

# German

An Essential Grammar

Bruce Donaldson



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# German

## *An Essential Grammar*

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*An Essential Grammar*



**Bruce Donaldson**

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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	<b>xi</b>
<b>Abbreviations</b>	<b>xv</b>
<b>Chapter 1 Pronunciation</b>	<b>I</b>
1.1 Vowels	1
1.2 Diphthongs	3
1.3 Consonants	3
1.4 Stress	7
1.5 Regional variants	8
<b>Chapter 2 Spelling</b>	<b>9</b>
2.1 Indicating vowel length	9
2.2 Use of the Umlaut	9
2.3 Use of capital letters	10
2.4 Use of the hyphen	10
2.5 The new spelling	11
2.6 The alphabet	12
<b>Chapter 3 Punctuation</b>	<b>13</b>
3.1 Commas	13
3.2 Colons with direct speech	15
3.3 Inverted commas/quotation marks	15
3.4 Exclamation marks	16
<b>Chapter 4 Case</b>	<b>17</b>
4.1 Case endings on nouns	18
4.2 Other uses of the nominative case	20
4.3 Other uses of the accusative case	20
4.4 The genitive case	21

4.5	Other uses of the dative case	22
4.6	Nouns in apposition	23
4.7	Order of cases in paradigms	24
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>Articles and other determiners</b>	<b>25</b>
5.1	The definite article	25
5.2	Other determiners inflected like <b>der/die/das</b>	29
5.3	The indefinite article	30
5.4	Other determiners inflected like <b>ein</b>	32
5.5	Indefinite pronouns used as determiners	32
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>Nouns</b>	<b>33</b>
6.1	Gender of nouns	33
6.2	Pluralization of nouns	37
6.3	Diminutization of nouns	41
6.4	Names of towns	42
6.5	Names of countries	44
6.6	Feminizing agents	44
6.7	Adjectival nouns	45
6.8	Compound nouns	47
6.9	Nouns in apposition (see 4.6)	48
<b>Chapter 7</b>	<b>Pronouns</b>	<b>49</b>
7.1	Personal pronouns	49
7.2	Possessives	58
7.3	Reflexive pronouns	60
7.4	Demonstrative pronouns	63
7.5	Interrogative pronouns	63
7.6	Relative pronouns	64
7.7	Indefinite pronouns	69
<b>Chapter 8</b>	<b>Adjectives</b>	<b>75</b>
8.1	Rules for inflection	76
8.1.1	The <b>der/die/das</b> (weak) endings	76
8.1.2	The <b>ein/eine/ein</b> (mixed) endings	76
8.1.3	The unpreceded adjectival (strong) endings	77
8.1.4	Adjectival endings after indefinite pronouns	78
8.1.5	Indeclinable adjectives	78
8.2	Comparative of adjectives and adverbs	79
8.3	Superlative of adjectives and adverbs	81
8.4	Predicate adjectives followed by a prepositional object	83

<b>Chapter 9</b>	<b>Adverbs</b>	<b>86</b>
9.1	Adverbs that are also adjectives	86
9.2	Comparative and superlative of adverbs	87
9.3	Intensifying adverbs	87
9.4	Adverbs of time	88
9.5	Adverbs of place and direction	100
9.6	Adverbs of manner and degree	102
9.7	Interrogative adverbs	102
<b>Chapter 10</b>	<b>Verbs</b>	<b>105</b>
10.1	Formation of tenses	106
10.1.1	The present tense	106
10.1.2	The future tense	111
10.1.3	The imperative	113
10.1.4	The imperfect tense	115
10.1.5	The perfect tense	120
10.1.6	The pluperfect tense	127
10.1.7	The future perfect tense	128
10.1.8	The conditional tense	128
10.1.9	The conditional perfect tense	129
10.2	Modal auxiliary verbs	131
10.2.1	Double infinitive constructions	135
10.2.2	Modals used with perfective infinitives	138
10.3	The subjunctive	138
10.3.1	The subjunctive I	139
10.3.2	The subjunctive II	141
10.4	The passive	145
10.5	The infinitive	151
10.5.1	Characteristics of the infinitive	151
10.5.2	Rules for the use of <b>zu</b> with infinitives	152
10.5.3	Use of <b>um ... zu</b> before infinitives	153
10.5.4	Double infinitive constructions (see 10.2.1)	154
10.5.5	The infinitive used as a noun	154
10.6	Participles	154
10.6.1	Present participles	154
10.6.2	Past participles	155
10.6.3	Use of present and past participles in extended adjectival phrases (see 7.6.4)	155
10.7	Progressive tenses	156
10.8	Reflexive verbs	157



