What You Oughta Know About Basic German Grammar: The 20-minute Guide

Ryan Sitzman   September 14, 2016

We all know the stereotypes of the German language.

It sounds harsh and guttural.

Its grammar is needlessly complicated.

It has ridiculously long words.

I was going to start this post with an encouraging and reassuring message that German isn't actually *that* bad, but I think you already know that.

Of course, every language has elements that seem strange, difficult or tricky—even extending to cultural understanding—when compared to our native language, and German is no exception.

But I'm guessing that since you're reading a post about German, you've already accepted these realities, and now you're ready to get down to some real learning. Right?

I know what they say about making assumptions, but the other main assumption I'll make today is that you're at least a bit familiar with English grammar.

I'm making that assumption because you're reading this in English, and if it's your native language, you probably had some lessons about the difference between a noun and a pronoun, even if it was years ago in junior high school.

Alternately, if English *isn't* your native language, then that's maybe even better for our purposes today! That means that you had to learn how to speak English from your native language, and you probably have even more understanding about what it takes to learn a new language.

Either way, if you can learn English, you can also learn German

How This Post Works

You might think the idea of "basic German grammar" is an oxymoron. After all, we're talking about a culture that revels in explaining jokes and that came up with the expressions "There must be order" and "Why make it easy, when it can also be made complicated?" But fear not, dear reader, since we're going to do this in a slightly non-Germanic way.

The idea here is not to detail one part of speech at a time ("This is a noun. A noun is a person, place or thing…" and so on). That would be a bit boring and dry.

Instead, we're going to look at the **similarities and differences between German and English**, especially in terms of grammar. There are other considerations when it comes to learning German vocabulary, as well as German pronunciation, so we won't focus much on those aspects of the language today.

Near the end, we'll examine a few general tips that you can use in your approach to learning more about German and German grammar. In that section, we'll do a quick review of what you should focus on if you're just starting to learn German, so that you can save yourself some trouble and headaches later on in your learning process.

The Good News About German Grammar

I know that some people believe in getting the bad news out of the way first, but I want to make sure you keep reading and give German grammar a fair chance, so I want to focus on the positive stuff first.

So let's look at German grammar elements that are similar to English, as well as a few aspects that are even easier than English!

German grammar elements that are similar to English ones

- **Word order**

In many cases, German uses the **Subject-Verb-Object** word order, like English does. There are some exceptions to this order in both languages, but it's still much more familiar than if you were to try to learn a language with a completely different word order, like Verb-Subject-Object.

- **Irregular verbs**

Uh-oh, "irregular." That doesn't sound too good, does it?

Well, in this case, it's actually a good sign, since English and German both have a lot of irregular verbs.

In English, regular verbs have an "-ed" ending in the simple past and past participle forms. Words like "cook/cooked/cooked" and "push/pushed/pushed" are regular verbs.

An irregular verb in English follows a different pattern in the past forms. Many of the most common verbs in English are irregular, including "eat/ate/eaten" and "see/saw/seen."

In German, there's a similar idea with **weak and strong verbs**.

We can imagine that "weak" verbs aren't strong enough to change the default past forms, so they get a "-t" suffix in the simple past form (like an "-ed" in English) and also a "ge-" prefix in the participle form. Some examples of weak German verbs are *machen/macht-/gemacht* (for the verb "make" or "do") and *sagen/sagt-/gesagt* (for the verb "say").

The German "strong" verbs, on the other hand, are irregular, since they change the roots of the verbs quite a bit in the past forms. Examples of strong German verbs include *kommen/kam-/gekommen* (for the verb "come") and *gehen/ging-/gegangen* (for the verb "go").

I know what you're thinking: "So what's the point? Are you trying to say that verbs in both languages are just confusing?"

Well, sort of, but they're often confusing in the same way. Because English and German share common linguistic ancestors, the verbs for both languages tended to develop along similar patterns. So if a verb is weak in German, it tends to be regular in English, and if it's strong in German, it's often irregular in English.

That's not to say that there are no exceptions, since the German language often seems to have more exceptions than rules, but it's a good general guideline. Also, simply knowing that there are different types of verbs in both languages can help you comprehend German grammar better.

Grammar elements that are easier in German than English

If you glance at this whole article, you'll probably notice that this section is short. Yeah, sorry about that.

If you're looking for more good news about learning German, though, check out German pronunciation, since that's easier in German than in English.

