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§ I. BASICS

1. The German Alphabet

German uses the same 26 letters as English, with four extra characters: **ä, ö, ü,** and **ß.**

The first three are alternate pronunciations or “shifts” of the vowels a, o and u. The **¨** mark is called an "umlaut" (rhymes with "zoom out"). They can appear capitalized too -- **Ä, Ö, Ü** -- but you won't see that too often, because they don't occur at the beginning of many common words.

The **ß** (“sharp S”) is not a real letter, just a [**ligature**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Typographic_ligature) for (or stylized way of writing) a double lowercase s. We’ll discuss a little later when to write ss and when to use ß – we have to cover the vowels first – but if you’re ever in doubt, write ss. It’s more acceptable to replace a ß with a double s than the other way around. There is no difference in how they’re pronounced. In Switzerland the ß is not used at all.

If you’re using a keyboard without these symbols, you can type ae, oe and ue instead of ä, ö and ü, and of course ss instead of ß. Or click [**here**](http://germanforenglishspeakers.com/non-german-keyboards/) for our full guide to typing German characters on non-German keyboards.

1. Pronunciation: Consonants

Many German consonants have the same pronunciation as they do in English. These are the main exceptions:

* **B :** *at the end of a syllable* is softened (“devoiced”) to more of a **P** sound; similarily, **D** and **G** at the end of a syllable sound like **T** and **K**, respectively.
* **J :** is pronounced like the English **Y** (so ***jung*** has the same initial sound as its English cognate ***young***)
* In the combination **kn**, **pf**, and **ps**, **both letters are pronounced**. This is not as hard as it sounds, although it takes some getting used to. You may already know the kn sound from the Yiddish word ***knish***. In the case of pf (as in ***Pferd***, a horse) and ps (as in ***Psychologie***), just get ready to say a **p**, with your lips closed, and say the second letter instead, letting it force them open a bit.
* **V :** is like the English (and German) **F** in words of Germanic origin (so ***Vater*** has the same initial sound as ***father***), but in words of foreign origin it's usually pronounced like the English V / German W (below).
* **W :** is very similar to the English **V** (and our **W** sound doesn’t exist in German).
* **Z :** is pronounced like **ts**
* **Qu** is pronounced like **kv** (as opposed to the **kw** sound in English). We have this in the Yiddish word ***kvetch*** (to complain) in English, which comes from the German quetschen (to crush or squeeze).
* **S :** a single **S** is usually pronounced like an English **Z**, with a few exceptions:
  + Before another consonant, it’s a normal soft ("voiceless") **S** as in English (so ***Skulptur*** has the same initial sound as the English ***Sculpture***).
  + **Sp-** and **St-** *at the beginning of a syllable* are pronounced **Shp-** and **Sht-** (ex. ***Spaten***, a spade/shovel).
  + To differentiate it from ***sechs*** (the number six), the **S** in ***Sex*** is soft.
  + (and a double **S** or **ß** is soft just like in English, e.g. ***assassin***).

The above sounds are relatively easy to pronounce, as long as you can remember the rules. For most English speakers, the most difficult sounds in German are **R** and **CH**. They come in multiple varieties:

* **R** 
  + **R** *at the end of a word or syllable* :

this is not always given in textbooks or dictionary pronunciations, but **most native speakers pronounce a terminal r very weakly**; it’s more of an **uh** sound that sometimes draws out the preceding vowel. For example, derusually sounds more like day-uh. This is a particular problem for North Americans: if you ask a German (or anyone really) to imitate a standard American accent, the first thing they’ll do is lean on those terminal **R**s. Irish accents have pretty strong **R**s too.

* + **R** *at the beginning of a word or syllable* :

as in ***rot*** (red), is pronounced **at the back of the throat with a bit of a scratch**, although in parts of southern Germany (notably Franconia) it can also be rolled in the manner of a Spanish **R**.

* **CH**
  + **Hard CH**

A **ch** is pronounced “hard” when it comes after **a, o, u**or**au**, as in ***auch*** (also), ***doch*** (but), or the exclamation ***ach***! It sounds like a harsh or throaty ***kh***, as in the beginning of the Yiddish word ***chutzpah*** (when it is correctly pronounced!).

* + **Soft CH** :

A **ch** after any other vowel (as in the pronouns ***ich*** and ***dish***), or at the beginning of a few words (***China, Chemie***) is pronounced “softly.” Many foreign speakers, and even some young native speakers, pronounce this as an English **sh** sound (as in ***shy***); this is understandable but incorrect. The correct pronunciation is very close to **the sound of a cat hissing**, with the corners of your mouth pulled apart and the air being pressed out laterally between the top of your tongue and the roof of your mouth.

* + **Greek CH** :

There is a third, less common **ch** sound that is identical to a **K**. We have this one in English too. It comes from the Greek letter ***chi*** (χ) and appears most **often in Greek-derived words** (***Chaos, Charakter***), but it also appears in a few Germanic words, like the aforementioned sechs (the number six).