10.9	Verbal prefixes	157
10.9.1	Verbs with separable prefixes (separable verbs)	157
10.9.2	Verbs with inseparable prefixes (inseparable verbs)	159
10.9.3	Verbs with variable prefixes (separable or inseparable verbs)	160
10.10	Verbs followed by prepositional objects	161
10.10.1	Use of prepositional adverbs before subordinate clauses	169
10.11	Transitive and intransitive verbs	170
10.11.1	Use of <b>sein</b> and <b>lassen</b> with intransitive verbs	171
10.11.2	Intransitive verbs and the passive	172
10.12	List of irregular verbs	172
10.12.1	Alphabetical list of irregular verbs	178

## **Chapter 11 Conjunctions 183**

11.1	Coordinating conjunctions	184
11.2	Subordinating conjunctions	185
11.3	Conjunctions introducing infinitive clauses	192
11.4	Correlative conjunctions	193

## **Chapter 12 Prepositions 195**

12.1	Prepositions that take the accusative case	196
12.2	Prepositions that take the dative case	199
12.3	Prepositions that take both the accusative and the dative case	207
12.4	Prepositions that take the genitive case	210
12.5	Contraction of prepositions with the definite article	213
12.6	How to translate 'to' into German	214

## **Chapter 13 Numerals 217**

13.1	Cardinal numerals	217
13.2	Ordinal numerals	219
13.3	Fractions	221
13.4	Arithmetic/calculation	222
13.5	Age	222
13.6	Money	223
13.7	Telling the time	223
13.8	Dates	225
13.9	Weights	226

13.10	Measurement	227
13.11	School marks/grades	228
<b>Chapter 14</b>	<b>Negation</b>	<b>230</b>
14.1	Position of <b>nicht</b> (not) and <b>nie</b> (mals) (never)	230
14.2	Notes on negatives	232
<b>Chapter 15</b>	<b>Common German abbreviations</b>	<b>237</b>
<b>Appendix I: List of countries, inhabitants and adjectives/languages</b>		<b>238</b>
<b>Index</b>		<b>252</b>



# *Introduction*

There are numerous German grammars on the market, so why this one? This book has been written specifically with the needs of the intermediate learner at secondary or particularly tertiary level in mind. It is intended to be used as a reference grammar, which does not mean that it is utterly comprehensive, but it does cover everything that might be called ‘essential’ knowledge for someone who has reached the intermediate level.

So what constitutes the intermediate level? That depends of course, but it would certainly apply to anyone who has completed an elementary course in German at a university, i.e. people who are in their second or third year of tertiary German, having started it at university without having done it at school. Students at advanced secondary level, however, would also qualify as intermediate and will thus find this book pitched at their needs, as will those teaching themselves who are progressing beyond what one might call beginners’ level. Once you have mastered the contents of this book, you will have reached a point in your learning of German where you are able to express yourself at quite a sophisticated level. Needless to say, you will also need to be concentrating on building up your vocabulary – grammar is useless on its own.

Other than being a book pitched squarely at the needs of the intermediate learner, what does this book offer its readers that other similar books may not? It has been written by someone with nearly forty years of experience in teaching German and Dutch at tertiary level, specializing in teaching students in their second year of German at university. The author is all too well aware of the shortcomings of the many textbooks available for the learning of German – take for example the way in which nearly all such books tackle German plurals. They nearly all fail to help the learner see through to the underlying system and thus fail to illustrate that plural formation is not nearly as arbitrary as it often appears to be to the newcomer to the language. How many books, for example, in their first introduction

to plural formation, mention that **Mann** has a plural in **Männer**, but fail to mention that there are only about ten masculine nouns in the entire language that have a plural in -er, which is otherwise an ending limited to neuter nouns? How many grammars tell you, to take another example, that possibly no more than 10 per cent of German nouns are neuter? So, if forced to guess a gender, it would be safer to assume the noun is masculine or feminine before assuming it is neuter. These two examples are typical of many of the underlying truths about German grammar that one discovers only through learning and teaching the language. These are also things which seldom strike the native speaker and why, at certain levels of learning a language, one may be better off with non-native teachers – they have been through the mill, as it were, which natives by definition have not. This book contains numerous such insights into German, acquired over many years of involvement with the language, both as a student and as a teacher. The author has applied his insights and long experience in explaining the intricacies of German to English-speaking people in as simple a fashion as the often complex material permits. German is certainly not simple – but then no language is – but it can be explained in a simpler, more palatable fashion than many books do.

Learning German is a challenge, but the rewards are great. No language other than English is of more use to you when travelling around Europe. Not only are there many more Germans (82 million) than there are French, Italians or Spaniards, for example, but the countries of Austria, Switzerland and Luxembourg further swell those numbers by several million native-speakers, not to mention the German-speaking minorities living in Russia, Romania, Hungary, Italy, Belgium and Denmark. All in all, the number of native-speakers of German living in Europe is nigh on 100 million. But go travelling through eastern Europe and you will be amazed at how well Poles, Hungarians and even Latvians, for example, can speak German too; their German is often much better than their English. Germany is an economic power of enormous importance and lies both physically and philosophically at the heart of the European Union. If you are interested in Europe and seek to broaden your linguistic and cultural horizons, you need look no further than German.

