der Hund **den Mann**?
 Beißt **den Mann** der Hund?

The dog bites **the man**.
 He (the dog) bites **him** (the man).
 The dog bites **the man**.
 Is the dog biting **the man**?
 Is the dog biting **the man**?

The direct object (accusative) functions as the receiver of the action of a transitive verb. In the examples above, **the man** is acted upon by the dog, i.e., receives the action of the subject ("dog"). To give a few more transitive verb examples, when you buy (**kaufen**) something or have (**haben**) something, the "something" is a direct object. The subject (the person buying or having) is acting on some object.

Definite Article (the)				
Fall Case	Masc.	Fem.	Neu.	Plur.
Nom	der	die	das	die
Akk	den	die	das	die
	den Bleistift den Mann den Wagen			
	den Präsidenten* den Jungen*			
*Note: Some masc. nouns add an -en or -n ending in the accusative and in all other cases besides the nominative .				
Interrogative Pronoun (who? - whom?)				
Nom (people)	wer? who?	wer? who?	wer? who?	wer? who?
Acc (people)	wen? whom?	wen? whom?	wen? whom?	wen? whom?
Indefinite Article (a/an)				
Fall Case	Masc.	Fem.	Neu.	Plur.
Nom	ein	eine	ein	keine*
Akk	einen	eine	ein	keine*
	einen Bleistift einen Mann einen Wagen			
	einen Präsidenten** einen Jungen**			
*Note: <i>keine</i> is the negative of <i>eine</i> , which has no plural form. But <i>keine</i> (no/none) can be used in the plural: "In Venedig gibt es keine Autos." (In Venice there are no cars.)				
**Note: Some masc. nouns add -en or -n in the accusative and in all other cases except the nominative .				

You can test for a transitive verb by saying it without an object. If it sounds odd, and seems to need an object to sound right, then it is probably a transitive verb. **Example:** I have... / *Ich habe...*; He bought... / *Er kaufte...* - Both of these phrases answer the implied question "what?" What do you have? What did he buy? And whatever that is, is the **direct object** and in the **accusative case** in German.

On the other hand if you do this with an intransitive verb, such as "to sleep," "to die," or "to wait," no direct-object completion is needed. You can't "sleep," "die" or "wait" something. (Two apparent exceptions to this test, *become* and *be*, are actually not exceptions, since they are intransitive verbs that act like an equal sign, and can not take an object.) A good additional clue in German: all verbs that take the helping verb **sein** (to be) are intransitive. (See our [German Verbs](#) page for verbs that take *sein*.)

Some verbs in English and German can be either transitive or intransitive, but the key is to remember that if you have a direct object, you'll have the accusative case in German.

The Germanic word for the accusative case, **der Wenfall**, reflects the **der-to-den** change. The question word in the accusative is, naturally enough, **wen** (whom): **Wen hast du gestern gesehen?**, Whom did you see yesterday?

Accusative Time Expressions

The accusative is used in some standard time and distance expressions.

Das Hotel liegt einen Kilometer von hier. The hotel lies **a** kilometer from here.

Er verbrachte einen Monat in Paris. He spent **a** month in Paris.

The Accusative Case with Prepositions

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Präpositionen mit Akkusativ

Certain German prepositions are governed by the **accusative** case. That is, they take an object in the accusative case. The accusative prepositions tend to be used a lot and it is important to learn them early in your study of German.

In English, prepositions take the objective case (object of the preposition) and all prepositions take the same case. In German, prepositions come in several "flavors," only one of which is accusative.

There are **two kinds** of accusative prepositions: **(1)** those that are **always accusative** and never anything else, and **(2)** certain "two-way" prepositions that can be **either accusative or dative** – depending on how they are used. See the chart below for a complete list of each type.

In the German-English examples below, the accusative preposition is **red**. The object of the preposition is **blue**:

Ohne Geld geht's nicht.
Sie geht den Fluss entlang.
 river.

Without money it won't work.
 She walking **along the**

Er arbeitet für eine große Firma.
 company.

He works **for a big**

Wir fahren durch die Stadt.
 driving **through the city.**

We're

Schreibst du einen Brief an deinen Vater?
 letter **to your father?**

Are you writing a

Notice in the second example above that the object (*Fluss*) comes **before** the preposition (*entlang*). Some German prepositions use this reverse word order, but the object must still be in the correct case.

