German Personal Pronouns

At this stage in learning German, you likely have a nice bit of German nouns under your belt — great job!

BUT it stinks to always sound like you're reading out of a 1st grade book: The girl is tall. The girl is kind. I like the girl. Do you like the girl?

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Using PERSONAL PRONOUNS — little words that *replace* people (like 'she' replacing 'the girl') — is one of the ways to start sounding a lot more authentic when you're speaking German.

Even just *She is tall. She is nice. I like her. Do you like her?* is quite a bit better, right?!

The Basics of Personal Pronouns.

In English & in German, personal pronouns are used all. the. time.

Personal pronouns (for example, *she*) are used to *replace* names or even entire (<– sometimes really long) noun phrases:

Sally → she
The girl → she
The tall, kind girl that I like but you don't → she

These are important, time-saving little words!

BUT there using personal pronouns in German can definitely be more challenging than English…

Why German personal pronouns are tricky for English speakers:

1. **German has more personal pronoun [cases](#).**
   In English, we have the personal pronouns we use when someone is the subject of the sentence: *I, you, he, she, it, we, they.*

Then, we have the pronouns for anytime the person is NOT the subject of the sentence: *me, you, him, her, it, us, them*.

German has subject pronouns, too: *ich, du, er, sie, es, wir, ihr, sie, Sie*.

But there are TWO varieties of non-subject pronouns (<– called *[accusative](#)* and [dative personal pronouns)](#). And these are used at very distinct times.

2. **German has 4 different types of 'you'.**

   In English, we have just YOU. And that's all we use, for anyone, ever.

   German has an *informal* version of 'you' (*du*) and a *formal* one (*Sie*).

   Then, there are *singular* versions AND *plural* versions of both!

3. **German has 1 pronoun that has 3 different meanings.**

   [The German sie / Sie can mean she, they, or You (formal).](#) YIKES.

4. **German has 3 different types of 'it'.**

   English uses the pronoun 'it' for all objects. But German has a *masculine* 'it', a *feminine* 'it', and a *neuter* 'it' to use with *masculine / feminine / neuter* objects.

   This ties into [why it's so important to learn all German nouns with their genders](#).

Have I mentioned that German personal pronouns are tricky??

Good news! This essential guide to German personal pronouns is going to walk you through everything you need to know, step-by-step.

How Personal Pronouns Work in German

What Are the German Personal Pronouns?

The best way to learn personal pronouns is to see them listed side-by-side in the 3 main cases ([nominative](#), [accusative](#), [dative](#)).

Personal Pronouns

German with Laura

		Nom	Acc	Dat
Singular	1st	ich	mich	mir
	2nd	du	dich	dir
		Sie	Sie	Ihnen
	3rd	er	ihn	ihm
		sie	sie	ihr
		es	es	ihm
Plural	1st	wir	uns	uns
	2nd	ihr	euch	euch
		Sie	Sie	Ihnen
	3rd	sie	sie	ihnen

On some level, you do have to simply memorize these pronouns. BUT there are some shortcuts (reading *Digging Deeper* below) so that you can memorize fewer.

Now What?

If you feel like you're getting the gist of the above, you should be ready to move on to the next sections.

There, we'll answer questions we need to address to apply personal pronouns to your German.

1. **Which *person* is the noun in?**
2. **Which *case* is the noun in?**
3. **IF the noun is an object**, which *gender* does it have?

When Do I Use Which Pronoun?

—

As mentioned above, to always select the correct personal pronoun in German, you need to know 2 (or 3) things about the noun you're wanting to replace with a pronoun.

1. **Which *person* is the noun in?** 1st? 2nd? 3rd? Singular? Plural?
2. **Which *case* is the noun in?** Nominative? Accusative? Dative?
3. **IF the noun is an object** (in the 3rd person singular), **which *gender* does it have?**

1. How to Know the *Person* of Your Noun

We have to get a little deeper into grammar here, but it's worth it: the terminology of 'person' is something you will use a lot in learning German (or any other foreign language) and it's not hard anyway. You can do it!

There are 3 'persons': *1st, 2nd,* and *3rd.*

Those 3 'persons' get split into 2 subcategories: *singular* and *plural.*

This table of English pronouns will hopefully make sense, but we'll break it down in a sec:

English Personal Pronouns	German with Laura	
	Singular	**Plural**
1st	I	we
2nd	you	you
3rd	he / she / it	they

What is the 1st Person?

Get egotistical for a moment now: *you* are the '1st person' (singular). That's why the 1st person pronouns are *I* and *me* (*ich, mich/mir*).

