German Accusative Pronouns

Are you tired of sounding like a 7-year old learning how to read?

Working on using pronouns to replace nouns can really bring your German up to the next level.

Frank has a dog. Frank likes his dog. The dog likes Frank. ← Yikes.

Your German will sound more authentic if you don't repeat all those nouns, but use pronouns instead (e.g. Frank likes him).

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Finally understand hard-to-grasp German grammar concepts.

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‐ 10 minute read

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Learning what the German accusative pronouns *are* is pretty simple … learning *when to use them* … well, I'm going to try to make that as EASY as possible.

You'll learn the following:

- **What are the German accusative pronouns?**
- **How do I know when to use the accusative instead of nominative?**
- **How do I know when to use the accusative instead of dative?**

The Basics of German Accusative Pronouns

If you've read my [overview guide on Personal Pronouns](#), you know that pronouns are little words that *replace* nouns or entire noun phrases, e.g.

Frank → *he*
My old friend Frank → *he*
Frank, the nice, tall, balding man over there who is my old friend from high school → *he*

Especially when you're replacing a LOT of words, pronouns come in very handy!

English vs. German Pronouns

Good News: for the most part, English & German pronouns are more similar than different.

Both languages have pronouns such as *I, you, he, she, we, they, us, me, him,* etc. And both languages use them the same way (to replace names, nouns, and noun phrases).

But of course, we couldn't get off quite that easily!

There are a handful of ways that [German pronouns are trickier than English ones](#). For starters, German has a whole additional category of pronouns than English does (I'll show you what I mean in a bit).

First, we have to quickly lay the foundation with *nominative* pronouns.

German & English both have *nominative pronouns* or 'subject pronouns'. Here's a look at them side-by-side:

Nominative Personal Pronouns Side-by-side		German with Laura	
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

These are the pronouns that are used to talk about the *subject* of the sentence, e.g.

I like to ride bike — **Ich** fahre gern Fahrrad.
You need to brush your teeth — **Du** musst dir die Zähne putzen.
You (formal) are most welcome here — **Sie** heißen hier herzlich willkommen!
He plays viola quite well — **Er** spielt gut Bratsche.
She enjoys juggling — **Sie** mag das Jonglieren.

Think of each of these sentences ^^ as having 'slots' that get filled up with nouns.

The most important slot — that gets filled up first — is the *nominative.* Whatever noun (or pronoun) is the *subject* of your sentence goes into that slot (usually the very first word in the sentence!), for example:

Frank drives.
NOM

Hopefully, nominative case pronouns are making sense. Now, you're ready to talk about the difference between nominative and accusative pronouns (that's why you're here after all!)
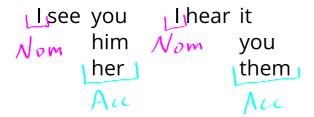
Nominative vs. Accusative Pronouns

Nominative personal pronouns replace the *subject* of the sentence. That's easy enough. But what do accusative pronouns replace?

Answer: the *direct object* of the sentence.

Yeek. If that suddenly makes your blood run cold (it's 5th English class all over again … RUN!), you're not alone. Let's quickly break this down by looking at the [case and *role* that nouns](#) (and pronouns) can have:

How Nouns Work in a Sentence

German with Laura

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

Now, read these sentences with *direct object pronouns* (only English examples for now!):

I see you   I hear it
Nom him   Nom you
      her   them
       Acc   Acc

Can you see how 'I' is the *subject* (nominative 'slot' [*case*]) of the sentence each time? The person *taking action* or *doing something*?

All the italicized *direct object* (accusative case) pronouns are the people who *receive action.* They *are being seen* or *heard* (by the subject!).

OK, all of that is not so bad! Choosing nominative vs. accusative pronouns = EASY. Got it.

Accusative vs. Dative Pronouns

But now here's the rub:

English has 'object' pronouns (*me, you, him, her, it, us, you [all], them* that you saw above) that get used for BOTH the accusative AND dative cases.

German, however, splits the 'object' pronouns into TWO groups: *accusative* ('direct object') pronouns and *dative* ('indirect object' pronouns).