Other books you might refer to may use different names for several of the grammatical concepts dealt with in this book. Particularly in the American and British English-speaking worlds different terminology is often used for various concepts. For this reason, where alternative terminology exists for a given concept, it is briefly discussed before proceeding with the issue

under consideration and all grammatical concepts can be accessed under all alternative names via the index.

There is an old German maxim: **ohne Vergleich kein Verständnis** (without comparison, there is no understanding). The approach to German grammar adopted in this book is strongly contrastive with English. English and German are after all, as languages go, very closely related and have a great deal in common. Look, for example, at the past tenses of irregular verbs (**trinken/trank/getrunken**) and the forms and functions of modal verbs (**kann/muss/will**). These are grammatical complexities that clearly stem from a common source, namely the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain in the fifth century AD. And then there is all that common vocabulary dating from the same time, e.g. **Mutter, Vater, Sohn, Tochter, Hund, Katze, Schwein** etc. All that the two languages have in common is a godsend to the learner, but then there is so much that the two do not (or no longer, as is often the case) have in common and this is where taking a contrastive approach can be invaluable. However, in order to do so, you need to be aware of exactly what the grammatical situation is in English with regard to a given issue. There are issues of which a native-speaker is often unaware. This is all the more so these days, when English at school level throughout the English-speaking world seldom includes analysis of formal grammar the way it used to. Generally speaking, this now means that the only people who leave school or university with any formal knowledge of English grammar are those who have learnt a foreign language and have therefore had to comprehend the intricacies of English grammar in order to access those of the foreign language being learnt. This is an added bonus in the learning of a language like German. English and German are oh so similar and oh so different. Unlocking the door to those similarities and differences is something this grammar sets out to do.

This book is intended as a reference grammar of ‘essential’ German and, as such, does not set out to be comprehensive, as previously mentioned. All the important concepts of German grammar are dealt with in considerable detail, with only minor exceptions and subtleties of grammar being left uncovered. The advanced learner who has mastered the contents of this book and who wishes to progress to a fully comprehensive reference grammar of German is advised to consider M. Durrell’s *Hammer’s German Grammar and Usage* (Arnold, London, 4th edition 2002).

*German: An Essential Grammar* only addresses grammatical issues, but many of the intricacies of mastering German are more lexical than grammatical in nature. The reader is referred to another work by the

author of the current book in which such lexical problems are addressed, namely B. Donaldson's *Mastering German Vocabulary – A Practical Guide to Troublesome Words* (Routledge, London/New York, 2004).

If you've been looking for a challenge, you need look no further. You've found it. Learning German is intellectually very rewarding and terrific fun. It is like unravelling a complicated puzzle, one with an underlying code that needs to be cracked. Penetrating the thoroughly logical system that underlies the intricate weave of grammatical inflection that is the result of gender and case, combined with a myriad of word order rules that are at odds with what prevails in English, constitutes the challenge. Mastering this system is a form of mental gymnastics beyond compare and constitutes a feat that will give tremendous intellectual satisfaction as well as enabling you to converse with 100 million Europeans in their own idiom rather than lazily expecting them, as the overwhelming number of English speakers do, to converse with you in your mother tongue. And it is an effort that you will find is greatly appreciated and admired by German speakers.

### About the author

Bruce Donaldson was born in Perth, Western Australia, in 1948. He did honours in German at the University of Western Australia, his MA in Old Germanic Languages at the State University of Utrecht and his PhD on Afrikaans at the University of the Orange Free State in Bloemfontein, South Africa. In 1973 he was appointed as lecturer in charge of Dutch and Germanic historical linguistics in the then Department of Germanic Studies at the University of Melbourne, from where he retired as associate professor and reader in 2004. For the last twelve years of his career, after the abolition of Dutch in 1992, he lectured in German, specializing in the intermediate level. He is currently a principal research fellow in his former department. He has written numerous monographs on Dutch, Afrikaans and German language issues, most of which have been published by Routledge. The author is interested in receiving constructive criticism for the improvement of any future editions of this work and can be emailed at [bcr@unimelb.edu.au](mailto:bcr@unimelb.edu.au).

# *Abbreviations*

>	produces, gives rise to
<	is derived from
acc.	accusative
dat.	dative
f.	feminine
gen.	genitive
lit.	literally; literary
m.	masculine
n.	neuter
nom.	nominative
pl.	plural
pron.	pronounced
sing.	singular
s.o.	someone
s.t.	something





## Chapter I

# *Pronunciation*

German does not contain many sounds that are difficult for English speakers to pronounce; **ch**, **r** and **ü** will probably prove the hardest to conquer, but even these are soon mastered with practice.

