

Online German course

Level A1 to C1

German declensions (nominative, accusative, dative, genitive)

The nominative case

- A noun or pronoun is in the nominative case when it functions as the subject of the verb. Examples:

Der Hund sitzt im Garten. = The dog is sitting in the garden.

Der Hund is the subject of *sitzt* and is therefore in the nominative case.

Wir wissen nicht, ob unsere Schwester kommen will. = We do not know whether our sister wants to come.

Wir is the subject of *wissen* and is therefore in the nominative, just like *unsere Schwester*, which is the subject of *will*.

- A noun or pronoun is also in the nominative when it functions as a predicate nominative (subject complement) with the stative verbs: *sein* (to be), *bleiben* (to stay / remain), *werden* (to become), *scheinen* (to seem). Examples:

Er ist der beste Skifahrer. = He is the best skier.

der beste Skifahrer is a subject complement of *sein* and is therefore in the nominative case, just like *Er*, which is the subject of *sein*.

Er bleibt der beste Schüler in seiner Schule. = He remains the best student in his school.

der beste Schüler is a complement of *bleiben* and is therefore in the nominative case, just like *Er*, which is the subject of *bleiben*.

The accusative case

- A noun or pronoun is in the accusative case when it follows one of the following prepositions: *bis*, *durch*, *für*, *gegen*, *ohne*, *um*, *entlang* (see the module "Prepositions" to know more about them). Example:

Das Auto fährt durch den Wald. = The car drives through the forest.

den Wald follows the preposition *durch* and is therefore in the accusative case (hence *den* instead of *der*).

- The accusative is also used for the direct object (COD). Examples:

Siehst du das Auto neben dem Baum? = Do you see the car next to the tree?

das Auto is the direct object (you see what? the car) and is therefore in the accusative case.

Sie hat viele Freundinnen. = She has many female friends.

viele Freundinnen is the direct object (she has what? many friends) and is therefore in the accusative.

- If a noun expresses a location or position, it is in the accusative when there is movement toward that location (directive movement). Example:

Der Bus fährt in die Schweiz. = The bus goes to Switzerland.

die Schweiz is a place, and since there is movement toward it, it takes the accusative.

- If a sentence contains a time expression that is NOT introduced by a two-way (mixed, it means it can be followed by either accusative or dative) preposition (auf, an, in, etc.), it is put in the accusative case. Naturally, the accusative is still used after prepositions that always govern the accusative, the dative after those that always govern the dative, and the genitive after those that always govern the genitive.

Example:

Das Kind hat den ganzen Tag geschlafen. = The child slept all day.

den ganzen Tag is a time expression, and since it is not introduced by a preposition, it is in the accusative case (thus *der Tag* becomes *den Tag*)

- The accusative is also used for greetings and wishes. Examples:

Guten Tag! = Good day / Hello

Herzlichen Glückwunsch! = Congratulations! (for a birthday for instance)

The dative case

- A noun or pronoun is in the dative case when it follows one of the following prepositions: *aus, bei, mit, nach, seit, von, and zu*. These are the main prepositions that govern the dative case (see the chapter on prepositions for their usage and a complete list of dative prepositions). Examples:

Die Eltern sind mit den Kindern gekommen. = The parents came with the children.

den Kindern follows the preposition *mit* and is therefore in the dative case. This is why the phrase uses *den Kindern* instead of *die Kinder* (see the declension tables).

- The dative is also used for the indirect object (COI). Example:

Der Mann gibt dem Mädchen ein Geschenk. = The man gives a gift to the girl.

dem Mädchen is the indirect object (to whom?) and is therefore in the dative case.

- If a noun or pronoun denotes a place or position, it is in the dative case when there is no movement toward that place or position (locative complement of place).

Example:

Die Blumen stehen auf dem Tisch. = The flowers are on the table.

dem Tisch indicates a location. The flowers are already on the table; there is no movement toward it. Therefore, *der Tisch* is in the dative case, marked here by *dem*.

- If a sentence contains a time expression introduced by a two-way (mixed, it means it can be followed by either accusative or dative) preposition (*auf, an, in, etc.*), it is used in the dative case. Of course, the accusative is used after prepositions that always govern the accusative, the dative after those that always govern the dative, and the genitive after those that always govern the genitive. Examples with two-way prepositions:

Er fliegt nach Deutschland in mehreren Tagen. = He will fly to Germany in several days.

mehreren Tagen is a time expression, and since it is introduced by the two-way preposition *in*, it is in the dative case.

Im zwei Stunden sind wir in Wien. = We will be in Vienna in two hours.

zwei Stunden is a time expression introduced by *in*, which is why it appears in the dative plural form.

Sie kam am Abend. = She came in the evening.

am Abend is a time expression introduced by *an* (*an dem Abend*), therefore it is in the dative case.

- When expressing a state or feeling, German very often uses the dative case.

Examples

Es geht mir gut. = I am doing well.

Literally: "It goes well to me." Here, *mir* is in the dative case.

Wie geht es ihm? = How is he doing?

ihm is the dative form of *er*.

Ihr ist schlecht. / *Es ist ihr schlecht.* = She feels sick.

Here, *ihr* is the dative form of the feminine singular *sie*.

Careful! Do not confuse this *ihr* with *ihr* meaning "you (plural)" in the nominative or with *ihr* as a possessive determiner meaning "her/their" when the possessor is feminine or plural.

The genitive case

- The genitive case links two nouns together, most often to express an idea of possession. It is always carried by the second noun (the one that "possesses").

Example:

Der Ton des Radios ist furchtbar. = The sound of the radio is terrible.

Here we have "the sound" (first noun), which belongs to "the radio" (second noun). The second noun (the "possessor") takes the genitive case and therefore becomes *des Radios*.

- In these contexts, the genitive can also be replaced by *von* + *dative*. Example:

Der Ton vom Radio ist furchtbar. = The sound of the radio is terrible.

- The genitive case is used after certain prepositions. Among the most common are *außerhalb*, *innerhalb*, *statt*, *trotz*, *während*, and *wegen* (see the module on prepositions for the full list). Examples:

Statt eines Briefes schickte er ihr eine E-Mail. = Instead of a letter, he sent her an email.

Trotz des Regens fand das Festival statt. = Despite the rain, the festival took place.

Good to know! In everyday spoken language, these prepositions are very often followed by the dative case.

- The genitive case is also used after words indicating a quantity or proportion. Examples:

Einige der Verletzten = Some of the injured
der Verletzten is in the genitive because *einige* (some) indicates a quantity of something.

Die Hälfte des Apfels = Half of the apple
des Apfels is in the genitive because *die Hälfte* (half) indicates a quantity of something.