Unfortunately, German grammar is a bit more intricate, let's say, than English grammar. There just tend to be more tricky spots that confuse German learners, especially those who are used to English.

Nevertheless, there are still a few bright spots.

- **No progressive tenses**

The sentences "I eat" and "I am eating" are the same in German: *"Ich esse."* You may think that's confusing. After all, if someone says *"Ich esse Fisch,"* do they mean "I eat fish" or "I am eating fish"? But in reality, you can basically always figure out the speaker's meaning from context.

For example, if you're going into the cafeteria and your friend says *"Heute esse ich Fisch,"* then he or she added the *heute* ("today"), which shows that it's just a one-time thing, not a frequent action. Likewise, if someone who's invited you to dinner asks you, *"Isst du Fisch?"* then you can be sure that they're asking if you generally eat fish, since they're probably considering serving fish.

This whole issue can actually cause problems and confusion for German speakers who are learning English, but since that's not you, we'll let them worry about it.

- **Adverbs being basically the same as adjectives**

Look at these two sentences:

Der Mann ist gut. (The man is good.)

Der Mann singt gut. (The man sings well.)

As you can see, here English is the language that looks a bit strange, since we change "good" to "well" when it becomes an adverb. We also add a "-ly" to many other adverbs, while German doesn't.

Unfortunately, this silver lining is indeed surrounding a huge, dark cloud: The major caveat here is that I said adjectives are **basically** the same as adverbs, but that only counts for basic adjectives, like in the examples above.

However, if you put the adjectives before a noun, then you have to include the dreaded adjective endings. Those endings mean that a simple word like *gut* can also turn into *gute, guter, gutes* or *guten*, depending on the context.

But that's a matter for our next section.
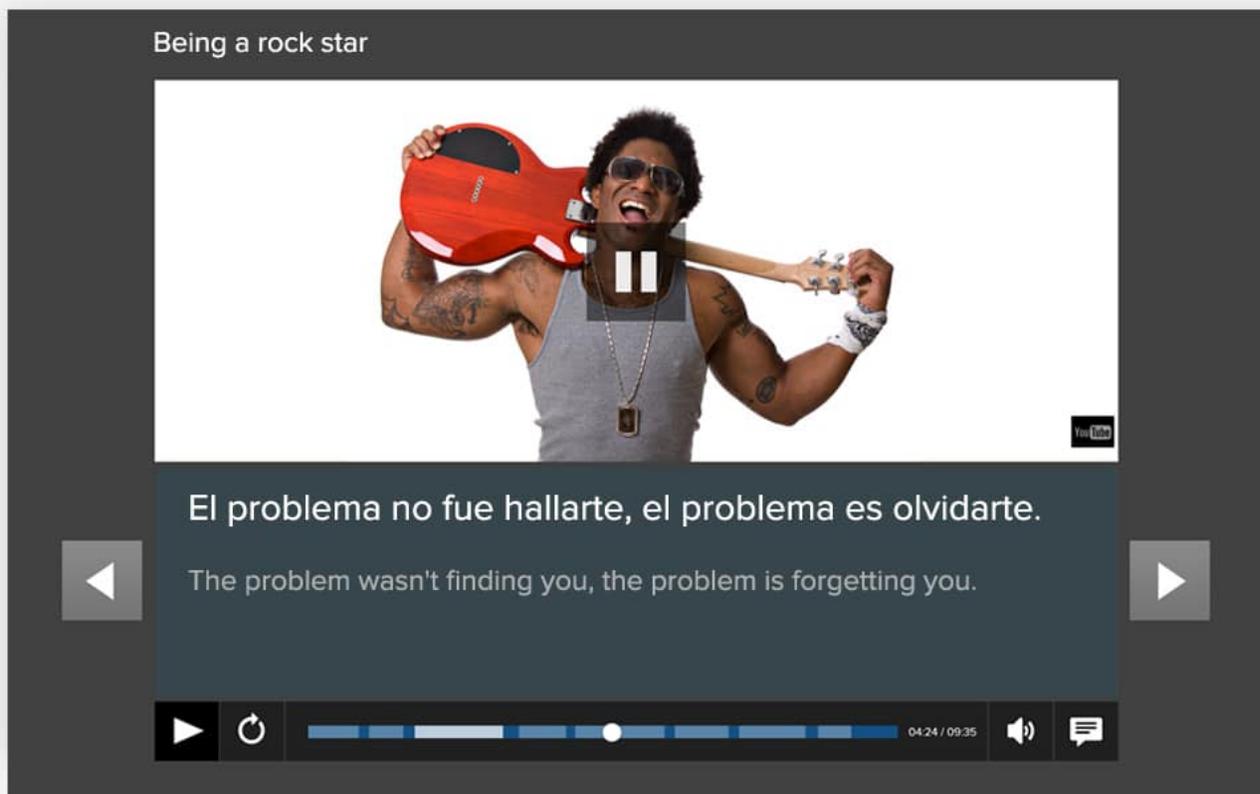
The Less-good News