The only reliable way of committing sounds to paper is via the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA), but only those studying linguistics as an academic discipline are likely to have the IPA at their disposal and for this reason it is not referred to here. This means, however, that phrasing such as ‘compare the vowel in tray’ and ‘compare the vowel in lot’ has its limitations. Those English words may well vary in the way they are pronounced depending on where in the English-speaking world you live. Every care has been taken to make comparisons which are valid regardless of whether you speak British or American English, although the author is a speaker of the former, but then the Australian variant thereof. For this and numerous other reasons there is, of course, no substitute for getting assistance from a native speaker, keeping in mind, however, that German is spoken over a very large area by European standards and thus shows considerable regional variation in the way it is pronounced. Some attempt to cover the prime regional differences in pronunciation is made in 1.5. What should help in describing the sounds of German without being able to resort to the IPA is the fact that this book has, after all, been written for the intermediate level and so this chapter is seldom going to have to serve the needs of the raw beginner. It is assumed the vast majority of readers will already have some idea of how German is pronounced.

### 1.1

### **Vowels**

Most vowels in German have both a short and a long variant. Clearly distinguishing between the two is very important. In German spelling two

consonants after a vowel will normally indicate it is short (e.g. **Kamm** ‘comb’), whereas only one consonant indicates it is long (e.g. **kam** ‘came’) (see 2.1).

- a** **a** is pronounced short in words like **Hand, Mann** and **statt**  
– compare the vowel in ‘but’.  
**a** is pronounced long in words like **kam, Vater** and **zahlen**  
– compare the vowel in ‘father’.
- ä** **ä** is pronounced short in words like **lässt, kälter** and **Männer**  
– compare the vowel in ‘bed’. It is identical to German short **e**.  
**ä** is pronounced long in words like **gäbe, Hähne** and **Väter**  
– compare the vowel in ‘hair’.
- e** **e** is pronounced short in words like **Bett, Henne** and **Sekt**  
– compare the vowel in ‘bed’. It is identical to German short **ä**.  
**e** is pronounced even shorter in words like **Beruf, Tante** and **zahlen** where it is unstressed – compare the vowel in the first syllable of ‘believe’ or the last syllable of ‘wooden’. In all words ending in **e** like **Schule** and **Kassette** the **e** must be pronounced and not merely dropped as in ‘cassette’. It is similar to the second syllable in ‘rubber’ as it is pronounced in British English.  
**e** is pronounced long in words like **lesen, Planet** and **Tee**  
– compare the vowel in ‘tray’, but keep it pure, i.e. do not diphthongize it at all.
- i** **i** is pronounced short in words like **bitter, ich** and **Pilz**  
– compare the vowel in ‘pit’. In very few words such as **Liga** and **wider** **i** is pronounced long – compare the vowel in ‘read’.
- ie** **ie** is always pronounced long, e.g. **liegen, lieh** and **sie** – compare the vowel in ‘fee’.
- o** **o** is pronounced short in words like **Loch, Schloss** and **Stollen**  
– compare the vowel in ‘lot’.  
**o** is pronounced long in words like **Floh, rot** and **Ton** – compare the vowel in ‘post’, but keep it pure, i.e. do not diphthongize it at all.
- ö** **ö** is pronounced short in words like **Löcher, Töchter** and **zwölf**  
– compare the vowel in ‘bird’, but keep it short.  
**ö** is pronounced long in words like **Flöte, Löhne** and **schön**  
– compare the vowel in ‘bird’ but with the lips as rounded as you can make them.

- u**    **u** is pronounced short in words like **Butt**, **Truppe** and **Zunge** – compare the vowel in ‘put’.  
**u** is pronounced long in words like **Buch**, **Fuß** and **gut** – compare the vowel in ‘food’ but with less lip rounding. Make sure you clearly distinguish between this sound and long **ü**. This sound is commonly pronounced too short by English speakers.
- ü**    **ü** is pronounced short in words like **fünf**, **Flüsse** and **Pfütze** – compare the vowel in ‘too’ but make it shorter and with the lips as rounded and tightened as you can make them, as if trying to whistle.  
**ü** is pronounced long in words like **fühlen**, **Füße** and **trübe** – compare the vowel in ‘food’ but make it longer and with more lip rounding and tightening, as if trying to whistle.

## 1.2 Diphthongs

German has only three diphthong sounds, i.e. **ei**, **au** and **eu**. English has quite a few more.

- ei**    **ei** in words like **Blei**, **Stein** and **Verleih** is identical to the vowel in ‘fight’.
- ai**    **ai** in words like **Hain**, **Laib** and **Mai** is identical in pronunciation to **ei** and occurs in very few words.
- au**    **au** in words like **aus**, **Auto** and **Traum** is very similar to the vowel in ‘house’.
- eu**    **eu** in words like **euch**, **Feuer** and **heute** is identical to the vowel in ‘boy’.
- äu**    **äu** in words like **enttäuschen**, **Kräuter** and **Schläuche** is identical to **eu**.

## 1.3 Consonants

There are few problems lurking here for English speakers.