* + **Foreign CH** :

There are many loan words in German that keep their original **CH** sounds, e.g. from French (***Chef, Chauffeur***), English (***Cheeseburger, Chips***) or Spanish (***Chile, Chihuahua***).

There are some other minor differences in the pronunciation of consonants, but they’re really too subtle to be learned this way, and they’re not as important for being understood. If you can remember everything above (even if you’re not perfect on the **R** and **CH** sounds), you’ll be well ahead of most foreign speakers.

1. Pronunciation: Vowels

There are eight standard German vowels – the same five as in English plus the three umlaut vowels **ä**, **ö** and **ü** – and they each have a “long” and a “short” variant. These terms refer first to how long the sound is held or drawn out, but there are sometimes also differences in the sound itself between the long and short variants of a vowel. Short vowels in German are very short and clipped compared to English, and long vowels are held a bit longer.

**In general, a vowel is long when followed by a single consonant and short when followed by a combination of consonants.** There are some exceptions to this rule, but they mainly involve unstressed syllables and short grammatical words (e.g. ***in*, *das*, *von***). The following table gives some examples of these sounds and how to pronounce them.

Also keep in mind that **most German syllables that begin with a vowel are led off by a glottal stop**. An example of a glottal stop is the break in the middle of “***uh-oh***” – or, for British readers, the way Cockney speakers swallow their **T**s. This is what makes German speech sound choppier than English and makes native Germans sound so distinctive when speaking English – just ask any German with a noticeable accent to read the words “***each other***” and notice how they put a stop between the words where no native English speaker would).

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
|  | **LONG** | **SHORT** |
| **a** | Similar to the **a** in the English ***father.*** | Same sound as the long version, just a bit shorter, like the vowel in ***mop.*** |
| **ä** | Like the sound of ***hair*** in British English. | Same sound but shorter, perhaps verging closer to a short **e**. |
| **e** | Like the long **A** in English (***day***) but “flatter”, without the same rounding into an **eee** sound at the end. | The short **e** is identical to that in English, so German ***nett*** is just like English ***net***. |
| **i** | Rather like the **ee** sound in English (***team, meet***). | Very close to the English short **i,** so German and English ***in*** and ***Mist*** sound alike. |
| **o** | Like the **O** in ***no*** without the **w** sound at the end. | Like the sound in ***clots*** in British English. |
| **ö** | Similar to the English vowel sound in ***worst*** or ***worry***. | Akin to the long version, short **ö** is like short **e** with rounded lips. |
| **u** | Rather like the English **oo**sound, as in ***tube*** and ***moon***. | This is just like a clipped version of the English short **u** in ***put*** and ***should***. |
| **ü** | For those who speak French, this is pronounced just like French **u** (as in ***tu***). | This vowel is the result of many English speakers’ attempts to pronounce long **ü**. |

In some instances, **vowels are marked as long by being doubled**, like in Staat (state), **or by adding an H after a vowel**, like in Stahl (steel).

The other basic vowels sounds are as follows:

* **y** **: appears as a vowel in some words of Greek origin**, and it’s pronounced like a long **ü**. One common example is ***typisch*** (typical).
* **e** **: appearing at the end of a word**, as in ***bitte***(please), is an unstressed **uh** like a terminal  **–a** in English (***manna*, *mania***) though the tongue is in a more neutral (central) position in the mouth – like the second **e** in ***celebration*** when spoken quickly.
* **ie** **:** is pronounced like a German long **i**, except at the end of some nouns where it can be an unstressed ***-yeh*** sound (e.g. ***Familie***).
* **au** **:** is pronounced like the English **ow** in ***cow.***
* **äu** **:** and **eu** are pronounced like the English **oy** in ***toy***
* **ei, ey, and ai** **:** (as well as the *ay* in *Bayern*, the word for Bavaria) are all pronounced like an English long **i** in ***fight***.

Now, let's come back to the question of when to use **ss** and when to use **ß**. The rules for this have changed in recent years, but the current practice is **to use ss after short vowels, and ß after long vowels** and diphthongs (vowel combinations). This may sound circular, since we just said that the length of a vowel is determined by the number of letters after it -- but in practice, you're usually either trying to spell a word that you've heard (in which case you should recognize whether the vowel is long or short) or you're trying to pronounce a word that you've seen (in which case you'll already know whether it's **ss** or **ß**).

**A little more about umlauts**

Many books define **ä**, **ö** and **ü** as full-fledged letters, but they aren’t quite; for example, they're not in the alphabet song that German children learn, and they don’t have their own sections in a dictionary. And they are closely related to their non-umlaut counterparts: most words with an **ä** are derived from “root” forms with an **a**.

