



They need time in order to grow. We give it to them.
The future has been with us for a long time. [Ad for the coal industry]

Note: The following description is meant to be a part of the broader discussion of word order that is found in "[Main clauses.](#)" Both are conceptual in nature. Those who would prefer to follow a more mechanical - but ultimately less complete - set of rules would be better served by linking to these [prescriptive instructions for German word order](#). Both sites overlap considerably.

Infinitive Clauses

In both English and German, infinitive clauses are a kind of dependent clause in which there is no grammatical subject, only an implied one, and therefore the verb is not inflected. An infinitive clause is particularly dependent on the main clause of the sentence for its meaning. Only through it can one find the necessary context for understanding the infinitive clause.

The infinitive, which is combined with "zu", goes to the end of the clause:

Es wundert mich, **meine Mutter hier zu sehen**.
It surprises me to see my mother here.
Er hat vergessen, **seiner Freundin etwas zum Geburtstag zu kaufen**.
He forgot to buy his girlfriend something for her birthday.

If the verb in question has a separable prefix, the *zu* goes between the prefix and the stem (e.g. *anzufangen* [to begin], *zuzumachen* [to close]).

Traditionally, an infinitive clause that contains only the verb and possibly an adverb is not set off by a comma, while those with other elements are:

Das ist schwer **zu machen**.
That's hard to do.
Er hat vor, **eine Torte zu backen**.
He intends to bake a cake.

More recent punctuation rules are more lax, but it is safe to go by the general rule that longer infinitive clauses are set off by a comma.

Note also that infinitive clause itself, like any other dependent clause, can occupy the first position of the main clause and can even function as its subject:

Ein Buch zu schreiben ist keine leichte Sache.
To write a book is no easy thing.

Um einen guten Eindruck zu machen, bringt er seiner zukünftigen Schwiegermutter Blumen mit.
In order to make a good impression, he brings his future mother-in-law flowers.

It can be useful to view infinitive clauses as being transformed from main clauses. To make the transition, one drops the subject and converts the finite verb to an infinitive, which goes to the end of the clause. (Note that in some cases one of the negatives must also be dropped in order to retain the intended meaning):

Es ist schön. Wir gehen an einem heißen Sommertag schwimmen.
Es ist schön, an einem heißen Sommertag schwimmen zu gehen.
It's nice to go swimming on a hot summer's day.

Er versucht. Er bindet sich die Schuhe mit einer Hand.
Er versucht, sich die Schuhe mit einer Hand zu binden.
He tries to tie his shoes with one hand.

Ich habe keine Lust. Ich helfe ihm nicht. [Note the meaning!]
Ich habe keine Lust ihm zu helfen.
I have no desire to help him.

Es war meine Gewohnheit. Ich stehe früh auf.
Es war meine Gewohnheit früh aufzustehen.
It was my habit to get up early

Man wird Vater. Es ist nicht schwer.
Vater zu werden ist nicht schwer
It's not hard to become a father.

Es muss schön sein. Man kann gut Klavier spielen.
Es muss schön sein, gut Klavier spielen zu können.
It must be nice to be able to play the piano well.

Grammatical tense in infinitive clauses: In the above examples, the infinitive clauses contain only an indeterminate tense. In the sentence, "Es war meine Gewohnheit früh aufzustehen", the temporal context is provided by the [simple-past](#) form of the finite verb in the main clause ("Es **war** meine Gewohnheit"). Presumably the early rising also took place in the past, but only logic suggests that, not the grammatical structure of the infinitive clause ("früh aufzustehen").

The one other temporal distinction that an infinitive clause can make is through a structure that draws on a [perfect tense](#). By combining a past participle with the appropriate auxiliary verb, the clause can indicate that the action it describes took place in the past. There is, on the other hand, no equivalent way to indicate a future action:

Sie freut sich. Sie hat ihr Referat schon fertiggeschrieben.
Sie freut sich, ihr Referat schon fertiggeschrieben zu haben.
She's happy to have finished writing her paper.

German uses **um ... zu** in order to express intention. This construction can usually be translated by "in order to":

Sie kommen nach Deutschland. Sie wollen Musik studieren.
Sie kommen nach Deutschland, um Musik zu studieren.
They're coming to Germany in order to study music.

Er trainiert jeden Tag. Er will besser Fußball spielen können.
Er trainiert jeden Tag, um besser Fußball spielen zu können.
He practices every day in order to be able to play soccer better.

„Ich möchte unser neues Traumhaus genießen – ohne ständig an die Finanzierung denken zu müssen.“

I'd like to enjoy our new dream house - without constantly having to think about the financing.

ohne ... zu and **(an)statt ... zu**: There is a further opportunity to use infinitive clauses in German where English builds prepositional phrases with gerunds:

Er ging nach Hause, ohne ein Wort zu sagen.
He went home without saying a word.

Sie hat mir verziehen, ohne meine Ausrede gehört zu haben.
She forgave me without having heard my excuse.

Statt zu arbeiten ging sie ins Kino.
Instead of working, she went to the movies.

Anstatt zu telefonieren haben wir eine E-mail geschickt.
Instead of telephoning, we sent an e-mail.

Sehr geehrte Besucher!

Wir möchten, dass Sie sich bei uns wohl fühlen. Deswegen haben wir einige Regeln aufgestellt, die für den gesamten Bereich des Schloss-Strassen-Centers gelten und deren Einhaltung wir streng verfolgen.

Dear Visitors, we would like you to feel comfortable with us. Therefore we have put some rules in place that apply to the entirety of the Schloss Straße (shopping) Center and to which we strictly adhere.

In English, in order to state a desire for someone else to do something, we make the other person the object of the verb "to want" (or some equivalent) and attach an infinitive construction: "I want you to clean up your room." German, in contrast, requires that the other person be the subject of a [dependent clause](#) that begins with "dass" and is the object of "wollen":



We want you to live safely. Your police.

Ich will, dass du dein Zimmer aufräumst.
I want you to clean up your room.

Sie möchte, dass er nach Hause anruft.
She would like him to call home.

Wollen Sie, dass ich Ihnen helfe?
Do you want me to help you?

Wir wollen, dass sie kocht.
We want her to cook.

Sie will, dass ich die ganze Arbeit mache.
She wants me to do all the work.