- b**    **b** in words like **Bein**, **Krabbe** and **loben** is identical to that in ‘bed’. At the end of a word as in **ab**, **Lob** and **ob** a **b** is always devoiced, i.e. it is pronounced as a ‘p’.
- c**    **c** in words like **Cicero** and **Mercedes** (both foreign words) is pronounced like a German **z**, i.e. as ‘ts’.

**ch** **ch** in words like **Bach, Loch, Buch** and **rauchen** (i.e. after **a, o, u** and **au**) is pronounced as in Scottish 'loch'. The Germans call this the **ach-Laut**, a hard sound.

**ch** in words like **Blech, ich, lächeln, Schläuche, Löcher, Bücher, welche, manche** and **durch** (i.e. after **e, i, ä, äu, ö, ü** as well as the consonants **l, n** and **r**) is a softer sound than when it follows **a, o, u** and **au**, i.e. it is pronounced with the tongue curved, hugging both the soft and hard palates. The Germans call this the **ich-Laut**, a soft sound. It must be clearly distinguished from the more guttural **ach-Laut**. The two **ch** sounds can alternate within variations of the same word when it is inflected, e.g. **Buch** (with the **ach** sound) and **Bücher** (with the **ich** sound).

The combination **chs** is pronounced like English 'x', e.g. **sechs, Dachs, Fuchs**. Compare **sechs** (6) with **sechzehn** (16) and **sechzig** (60) where **ch** is pronounced as in **Blech** above. The diminutive ending **-chen** is also pronounced with this soft variant of **ch**.

**ch** at the beginning of loanwords is pronounced like 1) English 'k', 2) English 'sh' or 3) soft German **ch**, depending on the source language, e.g. 1) **Chaos, Chlor, Charakter**; 2) **Chance, chauvinistisch, Chef**; 3) **Chemie, China**.

**ck** **ck**, found in the middle and at the end of words, is pronounced 'k', e.g. **lecker, Fleck**.

**d** **d** in words like **denken** and **Feder** is pronounced as in English.

At the end of a word as in **Glied, Gold** and **Hand** a **d** is always devoiced, i.e. it is pronounced as a 't'.

**f** **f** in words like **Frosch, Pfeffer** and **Schiff** is pronounced as in English.

**g** **g** at the beginning or in the middle of words, as in **Gang, gießen** and **fliegen**, is pronounced as in English.

At the end of a word as in **Tag, Teig** and **Zug** a **g** is always devoiced, i.e. it is pronounced as a 'k'. However, the ending **-ig** is pronounced like German **ich**, e.g. **König** and **lustig** (see I.5).

**h** **h** at the beginning of a words, as in **Haus, Horn** and **Hut**, is pronounced as in English. After a vowel it is not pronounced but simply serves to show that the vowel is long, e.g. **Floh**,

**sehen, Schuhe** (see 2.1). Sometimes this **h** is superfluous to pronunciation but spelling requires it, e.g. **sieh** and **sie** are pronounced the same, as are **liehst** (< **leihen** 'to lend') and **liest** (< **lesen** 'to read').

- j**    **j** is pronounced 'y', e.g. **Jahr, jeder, Joch**.  
**j** in French loanwords is pronounced like the 's' in 'leisure', e.g. **Journalist**.
- k**    **k** is pronounced as in English, e.g. **Katze, Klasse, kommen**.
- l**    **l** in all positions is pronounced as in 'light' never as in 'well', i.e. it is never a 'thick l', e.g. **Lohn, Licht, wählen, wohl**.
- m**    **m** is pronounced as in English, e.g. **Mann, Lämmer, Lehm**.
- n**    **n** is pronounced as in English, e.g. **nein, Tonne, zehn**.
- ng**    **ng** is always pronounced as in 'singer', never as in 'finger', e.g. **Finger, lang, Sänger, Zeitung**.
- p**    **p** is pronounced as in English, e.g. **Penner, Lippe, kaputt**. At the beginning of a word, where it is rare, it is lightly aspirated, as in English.
- pf**    **pf** is pronounced as the spelling suggests, i.e. both the **p** and the **f** are articulated, but this can be hard for English speakers at the beginning of a word, e.g. **Pfeffer, Tropfen, Kopf** (see **pf** under 1.5).
- ph**    **ph** is still used in some loanwords and is pronounced as an 'f', e.g. **Photograph, Philosophie**.
- q**    **q** always occurs in combination with **u**, as in English, and together they are pronounced 'kv', e.g. **Qualität, Quelle, Quadratmeter**.
- r**    In most of the German-speaking region **r** before a vowel is pronounced by slightly trilling the uvula in the back of your throat, but there are areas where, and individuals who, pronounce it by trilling their tongue against their alveolar ridge, i.e. the ridge of gum behind the top teeth, as in Italian. Either way **r** must be trilled, which usually means most English speakers have trouble with this sound, e.g. **Reh, reißen, Brot, schreiben**.  
 After a vowel an **r** is vocalized, i.e. it is pronounced as a vowel, e.g. in **er, mir** and **Uhr** you pronounce the vowel as you

would expect it to be pronounced and follow it by 'uh', as in the colloquial question form 'huh?', i.e. air-uh, mee-uh, oo-uh. The common ending **-er** is simply pronounced 'uh'; alternatively you could say it resembles the second syllable in 'teacher', but imagine this being spelt 'teacha', e.g. **Schuster** (shoos-tuh). The ending **-ern** is pronounced 'airn', not trilling the **r**, e.g. **wandern** (vundairn).