You can see this difference between English & German laid out in this graphic:

English vs. German Case Systems

German with Laura

German	or	English	Role
nominative		subjective	subject
accusative			direct object
dative		objective	indirect object
genitive		genitive	possessive

So, in English we have just the one set of 'object' pronouns that covers both the accusative & dative cases (which, in English, are collectively called the *objective* case).

But, to speak German, we have to learn how to make the distinction between accusative & dative. And this difference impacts many words — including pronouns.

Here are the *nominative, accusative,* AND *dative* personal pronouns side-by-side:

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

Now what?

You have the basic *theory* of accusative pronouns down — you understand *what* they are and the similarities and differences between English & German. But now we need some examples!

Keep reading for the practical whens & hows of accusative pronouns: when exactly do you use them (<– there's a rule for that) and how do you pick the right one (<– we'll hash that out, too).

We'll also suss out areas of common confusion & mistakes so you can avoid those pitfalls!

When to Use Accusative Pronouns

How do you know [when to use the accusative](#)pronouns vs. the nominative or dative ones?

Fortunately, there are some quick-and-easy rules for that!

It's really just a matter of sentence structure. For a basic sentence, we need 1-2 components:

1. First, fill up the nominative 'slot' with your subject noun / pronoun
2. Then, *default* to putting the very next noun / pronoun into the accusative case ('slot')

That's not so bad! And the key exception to #2 is this: [some particular (<– read: memorizable) verbs, adjectives, and prepositions require that the following noun be in the *dative* case](#).

Now, look at these German examples of this two-part rule in play (accusative is *italicized*):

1. Ich kaufe *den Apfel* — I buy the apple.
2. Ich höre *das Mäuschen* — I hear the little mouse.
3. Ich sehe *die Blume* — I see the flower.

In each of these sentences, you can see:

- *ich* (<– pronoun) is the subject, in the nominative case ('slot')
- the conjugated verb (e.g. *kaufe)* comes next

- the 2nd noun (*Apfel, Blume*, etc.) is in the accusative case ('slot')

NOTE: if you don't understand why there are different versions of the word 'the', [read my *Der Die Das* guide!](#)

Now that you understand the basic rule of WHEN to use accusative pronouns, let's look at HOW.

How would we take those same four examples, but replace the accusative nouns (e.g. apple, mouse, etc.) with accusative pronouns?

How to pick the right accusative pronoun

We have already established that you can assume that the 2nd noun in your sentence is in the accusative case.

The first noun is the subject (nominative case) and then we default to the next noun being a direct object (accusative case).

That narrows down our pronoun options to just those listed under 'Acc', but how do you know which one of those to pick?

When you're first learning accusative pronouns, you will probably think of them with their English equivalents:

Accusative Personal Pronouns Side-by-side

German with Laura

Person		English		German
Singular	1st	me	→	mich
	2nd	you (informal)	→	dich
		You (formal)	→	Sie
	3rd	him	→	ihn
		her	→	sie
		it	→	es
Plural	1st	us	→	uns
	2nd	you all (informal)	→	euch
		You all (formal)	→	Sie
	3rd	them	→	sie

To make sure you're supposed to use an accusative pronoun (vs. a nominative or dative), 'plug' an accusative pronoun into this short sentence: *I see ....* (accusative pronoun).

If it makes sense, then you know if you're using the correct category of pronoun. For example, we can say *I see **them.*** But we can't say *I see **they*** (<– that's a nominative pronoun!).

Hopefully the concept of how to use accusative pronouns when talking about people seems pretty straightforward to you now.

BUT now we need to talk about two extra-tricky aspects of accusative pronouns.

Accusative Pronouns: Common Pitfalls

There are a few things about accusative pronouns that frequently trip students up.

We already talked above about the difference between accusative & dative pronouns and general points on when to use which.

But that still leaves us with these points:

- [how many 'sie' pronouns are floating all over the place.](#)
- the various ways to say 'you' (compared to just our 1 way in English!)
- the masculine, feminine, and neuter versions of 'it' (read below!)

Gendered Pronouns

Using accusative pronouns to talk about people — *her, him, them,* etc. — is not so bad!

But sometimes we're talking about *objects* (e.g. I buy *an apple*. I love *the pictures*).

And this is a bit trickier because German is a language with *noun gender* — even for objects.

In English, all things are just 'it'. But German has a masculine 'it', a feminine 'it', and a neuter 'it'.

