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