German Grammar
You Really Need
to know
Jenny Russ
Meet the author

I didn’t have a clue about the language when I started to learn German at school, aged 12, but was blessed with an inspiring teacher who introduced me to the grammar in bite-size pieces and soon infected me with his enthusiasm. I found I could understand each new detail and discovered how satisfying it was to learn the rules, apply them and produce accurate German.

I then studied German at university, which involved spending a semester at Kiel University on the Baltic coast. There I met a fellow student of the German language, four years later we were married and we have shared a passion for German ever since. I trained as a language teacher and spent more than 30 years teaching the German language, literature and culture at every level and to every age group. Perhaps my biggest challenge was teaching my two sons A-level German, but the older one is now a German teacher himself and is married to a German teacher! I also wrote a book on German customs and festivals and became an examiner of both written and oral German for several UK examination boards.

I still love the German language and try to listen to it daily on satellite TV and visit the country two or three times every year, armed with a notebook to record new vocabulary.

Acknowledgements
I should like to record my grateful thanks to Ginny Catmur for being such a patient and pleasant editor, always available with immediate answers to my queries. I also want to thank my two sons, Jamie and Thomas, and my daughter-in-law, Kate, for their very helpful suggestions. I owe the biggest debt to my husband, Charles, for his constant support, plying me with good food and good examples in equal measure.

Finally, I dedicate this book to the memory of my late mother, who used to battle with German grammar.

Jenny Russ
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Asking for and giving personal information

In this unit you will learn how to

- **Say who you are**
- **State your nationality**
- **Say where you are from**
- **Say what your occupation is**
- **Give similar information about other people**
- **Ask for personal information about other people**

**Language points**

- **Subject pronouns**
- **Sein in the present tense**
- **Gender of nouns (nominative case)**
- **Plural of nouns**
- **Nouns and adjectives indicating nationality**
- **Ask questions (interrogative sentences)**
- **Negative sentences**

To ask for and give personal information you will need the German equivalent of words like *I, you, he, she*, etc. These are known as pronouns. You will also need a verb. This shows an action or state, for example *I cook, you buy, he is*, etc. In this unit we will learn the verb **sein**, which means **to be**.
SAYING WHO YOU ARE

Ich bin Hans Schmidt.  
I'm Hans Schmidt. (male)

Ich bin Inge Schneider. 
I'm Inge Schneider. (female)

STATING YOUR NATIONALITY

Ich bin Deutscher.  
I'm German. (male)

Ich bin Deutsche.  
I'm German. (female)

Every noun in German begins with a capital letter, e.g. der Mann (the man), die Frau (the woman), das Kind (the child). You will notice that the endings are different in the two examples above, the -er referring to a male German, the -e to a female. These are both examples of so-called adjectival nouns. For more details see Reference grammar §2.

SAYING WHAT YOUR OCCUPATION IS

Ich bin Arzt.  
I'm a doctor. (male)

Ich bin Ärztin.  
I'm a doctor. (female)

You will again notice the different endings in the two examples above. Here, the endings denote the difference between male and female professions. Sometimes we make the same distinction in English, e.g. the actor (der Schauspieler), the actress (die Schauspielerin), the waiter (der Kellner), the waitress (die Kellnerin).

The sign (¨) is known as an umlaut and can occur only above the vowels a, o and u. The addition of the umlaut alters the pronunciation.
SAYING WHERE YOU COME FROM

Ich bin aus Berlin. I’m from Berlin.
Ich bin aus Deutschland. I’m from Germany.

GIVING INFORMATION ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE

Er ist Lehrer. He’s a teacher.
Sie ist Lehrerin. She’s a teacher.

In English, we say: I am a doctor, He is a teacher. In German, you normally say the equivalent of: I am doctor, He is teacher.

But if you want to describe the person in more detail using an adjective, you do use the article (a, an, the):

Ich bin ein alter Arzt. I am an old doctor.
Sie ist eine gute Lehrerin. She is a good teacher.

Er ist Schweizer. He is Swiss.
Sie ist aus Zürich. She’s from Zurich.