Note how **-er** and **-e** differ in pronunciation at the end of words: **Mütter/Feuer** (with 'uh'), but **Hütte/Treue** (with the vowel in the second syllable in British English 'rubber'; in American English this final 'r' is pronounced, but not in British English).

- s** **s** at the beginning and in the middle of a word is pronounced 'z', e.g. **sollen, lesen, Gänse**. **S** at the end of a word is pronounced 's', e.g. **es, Gans, Glas**. The spelling **ss** is always pronounced 's' too, e.g. **Flüsse, Guss, schoss**.
- ß** **ß**, which only occurs in the middle and at the end of words, is always pronounced 's', e.g. **bloß, reißen, schießen**. **ß** indicates that any vowel preceding it is long (see 2.5).
- sch** **sch** is pronounced 'sh', e.g. **Schule, fischen, Tisch**.
- sp** **sp** at the beginning of a word is pronounced 'shp', e.g. **spät, Spaten, Spatz**. This is also the case in compounds and derived words where the **sp** is still seen as being at the 'beginning' of the word, e.g. **Aussprache, verspätet** (< **spät**). In the middle of a word, however, **sp** is pronounced 'sp', e.g. **lispeln, Wespe**.
- st** There are parallels here with the way **sp** is pronounced. At the beginning of a word it is pronounced 'sht', e.g. **Stadt, stehen, stoßen**. This is also the case in compounds and derived words where the **st** is still seen as being at the 'beginning' of the word, e.g. **Ausstoß, Großstadt, verstehen** (< **stehen**). In the middle and at the end of a word, however, **st** is pronounced 'st', e.g. **Gast, gestern, bist**.
- t** **t** is pronounced as in English, e.g. **Tag, rot, bitte**. At the beginning of a word it is aspirated, as in English. In French loanwords ending in **-tion**, **t** is pronounced 'ts', e.g. **Nation, national**.
- tsch** **tsch** is pronounced like 'tch' in 'butcher', e.g. **Deutsch**,

**Dolmetscher, Quatsch.** It only occurs at the beginning in foreign words, e.g. **Tschechien, tschüs.**

- v** **v** is pronounced 'f' in true German words, e.g. **Vater, von, Volk.** At the beginning of loanwords **v** is pronounced as in English, e.g. **Vase, Veteran, Video, Violine.**  
**v** occurs at the end of some loanwords, in which case it is pronounced 'f' (i.e. it is devoiced), but when **v** is no longer in final position, it is pronounced 'v', e.g. **aktiv, passiv**, but **aktive.**
- w** **w** is pronounced 'v', e.g. **Wasser, wir, Wurm.**
- x** **x**, which is rare in German, is always pronounced 'ks', e.g. **nix, Xylophon.**
- y** **y** is pronounced the same as long **ü**, e.g. **typisch, Zylinder, zynisch.**
- z** **z** is pronounced 'ts', e.g. **Polizei, zählen, zittern.** Sometimes it occurs together with **t** but the pronunciation is still 'ts', e.g. **Glotze, Platz, Spritze.**

## 1.4 Stress

As a general rule the first syllable of a German word bears the stress, e.g. **ankommen, Bruder, Rathaus, Wörterbuch.**

The verbal prefixes **be-**, **emp-**, **ent-**, **er-**, **ge-**, **ver-** and **zer-**, which are also found in nouns derived from verbs, are never stressed (compare the stress in 'believe', 'release', 'forgive' in English), e.g. **Bezug, empfehlen, entkommen, erreichen, gestehen, Verkauf, zerbrechen.** Some additional verbal prefixes are not stressed, e.g. **durchsuchen, vollenden, widersprechen**, while others are, e.g. **anrufen, ausgehen, wiedersehen** (see separable and inseparable verbs 10.9.1 to 10.9.3).

Many foreign loanwords, usually of French origin, stress the final syllable as in the source language, e.g. **Agent, Akzent, Bäckerei, kaputt, Partei, Pelikan, Philosoph, Planet, Satellit, Student.** Loanwords ending in **e** stress the second last syllable, e.g. **Forelle, Garage, Kassette, Kusine.**

Verbs ending in **-ieren**, mostly derived from French, are also stressed on the second last syllable, e.g. **buchstabieren, renovieren, studieren.**



**1.5 Regional variants**

As German is spoken over a very wide area and in several countries, there is great variety in regional pronunciation. Some of these variations are considered standard, not dialect; only these variants are dealt with here.