This means that if you're replacing a masculine noun object with a pronoun, the pronoun *also* has to be masculine. Then, same thing for feminine noun objects / pronouns and neuter noun objects / pronouns.

Thankfully, this issue is relevant ONLY in the 3rd person singular and I'll show you a shortcut for how to remember the different, gendered versions of 'it' (keep reading!).

Examples of masculine, feminine, and neuter 'it's

Here are our same 3 example sentences from above, but with the gendered pronouns ('it') (**bolded**) now!

Ich kaufe *den Apfel* → Ich kaufe ***ihn***(I buy *the apple* / '***him***' [it])
Ich höre *das Mäuschen* → Ich höre ***es*** (I hear *the little mouse* / ***it***)
Ich sehe *die Blume* → Ich sehe***sie***(I see *the flower* → I see '***her***' [it])

Let's break down the components for the accusative nouns in our example sentences.

den Apfel — a **masculine** noun put into the accusative case
das Mäuschen — a **neuter** noun put into the accusative case
die Blume — a **feminine** noun put into the accusative case

All of these nouns are non-people. In English, we would refer to all of them as 'it'. In German, we use 'it', too — but the *gendered* forms of it!

den Apfel (masculine accusative) → *ihn*
das Mäuschen (neuter accusative) → *es*
die Blume (feminine accusative) → *sie*

This is the part of the pronouns chart we're talking about:

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

Look at the examples again with their 'person' labels so you can see how it relates to the table:

Ich kaufe *den Apfel* → Ich kaufe *ihn* (<– 3rd person singular, masculine)
Ich höre *das Mäuschen* → Ich höre *es* (<– 3rd person singular, neuter)

Ich sehe *die Frau* → Ich sehe *sie* (<– 3rd person singular, feminine)

Thinking about needing to use different forms of 'it' that have gender is a bit of a stretch for English speakers.

Not to mention that *remembering* the various 'it' pronouns (not just in the accusative case, but in the nominative & dative, too) can feel pretty hard at first.

Good News: I have a helpful tip for you!

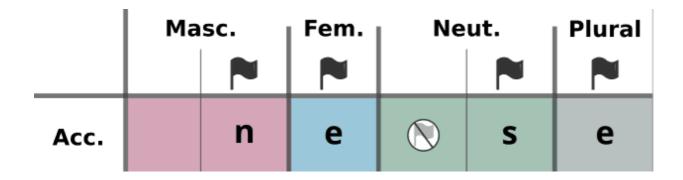## How Gendered Accusative Pronouns Relate to the Accusative Case

If you haven't had a chance to look at my [Accusative Case Guide](#), I totally recommend that! Understanding more about the accusative case in general will help you will accusative pronouns.

BONUS: it turns out that the accusative case *declensions* are also exactly what you need to remember the 3 gendered forms of the pronoun 'it'. Oooh, what's that about? 😀

Look again at the 3rd Person Singular section of the personal pronouns table and take special note of the *very last letter* on each pronoun:

3rd person singular, masculine: *ih**n***
3rd person singular, neuter: *e**s***
3rd person singular, feminine: *si**e***

Now, look at this accusative case snippet of what I call the All-In-One Declensions Chart:

The -n, -s, -e strong *declensions* 🏴 listed in the chart snippet are the *same* last letters we see on the accusative pronouns *ihn, es, sie,* and *sie.*

You need to have the complete All-In-One Declensions Chart memorized anyway, so it's great that it does double-duty for you by covering the declensions on the gendered pronouns 'it', too (in the accusative ^^ and also in the nominative & dative!)

Learn smarter, not harder!

Accusative Pronouns, Simplifying with Patterns

We've talked about [when to use accusative pronouns](#): to replace a direct object (which is the 2nd noun in a given sentence).

You've learned how to pick out the right one, too, by learning about the [different persons](#).

You even just tackled the different *sie / Sie* forms and gendered 'it's! That's huge!

The only thing that is left is to dissect our accusative pronouns table one final time, noticing patterns (to help us remember the pronouns more easily) and cutting out material wherever we can (so we don't have to remember as many!).