Here is a list of the accusative-only prepositions. The most common, important ones are in **red**. You should memorize them with their meanings.

Accusative Prepositions	
Deutsch	Englisch
bis*	until, to, by
durch	through, by
entlang	along, down
NOTE: The accusative preposition entlang , unlike the others, usually goes <u>after</u> its object, as in the example above.	
für	for
gegen	against, for
ohne	without
um	around, for; at (time)
*NOTE: The German preposition bis is technically an accusative preposition, but it is almost always used with a second preposition (<i>bis zu, bis auf, etc.</i>) in a different case, or without an article (<i>bis April, bis Montag, bis Bonn</i>).	

For more on the accusative-only prepositions, with examples, see German for Beginners [Lektion 14B - The Accusative Prepositions](#).

Two-Way Prepositions Accusative/Dative	
Deutsch	Englisch
NOTE: The meaning of a two-way preposition often depends on whether it is used with the accusative or dative case. See below for the grammar rules.	
an	at, on, to
auf	at, to, on, upon
hinter	behind
in	in, into
neben	beside, near, next to
über	about, above, across, over
unter	under, among

vor	in front of, before; ago (time)
zwischen	between

The basic rule for determining whether a two-way preposition should have an object in the accusative or dative case is **motion** versus **location**. If there is motion towards something or to a specific location (*wohin?*, where to?), then usually that is **accusative**. If there is no motion at all or random motion going nowhere in particular (*wo?*, where (at)?), then that is usually **dative**. This rule applies only to the so-called "two-way" or "dual" prepositions in German. (For example, a [dative-only preposition](#) like **nach** is always dative, whether there is motion or not.) Here are two sets of examples:

Wir gehen ins Kino. (*in das, accus.*) We're going **to** the movies/cinema. (motion towards)
Wir sind im Kino. (*in dem, dat.*) We're **at** the movies/cinema. (location)

Legen Sie das Buch auf den Tisch. (*accusative*) Put/Lay the book **on** the table. (motion towards)

Das Buch liegt auf dem Tisch. (*dative*) The book's lying **on** the table. (location)

A single German two-way preposition—such as *in* or *auf*—may have more than one English translation, as you can see above. In addition, you'll find many of these prepositions have yet another meaning in common everyday idioms and expressions: **auf dem Lande** (in the country), **um drei Uhr** (at three o'clock), **unter uns** (among us), **am Mittwoch** (on Wednesday), **vor einer Woche** (a week ago), etc. Such expressions can be learned as vocabulary without worrying about the grammar involved.

The Dative Case

The **dative** case in German is a vital element of communicating in German. In English the dative case is known as the **indirect object**. Unlike the accusative, which only changes in the masculine gender, the dative changes in **all genders** and in the **plural**. The pronouns also change correspondingly.

In addition to its function as the indirect object, the dative is also used after certain [dative verbs](#) and with [dative prepositions](#). In the examples below, the dative word or expression is in **red**:

Der Polizist gibt dem Fahrer einen Strafzettel. The policeman is giving **the driver** a ticket.
Ich danke Ihnen. I thank **you**.
Wir machen das mit einem Computer. We do that with **a computer**.

The indirect object (dative) is usually the receiver of the direct object (accusative). In the first example above, **the driver** got the ticket. Often the

dative can be translated with "to"- "the policeman gives the ticket **to** the driver." The following color-coded chart shows how the dative forms are used in various situations.

Definite Article (the)		
Fall Case	Masc.	Fem.
Nom	der	die
Dat	dem	der der Frau der Verkäuferin
	dem Bleistift dem Mann dem Wagen	
	dem Präsidenten* dem Jungen*	
*Note: Some masc. nouns add an -en or -n ending in the dative and in all other cases besides the nominative .		
Fall Case	Neu.	Plur.
Nom	das	die
Dat	dem dem Mädchen dem Haus	den den Leuten den Autos
Note: In the dative, plural nouns add an -en or -n if the plural does not already end in -n , except for plurals ending in -s .		
Indefinite Article (ein, eine, keine)		
Fall Case	Masc.	Fem.
Nom	ein	eine
Dat	einem	einer einer Frau einer Verkäuferin
	einem Bleistift einem Mann einem Wagen	
	einem Präsidenten* einem Jungen*	
*Note: Some masc. nouns add an -en or -n ending in the dative and in all other cases besides the nominative .		
Fall Case	Neu.	Plur.
Nom	ein	keine
Dat	einem einem Mädchen einem Haus	keinen keinen Leuten keinen Autos
Note: In the dative, plural nouns add an -en or -n if the plural does not already end in -n , except for plurals ending in -s .		