ASKING FOR PERSONAL INFORMATION ABOUT OTHER PEOPLE

a) in a formal or polite way, using the polite pronoun Sie:

Sind Sie Deutscher? Are you German? (male)
Sind Sie Architekt? Are you an architect? (male)

If you do not know the adult or adults to whom you are speaking, always use the polite Sie (you – singular or plural) with the plural form of the verb. This particular Sie is always written with a capital letter. None of the other pronouns (ich, du, er, sie, es, etc.) requires a capital unless at the beginning of a sentence.
b) familiarly, using the pronoun du:

Bist du Österreicherin?  Are you Austrian? (female)
Bist du aus Wien?    Are you from Vienna?

The pronoun du (you) is used when addressing one person you know well, a child or an animal. Never use du when addressing your doctor, a lawyer, a shop assistant, etc. The Germans tend to be more formal when talking to colleagues and professionals, so to be on the safe side, always use Sie in these situations until you are invited to use du.

Apparently, some people in Germany have even been fined for addressing the police as du! In church services, however, God is always addressed as du.

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Grammar summary

**SUBJECT PRONOUNS**

To say I, you, he, she, etc. in German (as you would for the subject of the verb, i.e. the person or thing performing the action of the verb: I speak, you learn, she likes), we use the following set of words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ich</td>
<td>wir</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>du</td>
<td>ihr</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sie</td>
<td>Sie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>er</td>
<td>sie</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sie</td>
<td>es</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>es</td>
<td>es</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| ich       | I       |
| du       | you (familiar) |
| Sie      | you (polite) |
| er       | he      |
| sie      | she     |
| es       | it      |
| wir      | we      |
| ihr      | you (familiar) |
| Sie      | you (polite) |
| sie      | they    |
| es       | es      |
The forms _er_ and _sie_ can also mean _it_ if replacing _der_ or _die_:

Der Tisch ist zu hoch. (_The table is too high._) → Er ist zu hoch. (_It is too high._)

**FAMILIAR AND POLITE FORMS OF ADDRESS**

As we noticed above, German uses familiar and polite forms of address. In general, the familiar forms (du and ihr) are used when addressing a child or children, members of one’s family, a close friend (or friends), an animal (or animals) or God (in prayer and worship).

You will remember that the polite form _Sie_ is used when addressing one or more person(s) whom you do not know or do not know well. In other words, the same form is used for both the singular and the plural polite form. The polite _Sie_ is the only subject pronoun which is always written with a capital letter.

**SEIN (TO BE) IN THE PRESENT TENSE**

The verb _sein_ is frequently used in German when giving personal information such as nationality or your occupation, and often for your place of origin and name. Here is the full form of _sein_ in the present tense together with the appropriate subject pronouns:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Singular</th>
<th>Plural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ich bin</td>
<td>wir sind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>du bist</td>
<td>ihr seid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sie sind</td>
<td>Sie sind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>er ist</td>
<td>sie sind</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sie ist</td>
<td>es ist</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_You are_ (familiar)  
_You are_ (polite)  
_He is_  
_She is_  
_It is_  
_We are_  
_You are_ (familiar)  
_You are_ (polite sing. or plural)  
_They are_

It is worth learning the whole of this verb _sein_. Later on, you will find that it is also used to form parts of the past tense.
Do not confuse the infinitive of the verb *sein* with the possessive adjective *sein*, which means *his* or *its*:

**Sein Haus ist in Köln.**

*His house is in Cologne.*

**GENDER OF NOUNS**

(Reference grammar 2.1)

A noun is a word for a person, a thing, a place, or even an idea. Apart from personal names, such as *Wilhelm* or *Berlin*, it can be preceded by either *the* or *an*, for example *the dog*, *the post office*, *a carrot*, *an egg*. For full details of nouns, see Reference grammar 2.

