

German Language Basics: A Briefing Document

This briefing document provides an overview of fundamental German language concepts, drawing from initial Duolingo skill guides (Basics 1, Family, Basics 2, Greetings, and Restaurant). It highlights key grammatical rules, pronunciation tips, and essential vocabulary for beginners.

I. Core Grammatical Concepts

A. Capitalisation of Nouns

A distinctive feature of German is the capitalisation of all nouns. This serves as a helpful visual cue for identifying nouns within a sentence.

In German, all nouns (people, places, things) are capitalized. This is actually a handy way of identifying nouns in sentences. (German Skill: Basics 1)

B. Grammatical Gender

Unlike English, German nouns possess grammatical gender, which extends to all nouns, including animals, objects, and places. It is crucial to memorise the gender alongside the noun, as it is not always intuitively obvious.

There are three genders:

Masculine: Uses the definite article 'der' ('the'). Example: der Vater (the father), der Hund (the dog).

Feminine: Uses the definite article 'die' ('the'). Example: die Mutter (the mother), die Katze (the cat).

Neuter: Uses the definite article 'das' ('the'). Example: das Brot (the bread), das Sandwich (the sandwich).

The indefinite article also changes based on gender:

ein Vater = a father (masculine)

eine Mutter = a mother (feminine)

ein Ei = an egg (neuter)

C. The Verb 'to be' (sein)

The German verb 'sein' ('to be') is highly irregular, similar to its English equivalent. Beginners must memorise its singular forms:

ich bin = I am
du bist = you are
er/sie/es ist = he/she/it is

II. Pronunciation Guidelines

A. Consonant Sounds

w: Pronounced like the English 'v'. Example: Wasser sounds like 'vaser'.
j: Pronounced like the English 'y'. Example: ja sounds like 'ya'.
tsch: Similar to the 'ch' sound in 'cheddar' or 'chew'.
v: Pronounced like an 'f'. Example: Vogel (bird) sounds like 'fohgul'.
ch: Similar to gently clearing one's throat. Examples: wach, ich.

B. Vowel Sounds (including Umlauts)

a: 'ah' sound.
ä: Pronounced like the name of the letter 'A'.
o: Long 'o' sound, like in 'zone' when followed by 'h'.
ö: Round your mouth for an 'oo' sound, then try to say 'uh'.
u: Round your mouth for an 'oo' sound, then try to say 'ee'.
ei: Pronounced like 'I'. Example: Ei (egg).

C. The 'h' Indicator

An 'h' following a vowel often indicates that the preceding vowel is held for a longer duration.

Example: A lot of German words seemingly have an extra 'h' in them, but this indicates that the vowel before it is held for a little longer than usual. (German Skill:Greetings)

III. Essential Vocabulary and Phrases

A. Greetings and Farewells

Informal:

hallo = hello

tschüss = bye

Formal:

guten Tag = hello, good afternoon

guten Morgen = good morning

guten Abend = good evening

auf Wiedersehen = goodbye

Other common phrases:

wie geht's? = how are you?

es geht = it's okay

gut = good

super = great

bitte = please

danke = thanks

ja = yes

nein = no

und = and

oder = or

prost = cheers

bis bald = see you soon

bis später = see you later (today)

es tut mir leid = I'm sorry

kein Problem = no problem

natürlich = of course

Entschuldigung = excuse me

B. Family Members

der Vater = father

die Mutter = mother

der Bruder = brother

die Schwester = sister

der Sohn = son

die Tochter = daughter

der Mann = man, husband

die Frau = woman, wife

C. Basic Nouns

der Kaffee = coffee

die Milch = milk

das Brot = bread

der Tee = tea

das Wasser = water

der Wein = wine

das Bier = beer

der Hund = dog

die Katze = cat

der Elefant = elephant

die Eule = owl
die Maus = mouse
der Bär = bear
die Pizza = pizza
der Käse = cheese
der Salat = salad
das Sandwich = sandwich
das Ei = egg
das Mineralwasser = mineral water
der Kellner = waiter
das Restaurant = restaurant
das Salz = salt
die Speisekarte = menu
das Essen = food
die Wurst = sausage
die Rechnung = bill
das Schnitzel = schnitzel

D. Adjectives and Other Words

jung = young
schön = beautiful
wo? = where?
oh! = oh!
groß = tall, big
klug = smart
nett = nice
sehr = very
ist = is
mit = with
heiß = hot
lecker = delicious
hier = here
kalt = cold
zu = too