The Germanic word for the dative case, **der Wemfall**, reflects the **der-to-dem** change. The question word in the dative is, naturally enough, **wem** ([to] whom): **Wem hast du das Buch gegeben?**, Whom did you give book? (Who'd you give the book to?). Some German verbs do *not* take an accusative object.

The Dative Case with Preposition

Dative Prepositions + Dual Prepositions (Acc/Dat) -- Präpositionen mit Dativ

Certain German prepositions are governed by the **dative** case. That is, they take an object in the dative case. Many dative prepositions tend to be very common vocabulary in German: **nach** (after, to), **von** (by, of) and **mit** (with).

In English, prepositions take the objective case (object of the preposition) and all prepositions take the same case. In German, prepositions come in several "flavors," only one of which is dative.

There are **two kinds** of dative prepositions: **(1)** those that are **always dative** and never anything else, and **(2)** certain "two-way" or "dual" prepositions that can be **either dative or accusative**—depending on how they are used. See the chart below for a complete list of each type.

In the German-English examples below, the dative preposition is **red**. The object of the preposition is **blue**:

Mit der Bahn fahren wir.
Meiner Meinung nach ist es zu teuer.
expensive.

We're going **by train**.
In my opinion it's too

Das Hotel ist dem Bahnhof gegenüber.
from the train station.

The hotel is **across**

Er arbeitet bei einer großen Firma.

He works **at a big company**.

Wir verbringen eine Woche am See.
lake.

We're spending a week **at the**

Notice in the second and third examples above that the object comes **before** the preposition. (With *gegenüber* this is optional.) Some German prepositions use this reverse word order, but the object must still be in the correct case.

Here is a list of the dative-only prepositions. You should memorize them with their meanings.

Dative Prepositions	
Deutsch	Englisch
aus	from, out of
außer	except for, besides
bei	at, near
gegenüber	across from, opposite
Gegenüber can go before or after its object.	
mit	with, by
nach	after, to
seit	since (time), for
von	by, from
zu	at, to
NOTE: The genitive prepositions statt (instead of), trotz (in spite of), während (during) and wegen (because of) are often used with the dative in spoken German, particularly in certain regions. If you want to "blend in" and not sound too stuffy, you can use them in the dative also.	

**Two-Way Prepositions
Dative/Accusative**

NOTE: The meaning of a two-way preposition also depends on whether it is in the accusative or dative. See below for the grammar rules.

Deutsch	Englisch
an	at, on, to
auf	at, to, on, upon
hinter	behind
in	in, into
neben	beside, near, next to
über	about, above, across, over
unter	under, among
vor	in front of, before; ago (time)
zwischen	between

The basic rule for determining whether a two-way preposition should have an object in the accusative or dative case is **motion** (*wohin?*, where to?) versus **location** (*wo?*, where?, at rest). If there is motion towards something or a specific location, then usually that is accusative. If there is no motion at all or random motion going nowhere in particular, then that is usually dative. Remember, this applies only to the two-way prepositions! Here are two sets of examples:

Wir gehen ins Kino. (*in das, accus.*)
We're going **to** the movies/cinema. (motion towards)
Wir sind im Kino. (*in dem, dat.*)
We're **at** the movies/cinema. (location)

Legen Sie das Buch auf den Tisch. (*accusative*)
Put/Lay the book **on** the table. (motion towards)
Das Buch liegt auf dem Tisch. (*dative*)
The book's lying **on** the table. (location)

A single German two-way preposition – such as *in* or *auf* – may have more than one English translation, as you can see above. In addition, you'll find many of these prepositions have yet another meaning in common everyday idioms and expressions: **auf dem Lande** (in the country), **um drei Uhr** (at three o'clock), **unter uns** (among us), **am Mittwoch** (on Wednesday), **vor einer Woche** (a week ago), etc. Such expressions can be learned as vocabulary without worrying about the grammar involved.