I didn't want to title this section "bad" news, since that sounds like a downer. Plus, no language is inherently bad or good. Anyhow, whether you call it "bad" or "less-good," this half of the article is about how German grammar is different from or harder than English grammar.

Also, please note that the title of this article refers to **basic** German grammar, so we won't get sidetracked here into talking about things like the _Plusquamperfekt_, subjunctive, conjunctive or conjunctivitis.

Of course, you can get into these elements of German grammar, and find things that are even more confusing, but that's true of most languages if you look hard enough. After all, when is the last time you really thought about English grammar or diagrammed an English sentence? I'd bet that for most of you, your answer will fall somewhere on the timeline between "not since 9th grade" and "never."

The point is this: These things are different from English, but by no means should they be a reason for you to despair or give up German. It's just good to know what you're facing so you can know how to overcome it and achieve German grammatical greatness!

German grammar elements that are different from English ones

- **Sending things, especially verbs, to the "back of the line"**

I know that I was extolling the virtues of German word order in the section above, but as with many things, there is some fine print.

This may not be strictly "basic" German grammar, but it's usually something that you'll come across by the time you get to chapter 5 or 6 in most good German textbooks.

In those chapters, you'll start learning words like **dass** (that) or **weil** (because). These words and other similar ones are called "subordinating conjunctions," and when you use them, they send the verb(s) to the end of the sentence or immediate clause.

For example, let's elaborate on our **"Ich esse"** example from above. You eat (or are eating) for a reason, right? If that reason is "because I am hungry," then you'd say "I am eating because I am hungry" in English. In German, it would be pretty similar, except the word "because" will send the verb to the end:

Ich esse, weil ich Hunger habe. (I am eating, because I hunger have.)

So yeah, it sounds a little bit like Yoda when you're starting to learn German, but you'll get used to it and be able to produce sentences like that soon. Just start getting used to it, because it in the future come will (to use German sentence order!).

- **Big compound nouns**

They say that there's a kernel of truth to many stereotypes. I'm not sure if that's true, but if you have heard the stereotype that German has long words, then I'm afraid this truthkernel (or kernel of truth, for the non-German) can often be true.

The main reason for these long words is simple: They're usually just a few short words smashed together into one longer one.

In English, we can say "Christmas tree," with the adjective followed by the noun. In other languages, like Spanish for example, you'd say something like *árbol de Navidad,* literally "tree of Christmas." But in German, you'd put that all into one glorious word: **Weihnachtsbaum,** literally "Christmastree." And if you count the spaces, the German version actually has fewer characters than the Spanish one.

The main thing you'll need to get used to when it comes to these big words is learning where the smaller words came together, which will also indicate how to pronounce them easily. And as your vocabulary grows, that will become easier to do.

- **Verb conjugations**

If you say "she don't" in English, people will say it's grammatically incorrect. Sure, listeners will almost certainly understand you, and you may even sound really cool when you <u>sing it incorrectly in a song</u>, but it's still not considered standard English. For that, you'd need to say "she doesn't."

Changing that "do" by adding the ending "-es" is called conjugation. We don't do it that much in English; basically we just have to add an "-s" or "-es" to the end of verbs following "he," "she" or "it," and also to change up the verb "to be," since it's always weird.

German also has conjugation, but you generally have to change every form of the verb according to the subject. Take the example of**kommen** ("to come") as compared to English.

German:

- *ich komm**e***
- *du komm**st***
- *er/sie/es komm**t***
- *wir komm**en***
- *ihr komm**t***
- *sie/Sie komm**en***

English:

- I come
- you come
- he/she/it come**s**
- we come
- you come
- they come

Needless to say, even though it's something we do in English, it's a lot more involved in German. You probably don't even think about it when you speak English.