Likewise, the '1st person *plural*' is for a group of 2+ people that *includes you* — a.k.a. *we, us* (*wir, uns*).

What is the 2nd Person?

Then, if you imagine that you (1st person) are talking to someone else … that someone else is the *2nd person.* If you're talking directly to one person, you would use the 2nd person *singular* (you / du) and the *plural* (you / ihr), if you're talking to 2+ people.

Remember from above that this *du / ihr* difference is one of the 4 reasons German pronouns are tricky — we don't have an official 2nd Person Plural form in English (at least outside of Texas 😉). When I'm explaining it, though, I use 'you all' or even 'y'all' in my examples).

Remember, too, that in German we have the *formal* 2nd Person (*Sie*) and the *informal* (*du*) plus their plural forms! Again, this is tricky because we don't have an English equivalent (however, if you know any Spanish, it's *Sie = Usted* and *du = tu*).

What is the 3rd Person?

Finally, if you (1st Person) are talking to/with someone (2nd Person) *about* someone else (a '3rd party, if you will), that *someone else* is the 3rd Person!

Of course, just like in the other examples, you have the singular version (talking about a *him, her,* or *it*) and a plural [2+] version (talking about *them*).

German Nominative Personal Pronouns

It's helpful to know the grammar terminology for 'person', especially in those instances where there are differences between English & German (e.g. all the forms of 'you' English doesn't have).

But perhaps the fastest way to be sure of the person (1st, 2nd, 3rd; singular, plural) of your noun is to know the basic *nominative* personal pronouns (in English & German) like the back of your hand.

Then, if you know which pronoun you'd use in English, you can know which German one to use!

So, what are 'nominative personal pronouns'? They are the pronouns we use for whoever is the *subject* of the sentence (and are therefore also called 'subject pronouns'). Nominative personal pronouns (just like the names or noun phrases they replace) will always pair with a conjugated verb to denote the action the subject is taking. [Learn more about German Verb Conjugations here](#)!

Look at English & German nominative / subject personal pronouns side-by-side:

Nominative Personal Pronouns Side-by-side

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Person		English		German
Singular	1st	I	→	ich
	2nd	you (informal)	→	du
		You (formal)	→	Sie
	3rd	he	→	er
		she	→	sie
		it	→	es
Plural	1st	we	→	wir
	2nd	you all (informal)	→	ihr
		You all (formal)	→	Sie
	3rd	they	→	sie

In any sentence, you have to know whether you're trying to say *I* see the dog vs. *You* see the dog, *He* sees the dog, etc.

If you still don't know which subject pronoun you need, try answering these questions to figure it out:

How to know if you're using the right pronoun:

1st Person Singular
Question: Can you fill in that slot in the sentence *with your own name*?

1st Person Plural
Question: Are you talking about a group of 2+ people that *includes yourself?*

2nd Person Singular
Question: Are you talking *directly* to that person?

2nd Person Plural
Question: Are you talking *directly* to a group of 2+ people?

3rd Person Singular
Question: Are you talking to someone *about* someone else?

3rd Person Plural
Question: Are you talking to someone *about* a group of 2+ people?

Note: [Accusative Pronouns](#) and [Dative Pronouns](#) are covered separately!

2. How To Know The Case Of Your Noun

After you know exactly which *person* your noun is in (1st, 2nd, 3rd; singular, plural), you still need to figure out *which case* your noun is in.

There are two great ways of doing this.

1. If you're in the process of *creating* the sentence, it's best to think about *which role* your noun needs to play and then put your noun into the corresponding case.
2. If the sentence is already formed (you just want to replace the noun with a pronoun), you can [look at the *declensions* on the words coming in front of the noun → these declensions signal the noun's *case.*](#)

So, you can work *forwards* by figuring out the noun's *role* as the means to select its case...
OR you can work *backwards* by looking at nearby declensions to decipher the noun's case.

A. Roles Nouns Play In A Sentence

Let's look first at how to determine *which role* a noun plays in a given sentence.

There are 3 main roles we're concerned with right now: *subject, direct object,* and *indirect object.*

Whatever *role* a noun has, it has to be *[put in the case that reflects that role](#)*.

For example, if your noun is the *subject*, it has to be put into the *nominative case.*

Case	Role	Description
nominative	subject	takes action
accusative	direct object	receives action
dative	indirect object	to/for whom action is taken
genitive	possessive	indicates owner of someone/something

In English, we rarely make a distinction between *direct* and *indirect* objects — for us, objects are just objects.

But in German, this difference between the accusative case & dative case is still crucial.