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

Notice the following things:

- *mich and dich rhyme! The only letters that are different are also easy to remember: m for mich (just like the m in me) and d for dich (just like the d in du).*

- The 3rd person accusative pronouns are IDENTICAL to the nominative ones *except* for *er – ihn.* The *es* and *sie* are all repeated.
- Remember that the formal You (*Sie*) has all the same forms as the 3rd person plural *they* and then you can nix 2 entire lines of the table that are redundant!
- All-in-all, between the nominative & accusative pronouns, you have only 12 total you have to know in German — and that's the same number of English pronouns we have! You can do that! (NOTE: the [dative pronouns](#) adds another 5 to learn, but you can handle that.)

Main Takeaways

1. Pronouns are little words (e.g. you, he, we) that replace nouns or noun phrases.
2. English & German both have 'subject pronouns' (nominative case).
3. But German draws a distinction between *accusative* and *dative* pronouns that doesn't exist in English (we use just one group of pronouns for both, which we call *objective* pronouns).
4. To use the right pronoun, you have to know which 'person' your noun is in.
5. In the 2nd person, you also have to distinguish between the formal & informal forms (*Sie* vs. *du*) AND between the singular and plural variants of the 2nd Person Informal (*du* vs. *ihr*). None of these different versions of 'you' exist in English (we have just one!).
6. In the 3rd person, even if you are talking about a noun *object* (not just a person), you have to use the *gendered* pronoun that matches the gender (masc., fem., neut). of the noun.
7. In constructing sentences, after we establish the *subject* (nominative case), we default the next noun / pronoun into the *accusative case* as the *direct object.*
8. Single letters (e.g. -n, -s, -e) called *declensions* are added to the ends of certain words (e.g. *determiners*) to indicate the *gender & case* of the following noun. There are particular *accusative case* declensions to use with each gender (and with plural).
9. The accusative case declensions (chart provided) perfectly match the declensions on the 3rd Person Pronouns, so that is an even easier way to memorize them.

10. Taking note of repeated pronouns and other patterns makes learning pronouns easier.
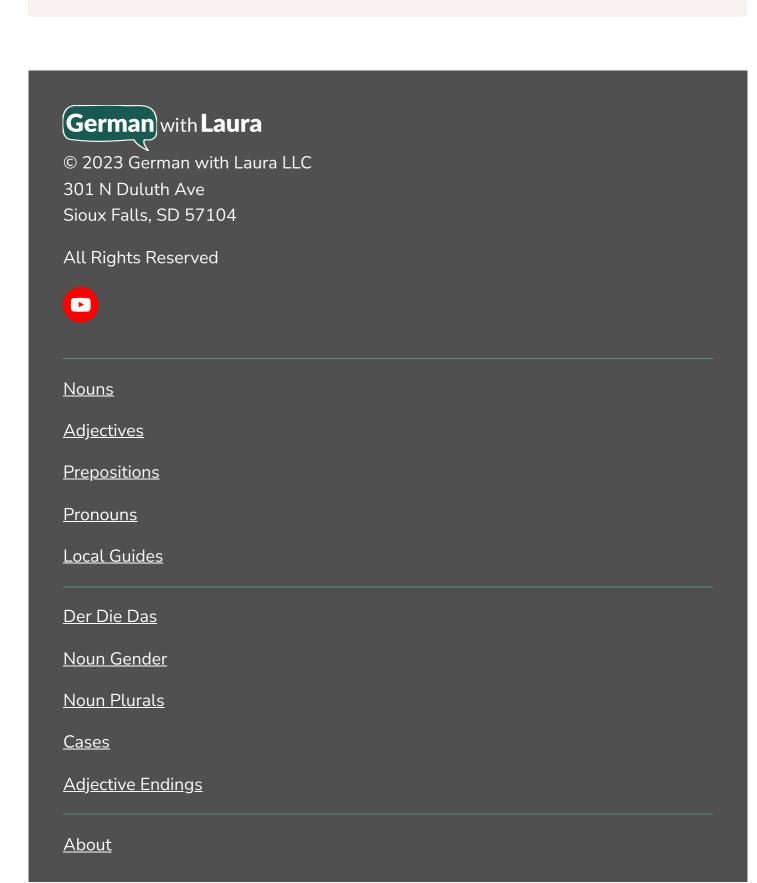
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