Also, another bit of less-good news: You also have to conjugate verbs in the past. Whereas in English you can say "I came," and "came" stays the same for any subject, it changes in German. With that same verb in the **Präteritum** (simple past equivalent), it would be:

- *ich kam*
- *du kam**st***
- *er/sie/es kam*
- *wir kam**en***
- *ihr kam**t***
- *sie/Sie kam**en***

Whereas in English, it would just be:

- I came
- you came
- he/she/it came
- we came
- you came
- they came

Take heart, though: The sorta-good news is that these conjugations are usually somewhat predictable and you can learn the weird ones in sets.

Grammar elements that are more difficult in German than English

Well, we can't avoid it any longer: There are some things that are just trickier for most of us to get the hang of when learning German. With this section, it's best to approach it with the "it is what it is" mindset. As much as we'd all love for a new *Rechtschreibreform* ("spelling reform") to actually change some of these baffling grammatical aspects, we'll probably never get one. So I guess we'll just have to deal with these things.

- **Gendered nouns**

As Mark Twain famously noted in "The Awful German Language," German nouns "have sex." Or, at least gender. And in the case of German, there are actually three genders.

If you're familiar with Spanish or French, you'll probably know that those languages have "masculine" and "feminine" nouns. German has those two, also, but it adds in "neutral/neuter." Unfortunately, the gender of a noun rarely has anything to do with whether it has masculine, feminine or neutral characteristics.

Mädchen (girl), for example, is famously neutral, not feminine, despite obviously describing a female person. But in this particular case, the word is neutral because it has the *-chen* diminutive ending, and all nouns with diminutive endings are neutral in German *(Mädchen* translates basically to "little maid").

So if you know that, you'll be OK with this and any other word that happens to be diminutive, but there are many other issues.

In Spanish, for example, if a word ends in "o," it's usually masculine, and if it ends in "a," it's usually feminine. German nouns can end in basically any letter, though, and that doesn't really affect the gender.

Instead, you can sometimes find some **combinations** of letters at the end of a word that will indicate if it's masculine, feminine or neutral. Unfortunately, this seems to work with fewer than half of the nouns out there, and there seem to be quite a few exceptions, also.

The takeaway lesson: **If you learn a new noun in German, learn its gender immediately.** It does matter, especially as you learn more and more, even though you may think it seems dumb or useless at first.

- **Definite and indefinite articles**

How do you say "the" in German? Isn't it *das*, like in the movie title *"Das Boot"*? Well, that's one word that means "the" (which is called a "definite article"). But you can also say *der, die, den, dem* and *des*—they all also mean "the," depending on the circumstances.

Similarly, "a" or "an" (the indefinite articles) can be *ein, eine, einen, einem* and *eines*. These two types of articles change depending on whether the word in question is connected to a subject, a direct object, an indirect object or a possessive word. You'll hear a lot of talk about different "cases" like **nominative, accusative** and **dative**, and these are just basically grammatical terms to describe parts of sentences.

Oh, and to make it all a bit more confusing, the articles also change depending on the noun's gender, of course.

Again, this is supposed to be about basic grammar, but this post on cases can help you sort this whole matter out.

Just to give a very basic example, let's go back to our "good man" from above.

I can say *"Der Mann ist gut"* (The man is good), where *der* is the masculine definite article (this is also one of those rare cases when a creature with a sexual gender also has the same grammatical gender). In this example, *der Mann* is the subject of the sentence.

But if I made him the object of the sentence, I have to change that *der* to *den*:

Ich sehe den Mann. (I see the man.)

In this case, everything is the same, except the man has now been moved from the subject position to the object position, so we need to reflect that in the grammar by changing *der* to *den*. We'd have to make similar changes if we made him the indirect object or the owner of something.

Why does German do this? Again, it's not our place to ask this—perhaps the German language gods know. But I find it's best not to grumble about it and just continue living life with a new fun fact and a smug yet misguided sense of linguistic superiority.

- **Adjective endings**

Alright, this is another element that's a bit further along than mere basic German grammar, but it's still probably best to give you a heads-up if you've not gotten to these yet.

If you're a bit familiar with Spanish, you probably know that you can say something like *la casa blanca* (the white house), but not *la casa blanco.* The reason you can't is because *casa* is a feminine noun, and those require a feminine adjective ending, in this case an "a."

German is very similar in this regard, but of course they had to go and take it too far again. Since German has three genders, you'd think it would need three endings. But it's not that simple, of course, since much as indirect and direct articles (above) are affected by their position in the sentence, you also need to change adjective endings depending on whether the nouns that follow them are the subject, direct object, indirect object or possessive word in a sentence.