You can see this spelled out by looking at this side-by-side chart of English & German personal pronouns according to *case*:

Personal Pronouns

German with **Laura**

		Nom	Acc	Dat
Singular	1st	ich	mich	mir
	2nd	du	dich	dir
		Sie	Sie	Ihnen
	3rd	er	ihn	ihm
		sie	sie	ihr
		es	es	ihm
Plural	1st	wir	uns	uns
	2nd	ihr	euch	euch
		Sie	Sie	Ihnen
	3rd	sie	sie	ihnen

Both German & English have unique nominative personal pronouns.

Then, German *continues* to have separate pronouns for the accusative vs. dative cases (e.g. mich vs. mir, ihn vs. ihm). These are then 'direct object pronouns' and 'indirect object pronouns', respectively.

But, in English, the accusative & dative pronouns have the same translation (e.g. me & me, him & him) because in English there is no difference between the two — they both are the same 'object' (vs. subject) pronouns.

It's fairly easy to know when to use the subject pronouns in either English or German, and we've talked about that above.

Knowing when to use the German accusative or dative pronouns, though, is harder. Luckily, there are [some tips & tricks](#) to help out us English-speakers who aren't used to an accusative vs. dative distinction!

B. [Declensions that signal the *case* of your noun](#)

The *case* of each noun is signaled by the words that come directly in front of it.

There are two types of words that come in front of nouns: *determiners* & *adjectives.*

Determiners: *a, the, some, few, this,* etc. that tell us *how many* of the noun or *which one.*

Adjectives: *describe some feature of the noun* (e.g. big, small, round, flat, blue).

Determiners & adjectives take little changes called *declensions* (**bolded**):

Di**e** groß**e** weiß**e** Gans schnattert mit eine**r** kleine**n** gelbe**n** Ente.
(The big, white goose gaggled with the small, yellow duck.)

Declensions are just single letters (^^ -r, -e, -n) that get added to the ends of determiners (^^ the, a) and adjectives (^^ big, white, small, yellow).

There are 3 *types* of declensions (none, strong, & weak) that you can see reflected in this All-In-One Declensions Chart:

All-In-One German Declensions Chart
Articles • Other Determiners • Adjective Endings

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Ⓝ no declension   🏴 strong declension   🏳 weak declension

	Masc. 🏴	Masc. 🏳	Fem. 🏴	Fem. 🏳	Neut.	Neut. 🏴	Neut. 🏳	Plural 🏴	Plural 🏳
Nom.	Ⓝ	r	e	e	e	Ⓝ s	e	e	n
Acc.		n	n	e	e	Ⓝ s	e	e	n
Dat.		m	n	r	n		m	n	n	n
Gen.		s	n	r	n		s	n	r	n

If you need to know the case that a noun has already been put into (so that you can replace the noun with the correct pronoun), then you can 'work backward' by looking at the declensions on this chart to analyze which case (nominative, accustive, dative) your noun is in.

3. How to Know the *Gender* of Your Noun

> *REMEMBER: This topic of pronoun gender is relevant ONLY if your pronoun is replacing an object (which are always in the 3rd Person Singular or Plural).*

Knowing the gender of monosyllabic German nouns (e.g. *Tisch, Stuhl, Wand, Bild*, etc.) is pretty tricky — these nouns should definitely be memorized with the *der, die, das* in front of them.

BUT if the noun has a suffix (e.g. *-ling, -heit, -ment,* etc.), you can successfully relate it to one gender (masculine vs. feminine vs. neuter) up to 100% of the time, dependent on the suffix.

There are also some noun groups (e.g. months of the year) that are comprised of nouns all (or with few exceptions) taking the same gender.

Of course, if you don't have the noun's gender memorized and neither a suffix nor a particular noun group can help you out either, you can always look the noun up in a German dictionary!

Learn Pronouns Smarter, Not Harder

You saw this chart (unmarked) above. But we can simplify it a bit yet!

Personal Pronouns   German with Laura

		Nom	Acc	Dat
Singular	1st	ich	mich	mir
	2nd	du	dich	dir
		~~Sie~~	~~Sie~~	~~Ihnen~~
	3rd	er	ihn	ihm
		sie	sie	ihr
		es	es	ihm
Plural	1st	wir	uns	uns
	2nd	ihr	euch	euch
		~~Sie~~	~~Sie~~	~~Ihnen~~
	3rd	sie	sie	ihnen

We can talk about some *patterns*, so you have to memorize *even fewer* of these pronouns.