The Genitive Case

Werfall | Wenfall | Wemfall | Wesfall
Nominativ | Akkusativ | Dativ | Genitiv

Der Genitiv • Der Wesfall

Also see: The genitive case [with prepositions](#)
The **genitive** case in German shows possession and is expressed in English by the possessive "of" or an apostrophe-s ('s). The genitive case is also used with some verb idioms and with the [genitive prepositions](#). The genitive is used more in written German than in spoken form. In spoken, everyday German, **von** plus the dative often replaces the genitive: **Das Auto von meinem Bruder** = My brother's car.

You can tell that a noun is in the genitive case by the article, which changes to **des/eines** (masculine and neuter) or **der/einer** (feminine and plural). Since the genitive only has two forms (**des** or **der**), you only need to learn those two. However, in the masculine and neuter, there is also an additional noun ending, either **-es** or **-s**:

das Auto meines Bruders
my brother's car (the car **of my** brother)

die Bluse **des** Mädchens

the girl's blouse (the blouse **of the** girl)

der Titel **des** Filmes (Films)

the title **of the** film

Feminine and plural nouns do not add an ending in the genitive. The feminine genitive (**der/einer**) is identical to the feminine dative. The one-word genitive article usually translates as two words (of the / of a/an) in English.

Definite Articles (the)				
Fall Case	Masc.	Neu.	Fem.	Plur.
Nom	der	das	die	die
Gen	des (-es/s)*		der	
Indefinite Article (a/an)				
Nom	ein	ein	eine	keine
Gen	eines (-es/s)*		(k)einer	
* Note: Some masc. nouns add an -en or -n ending in the genitive and in all other cases besides the nominative .				
Adjective endings: In the genitive case, adjectives almost always have an -en ending. Examples: <i>des neuen Autos, der hohen Kosten</i>				

The Germanic word for the genitive case is **der Wesfall**. The question word in the genitive is **wessen** (whose): **Wessen Buch hast du?** (Whose book do you have?)

When showing possession with the names of people, countries or cities, German adds an **s** (without an apostrophe): **Karls Haus, Marias Buch, die Geschichte Deutschlands** (Germany's history). Unfortunately, many German-speakers have adopted the English practice of using an apostrophe (*Karl's Auto*) for the possessive forms, but it is still considered to be substandard German.

Genitive Expressions

The genitive is used in some idiomatic expressions.

Ende **der** Woche gehen wir.

At the end **of the** week we're going.

Ich muss das Anfang **des** Monats bezahlen.

I have to pay that at the start **of the** month.

Genitive Prepositions (Präpositionen mit Genitiv)

A few German prepositions are governed by the **genitive** case. That is, they take an object in the genitive case. There are only a few common genitive prepositions* in German, including: **(an)statt**(instead of), **außerhalb/innerhalb** (outside/inside of), **trotz** (in spite of), **während** (during) and **wegen** (because of). Notice that most of the time the genitive prepositions can be translated with "of" in English. Even *während* can be rendered as "in the course of" as well as "during."

* Other genitive prepositions in addition to those listed above include: **angesichts** (in view of), **beiderseits** (on both sides of), **diesseits** (this side of), **jenseits** (on the other side of), and **laut** (according to).

The genitive prepositions are often used with the dative in spoken German, particularly in certain regions. If you want to "blend in" and not sound too stuffy, you can use them in the dative also, but purists will want to learn the genitive forms.

In the German-English examples below, the genitive preposition is **red**. The object of the preposition is **blue**:

Während der Woche arbeiten wir. During the week we work.
Trotz des Wetters fahren wir heute nach Hause. In spite of the weather we're driving home today.

Here is a list of common genitive prepositions. You should memorize them with their meanings.

Genitive Prepositions	
Deutsch	Englisch
anstatt statt	instead of
außerhalb	outside of
innerhalb	inside of
trotz	despite, in spite of
während	during, in the course of
wegen	because of
NOTE: The genitive prepositions listed above are often used with the dative in spoken German, particularly in certain regions. Examples:	

trotz dem Wetter - in spite of the weather
während der Woche - during the week (*same as genitive*)
wegen den Kosten - because of the costs

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