To be honest, at least for me, this is where learning German can get a bit bleak and lead you down some dark linguistic paths, but fortunately German culture has a lot of pork and beer to invigorate your spirits and loosen your tongue.

Do These 3 Things to Keep Learning German Grammar

I don't want to give the impression that German is incredibly hard, but I also don't want to make you think it's a piece of cake. Like any language, it will take time and effort.

Taking all of the above into consideration, here are a few places where I'd suggest you concentrate that effort when learning German.

1. Learn the gender of every new noun you learn

I mentioned this in the previous section, but I'll say it again because it's very important. Unfortunately, it's also difficult if you're not used to thinking in these terms.

But as you probably noticed, much of the structure of German grammar is based on whether a specific word is masculine, feminine or neutral. That fact affects adjectives, articles and your general sanity. So as you learn words, be sure to note the genders.

You can use different colors for different genders, you can put them in charts, you can invent mnemonic devices, or you can do whatever else works for you—just be sure to do it.

I can't stress how much aggravation this would have saved me if I had done this from the moment I started learning German. Even now, 20 years later, this is a question that I still ask myself all too frequently: "Oh crap, is that *der, die* or *das*?"

2. Learn the basic parts of speech

Even after finishing my English grammar classes in high school, I would have been really hard-pressed to tell you the difference between a preposition, a participle, a prostitute and a pepperoncini. I wasn't the brightest grammar student, in other words.

When I started to learn about German, though, those grammar ideas became a lot more important, and learning about them for German also helped me understand more about my native language, English.

You don't need to know everything, though. If you're unsure about the difference between a subordinating conjunction and a coordinating conjunction, you'll probably be OK unless you're a teacher or a grammar textbook author, and you'll still probably have a decent shot at a fulfilling and romantic life.

But at a minimum, it's best to brush up on these ideas:

- noun
- pronoun
- adjective
- verb
- preposition
- participle
- definite and indefinite articles

You should also familiarize yourself with the idea of an **auxiliary verb**, **conjugation** and the concept of **tenses**.

3. Monitor your progress and be consistent

This actually applies to many aspects of language learning, but it can be especially important for learning the nuts and bolts of a language.

If you want to learn something new, you'll have to dedicate time to it. The more time, the better, and the more consistent you are with that time, the better. But if you can only do 20 minutes a day, four days a week, that's still probably more effective than 90 minutes in one breakneck German-cramming session. Your brain needs time to absorb what you've learned.

One good resource for learning German grammar at your own pace is the German Language Tutorial from ielanguages. It gives you an overview of the German language, including grammar, with sample sentences, images and native speaker audio to help you put the concepts you learn into context.

At the same time, record new vocabulary, new questions and new thoughts in some way. If you like to listen to music or watch classic movies, you may still learn well, but most people find that by writing down new vocabulary words, for example, they retain a lot more of the new vocabulary that they've been learning. It also lets them monitor how far they've come and identify areas for future learning.

You Can Do It!

That's a bit of a cheesy heading title, but I wanted to leave you with a little more encouragement before you get out there and really tackle German grammar.

I may have joked some about German being difficult, and I certainly wouldn't have been the first to do so. But look at it this way: German has about 100 million native speakers, in addition to another 120 million or so who speak it as a second or third language. And not a single one of them speaks it 100% perfectly.

So get out there and don't be afraid to make mistakes while you're learning.

If they can do it, so can the rest of us!

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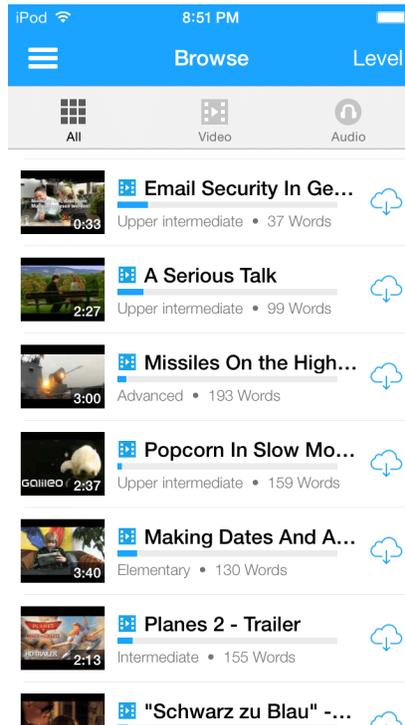
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