1. Notice all the spots where the pronoun is doubled (e.g. *uns, uns, euch euch*). That's easier to remember!

2. *mich-dich* and *mir-dir* are kinda matched, in a rhyming sort of way!
3. Since the formal You (*Sie*) has the same forms as *sie* (they), I recommend scratching the two You-*Sie*s from the chart in your mind (there's *definitely* no need to remember the singular & plural forms since they're the same!) & just remembering to use the same forms as *sie* (they) whenever you need to say You, formal (*Sie*).
4. Best of all: the 3rd person singular personal pronouns line up exactly with the Masc. / Fem. / Neut. strong declensions in our [All-In-One Declensions Chart](#) (abbreviated):

All-In-One German Declensions Chart
(Weak declensions omitted)

German with Laura

🚫 no declension   🚩 strong declension

	Masc. 🚫	Masc. 🚩	Fem. 🚩	Neut. 🚫	Neut. 🚩	Plural 🚩
Nom.	🚫	r	e	🚫	s	e
Acc.		n	e	🚫	s	e
Dat.		m	r		m	n
Gen.		s	r		s	r

Do you see how the 3rd person *masculine* pronouns (*er, ihn, ihm*) have the same -r, -n, -m strong declensions listed under the masculine nom. / acc. / dat.?

Similarly, the 3rd person singular *feminine* pronouns (*sie, sie, ihr*) line up perfectly with the strong -e, -e, and -r declensions for the nom. / acc. / dat. in the feminine column!

And, that's right: it's *the same thing* for the 3rd person singular *neuter* pronouns (*es, es, ihm*). We see exactly those same -s, -s, -m strong declensions in the neuter column. NICE.

The crazy deal with 'sie / Sie' in German

You can see in this marked up version of the pronouns chart that we have THREE different 'sie's!

Personal Pronouns

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		Nom	Acc	Dat
Singular	1st	ich	mich	mir
	2nd	du	dich	dir
		Sie	Sie	Ihnen
	3rd	er	ihn	ihm
		sie	sie	ihr
		es	es	ihm
Plural	1st	wir	uns	uns
	2nd	ihr	euch	euch
		Sie	Sie	Ihnen
	3rd	sie	sie	ihnen

1. *Sie (2nd person singular / plural) → *You [formal] / *You (2+) [formal]
2. sie (3rd person singular) → she
3. sie (3rd person plural → they

*NOTE: the formal 'you' is ALWAYS capitalized in German. In English, I like to capitalize it, too — You vs. you — just to help make the distinction when teaching this concept.

She and *they* have their own spots on the chart — no problem.

But the formal 'You' is a hard one.

In a way, since it's the 2nd person singular / plural, it should not only be listed TWICE (<– if we're being thorough), but it should be up in the 2nd person parts of the chart.

HOWEVER, the different forms of *Sie* (You [formal], singular/plural) are *exactly the same* as the *sie* (= they [3rd person plural]). So in some ways, it would make sense to list *Sie* there in the chart.

In the end, what I recommend is to NOT officially list the *Sie* anywhere. Instead just remember:

1. It means 'You' [formal] no matter how many people you're talking to.
2. Its forms are just like 'they': *sie* (nominative), *sie* (accusative), *ihnen* (dative), just capitalized!

Main Takeaways

1. Pronouns are handy, efficient, little words used to *replace* nouns (e.g. names) and even entire *noun phrase* (e.g. the beautiful, tall, dark green tree → *it*).
2. German & English *use* pronouns the same way EXCEPT that German has a *whole additional category* of pronouns that English doesn't:

What in English are just 'object pronouns' (e.g. me, him, her, etc) get split up into 2 groups in German (e.g. mich / mir, ihn / ihm, sie / ihr) that then are used in very specific, different contexts. This is often very confusing for English-speakers at first!

1. There are patterns and other tips & tricks that make learning German pronouns easier.
2. The best way to learn German pronouns is with a side-by-side chart where you see it all listed out (and can make a mental note of those

patterns, etc.^^)

3. To pick the correct pronoun you need, you need to know the *person* and *case* of the noun you're replacing.
4. When using a pronoun to replace *an object*, you also have to know the *gender* of that noun (e.g. *der Tisch* [masculine]) so that you can use the version of 'it' that has that same gender (e.g. *er / ihn / ihm,* dependent on which *case* the *Tisch* is in — see previous point!)

German pronouns are additionally tricky because some (*sie*) have multiple meanings and others have 3 different versions (e.g. *du / ihr / Sie*) when in English we have just 1 (*you*).

ON THIS PAGE

PRONOUNS

[German Accusative Pronouns](#)

[German Dative Pronouns](#)

[German Possessive Pronouns](#)

[German Reflexive Pronouns](#)

[German Relative Pronouns](#)

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