You will soon discover that a noun can also be preceded by the following:

- **kein/keine** (*not a*)  
  *Da ist kein Parkplatz.*
  *That is not a car park.*

- **mein/meine** (*my*), **dein/deine** (*your*), **sein/seine** (*his/its*)  
  *Dein Auto ist toll.*
  *Your car is super.*

- **dieser/diese/dieses** (*this*), **jener/jene/jenes** (*that*)  
  *Dieser Lastkraftwagen kommt aus Bulgarien.*
  *This lorry is from Bulgaria.*

- **welcher?/welche?/welches?** (*which?*)  
  *Welches Buch suchen Sie?*  
  *Which book are you looking for?*

All nouns in German begin with a capital letter and are masculine, feminine or neuter. Their gender is shown by the use of the definite article: *der* for masculine, *die* for feminine, or *das* for neuter, preceding the noun; but in dictionaries or coursebooks, gender is sometimes shown by *m.* or *f.* or *nt.* This form is known as the
nominative case and is used after the verb sein and for the subject of the sentence.

Do try to learn the gender with each new word. In some contexts, the der, die or das which you find in the dictionary will change and it is very important to know what the original gender is.

Occasionally the same word can have a totally different meaning, depending on its gender:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>German</th>
<th>English</th>
<th>German</th>
<th>English</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>der Gehalt</td>
<td>the content</td>
<td>das Gehalt</td>
<td>the salary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>der See</td>
<td>the lake</td>
<td>die See</td>
<td>the sea</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>das Steuer</td>
<td>the steering wheel</td>
<td>die Steuer</td>
<td>the tax</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>der Tor</td>
<td>the fool</td>
<td>das Tor</td>
<td>the goal/gate</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Der, die and das are translated as *the* in English. If you wish to say *a/an* instead of *the*, then the indefinite article ein (for both masculine and neuter) and eine (for feminine) is used. As in English, the indefinite article is not needed when stating one’s nationality; but unlike English, it is also not required when stating one’s profession.

**Gender of nouns indicating nationality and profession**

Nouns which refer to people, such as those indicating nationality, profession or occupation, often show the masculine or feminine form in the noun itself, for example by adding a feminine ending such as -in:

- Er ist Engländer.  He is English.
- Sie ist Engländerin.  She is English.
- Er ist Kellner.  He is a waiter.
- Sie ist Kellnerin.  She is a waitress.

For the sake of political correctness and brevity, the following form with an internal capital letter I is sometimes found in some areas of journalism: LehrerIn, SchülerIn. This form stands for der Lehrer and die Lehrerin, der Schüler and die Schülerin. It is not recognized as an official spelling.
In nouns of nationality where the masculine form ends in -e, the final -e is replaced by -in in the feminine form:

Jens ist Däne. Jens ist Danish. (male)
Jytte ist Dänin. Jytte is Danish. (female)
Jozef ist Pole. Jozef is Polish. (male)
Franya ist Polin. Franya is Polish. (female)

NB There are a few exceptions to the above, for example the German words Arzt (doctor), Franzose (Frenchman) and Koch (cook). In these cases not only is -in added, but the vowel preceding the ending is changed by adding the umlaut sign (¨), e.g. a → ä, o → ö, u → ü, as in Ärztin, Französín, Köchin. An umlaut can be put on the letters a, o or u (ä, ö, ü), and this alters the pronunciation (Reference grammar 1.2).

Er ist Koch. He is a cook.
Sie ist Köchin. She is a cook.

PLURAL OF NOUNS

(Reference grammar 2.3)

As in English, most nouns in German can have singular and plural forms. In English, most nouns form their plural by adding -s or -es, but there are a few exceptions such as ox → oxen, mouse → mice, etc.

Unfortunately, the formation of the plural in German is not so simple as in English, and it is always worth checking in a dictionary, where the plural is given in brackets after the noun, e.g. (-e), (-), (-n or -nen), (¨), (¨-er), or (¨-e). The dash in these brackets represents the singular stem of the noun and the additional information is the plural ending; (¨) indicates an added umlaut. The plural (¨-er) is chiefly used with neuter nouns, but der Mann (man) has the plural Männer.

der Ingenieur (-e)

Hans ist Ingenieur. Hans is an engineer.
Hans und Otto sind Ingenieure. Hans and Otto are engineers.
In a mixed group of people the masculine form is used.