In the north of Germany long **ä** is pronounced 'eh', i.e. the same as German long **e**, and thus the distinction between **gäbe/gebe** and **nähme/nehme**, for example, is not made.

In the north of Germany many long vowels in closed syllables (i.e. those ending in a consonant) are pronounced short, e.g. **Glas**, **Tag**, **Zug**.

In the north of Germany final **g** is pronounced like German **ch** (both **ich-** and **ach-Laut**, depending on the preceding sound), e.g. **Tag**, **Teig**, **Weg**, **zog**, **Zug**.

In verbs before the endings **-t** and **-te/-ten** etc. **g** is also pronounced in this way, e.g. **liegt**, **gesagt**, **legte**, **sagte**; in standard German the **g** in these words is automatically pronounced 'k' due to the influence of the following **t**.

In the north the ending **-ung** is often pronounced 'oonk', e.g. **Zeitung**, **Rechnung**.

Over large areas of northern and central Germany **pf** at the beginning of a word is likely to be pronounced 'f', e.g. **Pfeffer**, **Pfund**. If you are having trouble pronouncing **pf** in such words, simply say **Feffer** and **Fund** and no one will even notice you are not saying **pf**.

In southern Germany and Austria, **sp** and **st** are pronounced 'shp' and 'sht' in all positions, not just initially, e.g. **bist**, **Australien**, **Wespe**.

The reverse can occur in the far north of Germany where **sp** and **st** might be pronounced 'sp' and 'st' in all positions, e.g. **Stadt**, **spät**.

In the south of Germany and in Austria **k**, **p** and **t** are commonly pronounced in a way that makes them barely distinguishable from **g**, **b** and **d** respectively, e.g. **kaufen** > **gaufen**, **Parade** > **Barade**, **trinken** > **drinken**.

## Chapter 2

# Spelling

Generally speaking, German is written as it is pronounced, each spelling having only one possible pronunciation and each pronunciation being written in only one way. There are very few exceptions to this, and they are dealt with here.

### 2.1 Indicating vowel length

Vowel length is inconsistently represented in German spelling – compare the following where all words contain the same long **a**, **e**, **o** or **u** sound respectively: **Saal**, **Stahl**, **Tal**; **Tee**, **Mehl**, **beten**; **Boot**, **Lohn**, **bot**; **Fuß**, **Schuh**.

**h** is commonly used after a vowel to indicate that the vowel is long, although this indication is usually superfluous, e.g. **mahlen** (to grind) and **malen** (to paint), **sieh** (look) and **sie** (she/they). This is called in German a **Dehnungs-h** (< **dehnen** ‘to lengthen, stretch’).

In a minority of words **a**, **e** and **o** are doubled to show they are long, e.g. **Saal**, **Beet**, **Boot**. Otherwise a single consonant following **a**, **e** and **o** usually indicates that those vowels are long, e.g. **Tag**, **Gen**, **Kot**, **Vater**, **beten**, **boten**. Conversely, a short vowel is usually followed by two or more consonants, which may be the same or different, e.g. **Männer**, **Pommern**, **sprechen**, **fanden**, **Stadt**, **Wespe**.

### 2.2 Use of the Umlaut

German only uses one diacritic, the Umlaut. It appears in printed matter as two dots over the vowel, but in handwriting is best written as two short strokes, not dots. Umlauts are only possible on the vowels **a**, **o**, **u** and the diphthong **au**, which are all vowel sounds pronounced in the back of the

mouth. For historical reasons, in derived forms of words containing **a**, **o**, **u** or **au**, the vowel is brought further forward and/or higher in the mouth and this is reflected in the spelling by umlauting these vowels. This is best illustrated by comparing the singular with the plural of certain nouns, e.g. **Bach** > **Bäche**, **Loch** > **Löcher**, **Buch** > **Bücher**, **Bauch** > **Bäuche** (compare ‘goose > geese’). In the examples given, the change in vowel also causes a change in pronunciation of the **ch** from the hard to the soft variant.

### 2.3 Use of capital letters

All nouns are capitalized, e.g. **Bruder**, **Mutter**, **Sofa**.

Adjectives of nationality are not capitalized, but nouns are, e.g. **eine deutsche Frau** (a German woman), **Sie ist Deutsche** (She is a German).

‘To write with a capital/small letter’ is expressed by the verbs **groß-** and **kleinschreiben**, e.g.

**Er kann Deutsch; hier wird ‘Deutsch’ großgeschrieben.**

He speaks German; here ‘Deutsch’ is written with a capital letter.

**Beethoven ist ein bekannter deutscher Komponist; hier wird ‘deutsch’ kleingeschrieben.**

Beethoven is a well-known German composer; here ‘deutsch’ is written with a small letter.