**der Mechaniker (-)**

Klaus ist Mechaniker. *Klaus is a mechanic.*  
Klaus und Ilse sind Mechaniker. *Klaus and Ilse are mechanics.*

**die Krankenschwester (-n)**

Inge ist Krankenschwester. *Inge is a nurse.*  
Inge und Beate sind Krankenschwestern. *Inge and Beate are nurses.*

**die Studentin (-nen)**

Karin ist Studentin in München. *Karin is a student in Munich.*  
Karin und Dagmar sind Studentinnen in München. *Karin and Dagmar are students in Munich.*

**der Vater (-)**

Johann ist Vater. *Johann is a father.*  
Johann und Reinhard sind Väter. *Johann and Reinhard are fathers.*

(The ä is pronounced almost like ay in English say.)

**der Arzt (-e)**

Helmut ist Arzt. *Helmut is a doctor.*  
Helmut und Norbert sind Ärzte. *Helmut and Norbert are doctors.*

A few words denoting nationality or a profession form their plurals in German by adding -s, e.g. der Israeli(s), der Pakistani(s):

David ist Israeli. *David is an Israeli.*  
David und Menachem sind Israelis. *David and Menachem are Israelis.*
Akram und Mumtaz sind Pakistanis.

Curiously, there are several nouns which are found only in the singular form in German but which are used in the plural in English, e.g. die Brille (the reading glasses, spectacles), die Hose (the trousers), die Schere (the scissors).

ASKING QUESTIONS (INTERROGATIVE SENTENCES)

It is possible to form questions in German in several ways:

- Reversing the order subject–verb (i.e. by starting the sentence with the verb):

  Sind Sie Amerikaner? Are you American?

  Bist du Schotte? Are you Scottish?

This form is normally answered with ja (yes) or nein (no).

- Using a special question word, known as an interrogative. Most of the German question words (interrogatives) begin with w, the most common being:

  wie? how?
  Wie ist das Klima in Ägypten? What is the climate like in Egypt?

  wo? where?
  Wo ist Namibia, bitte? Where is Namibia, please?

  was? what?
  Was ist die Hauptstadt von Bulgarien? What is the capital of Bulgaria?

  wann? when?
  Wann ist der Nationaltag in der Schweiz? When is Switzerland’s National Day? (literally ‘When is the National Day in Switzerland?’)

  warum? why?
  Warum sind Sie in Ulm? Why are you in Ulm?
In informal speech, one can form a question simply by making a statement followed by a phrase or word such as nicht wahr? (literally not true?) or oder? (literally ‘or?’), or, in Southern Germany and Switzerland, gell or gelt? (right?) and making one’s voice rise at the end of the sentence. The words oder? and gelt? are colloquial, and gell/gelt is not usually written. In English, these are rendered by the so-called tag questions where the pronoun of the sentence is repeated in a question:

Sie sind Schwede, nicht wahr? You’re Swedish, aren’t you?
Sie ist katholisch, oder? She’s Catholic, isn’t she?
Ihr seid evangelisch, gell? You’re Protestant, aren’t you?

The expression gell? (or gelt?) is a regional tag question which is translated as isn’t it?, aren’t you? etc. It comes from the verb gelten (to be valid, to be in force). Gell literally means something like Let it be or (colloquial English) Right?, as in Na, du machst jetzt dein eigenes Bett, gell? (Now, you’ll make your own bed, right?).

NEGATIVE SENTENCES

If you want to negate the verb in a sentence, you use the word nicht (not):

Ich bin nicht aus Russland. I am not from Russia.
Er ist nicht Amerikaner. He is not American.

If you want to negate the noun, i.e. say not a/no in a sentence, you use kein or one of its forms:

Er ist kein Deutscher. He is not a German.
Sie ist keine Mutter. She is not a mother.
Es ist kein Geschenk. It’s not a present.