Because, for historical reasons, modern German uses the word for ‘they’ as the polite form of address, to distinguish between ‘they/them/to them/their’ and ‘you/to you/your’ the latter are all written with a capital letter, i.e. **Sie/Ihnen/Ihr**.

### 2.4 Use of the hyphen

Compounds are seldom hyphenated as in English, where we often vacillate between using a hyphen in a given compound, writing it as two words or writing it as one word, e.g. **Wohnzimmer** (lounge-room, lounge room, loungeroom), **Küchentür** (kitchen door), **spottbillig** (dirt cheap). There is no limit to how long such compounds can be in German, e.g. **Gerichtsberichterstatter** (legal correspondent, lit. court report compiler).

When a hyphen is used, as in **an Sonn- und Feiertagen** (on Sundays and holidays) and **auf- und zumachen** (to open and shut), it is understood that

this stands for **an Sonntagen und Feiertagen** and **aufmachen und zumachen** and saves repeating the second part of the compound.

The new  
spelling

## 2.5 The new spelling

German reformed its spelling (**Rechtschreibung**) in 1998 for the first time in almost a hundred years. The reform, called **die Rechtschreibreform**, has aroused a great deal of controversy. Although all government agencies, schools and publishers adhere to the new recommendations, many individuals refuse to do so, and of course anything published prior to 1998 is in the old spelling. The differences are, however, minimal.

By far the most important change to the spelling in 1998 was in the use of **ß**, called either **scharfes s** or **ess tset** (i.e. German for 'sz', as the symbol is derived from a long s and a z in old German printing and handwriting).

Under the new rules **ß** is only used after long vowels and diphthongs, e.g. **schießen, Spaß, stoßen, draußen, fleißig, scheußlich**. Thus the spellings **Schoß** and **schoß**, **Fuß** and **Fluss** indicate to the reader that there is a difference in vowel length. Sometimes **ß** and **ss** alternate within a word family, indicating the length of the vowel, e.g. **schießen** (to shoot), **schoß** (shot).

Under the old spelling **ß** was used after long vowels, as now, but also at the end of words, regardless of the length of the preceding vowel, and before the verbal endings **-t** and **-te/-ten**, e.g. **schoß, Fluß, paßt, mußte** are now all **schoß, Fluss, passt, musste**.

The only other important spelling change relates to the use of capital letters where a certain inconsistency had evolved. It was decided that any word that can possibly be perceived as a noun should be capitalized, something which had previously been somewhat inconsistent, e.g. **auf deutsch** > **auf Deutsch**, **heute abend** > **heute Abend**.

The other changes are so trivial as not to warrant mention here, but if at times you see inconsistencies in spelling (e.g. **wieviel/wie viel** 'how much', **radfahren/Rad fahren** 'to cycle'), the chances are you are witnessing the differences between the old and the new spelling. Just take note whether your dictionary, any other textbook you are consulting or book you are reading was printed pre or post-1998. This book does of course observe the new spelling.

## 2.6 The alphabet

The combination 'eh' in the pronunciations given below approximates the vowel in English 'bay' but without any tendency to diphthongize – it is a pure long vowel.

a	ah	n	en
b	beh	o	oh
c	tseh	p	peh
d	deh	q	koo
e	eh	r	air
f	ef	s	es
g	geh	t	teh
h	hah	u	oo
i	ee	v	fow
j	yot	w	veh
k	kah	x	iks
l	el	y	üpsilon
m	em	z	tset

If spelling out a word with an Umlaut in it, read the letters as follows: **kämpft** – kah, air, em, peh, ef, teh. This is more usual than **kah, ah-Umlaut, em, peh, ef, teh**, which is however also possible.

Letters of the alphabet are neuter, e.g.

**Das I im Wort Voigtländer wird nicht ausgesprochen.**

The i in the word Voigtländer is not pronounced.

# Punctuation

Generally speaking, German punctuation does not differ greatly from that of English. It is only the comma which is used somewhat differently but a couple of other punctuation marks can differ slightly from English usage too. Only those punctuation conventions that differ from English are described here.

## 3.1 Commas

Commas are determined by grammar in German, not by the writer feeling a pause is appropriate, as is so often the case in English, e.g.

**Er wird aber innerhalb von vierzehn Tagen zurückkommen.**

(aber = however)

He will, however, return within a fortnight.

In German you must always insert a comma between an independent and a dependent clause, however short they are, e.g.

**Ich will das Buch nicht übers Internet kaufen, obwohl es dort billiger wäre.**

I don't want to buy the book over the internet although it would be cheaper there.

**Er wusste, dass ich es war.**

He knew that it was me.

When joining two independent (main) clauses by means of a coordinating conjunction, a comma must be inserted between the two if the second clause has its own subject, e.g.

**Er fliegt heute nach London, aber er kommt morgen schon zurück.**

He's flying to London today but (he) is returning tomorrow.