**The original purpose of a Germanic umlaut was to shift from a "back vowel" to a "front vowel"** (these terms refer to the position of the tongue in the mouth) to make a derivative form of a word easier to pronounce, usually because it was adding another syllable. For example, **alt**(old) --> **älter**(older). But they now appear in many words where this process is no longer apparent – usually because the extra syllable has been dropped (as in many noun plurals) or because the root form has fallen out of use. It can also happen because they’re being used to approximate a foreign pronunciation (**militär**), or for more complex reasons (e.g. **für** comes from **vor**, but even native speakers don’t usually think of them as related).

You certainly don’t need to think about this every time you read or hear an umlaut vowel, but it’s useful to have it in the back of your mind when learning vocabulary. The more you can visualize the umlaut forms of a word as “shifted” rather than as a whole separate word, the easier it will be to remember them.

1. Loan Words in German

There are a growing number of foreign words in German, and they sometimes break the pronunciation rules in the previous two sections. Most of them are from English or French – but even if you know the correct French or English pronunciation, that doesn’t tell you whether German will adapt it entirely or convert it to a more German pronunciation.

However, once you have a sense of how native German words sound, you’ll start to get a good feel for it. Generally if there’s a way to pronounce the foreign word according to the German rules above, that’s what happens. The words that keep the foreign pronunciation are usually ones like ***das Baby*** or **das Croissant**, with letters (like the terminal **y** or the **oi**) that wouldn’t have any clear pronunciation in German. To be sure, there are exceptions, but it’s a good general rule. There are also some words that fall in between – for example, **die Creme**(cream) is pronounced with a long German **e** in the middle rather than the short **è** in French, but many speakers leave the second **e** silent as in French, rather than pronouncing it as you would in German.

Also, remember that loan words often narrow their meanings. For example, we use **angst** with a more specific meaning than it has in German and **entourage** or **milieu** with a narrower connotation than they have in French. A **sombrero** is a more specific style of hat in the US than in Mexico, and a **taco** is a more specific dish. Similarly, in German, **das** **Notebook**refers only to a laptop computer, not to a paper notebook, and **der Star** is a celebrity, not a star in the sky. There are also a few English words in German that are purely German coinages, like **das Handy** for a cell phone, **der Beamer**for a video projector, and **der Oldtimer** for a vintage car.

1. Capitalization & Punctuation

As you may have noticed by now, **all nouns are capitalized in German**, wherever they appear in a sentence. This is a nearly unique feature in a contemporary language, and it’s helpful in parsing sentences when there are words you don’t know. **We used to do it in English, as you can see in old documents like the U.S. Constitution**.

**Sie (the formal "you") is always capitalized**. This also applies to the related forms ***Ihnen*** and***Ihr***, although not to the reflexive pronoun ***sich***.

Unlike the English **I**, the first-person singular pronoun **ich**is not capitalized unless it begins a sentence.

Unlike in English, adjectives describing nationality, ethnicity and religion (***the American car***) are not capitalized in German (***das amerikanische Auto***) unless they’re part of a proper noun (***Deutsche Bank***)

As in the rest of continental Europe, decimal points and commas are reversed in writing numbers (e.g. a coffee might cost 1,50€ while a car costs 15.000€).

Typically the format for German quotation marks is **„\_\_\_“** (rather than **“\_\_\_”**), with the opening quote mark upside down and both of them curling outwards (see our "[**non-German keyboards**](http://germanforenglishspeakers.com/reference/non-german-keyboards/)" section for how to type these).

French chevron-style quotation marks (**«\_\_\_»**) are also sometimes used, although German tends to invert them (**»\_\_\_«**).

German never uses the “[**Oxford comma**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serial_comma)” at the end of a list.

Unlike in English, **a comma can link two independent clauses in German.**

**du**and its related forms (**dich/dir/euch**) used to be capitalized like **Sie**, and some people still capitalize them, especially in correspondence. This is certainly not wrong, but's no longer standard, and you don't need to do it unless you want to.

1. Sentence Structure & Word Order

A simple main clause in German can be written with the same word order as English:

*Ich gab dem Jungen einen Ball.*

I gave the boy a ball.

However, unlike in English, the word order in a main clause **can also be rearranged to emphasize something** other than the subject by putting it first – so long as the conjugated verb remains in the second position:

*Einen Ball gab ich dem Jungen.*

I gave the boy a **ball**. (as opposed to giving him something else)

*Dem Jungen gab ich einen Ball.*

I gave the **boy** a ball. (as opposed to giving it to someone else)

With a compound verb (consisting of a main verb and a helping verb), English usually keeps the two parts together. **In German the conjugated verb must be in the second position, while the other verb almost always goes at the end of the phrase:**

*Ich* ***werde*** *das Buch bald* ***lesen.***

I **will read** the book soon.

**In a subordinate clause, the verbs all go at the end of the phrase**. If there’s more than one, the conjugated verb comes last:

*Ich trinke, weil du mich* ***verlassen hast.***

I’m drinkingbecause you **left** me.

This is also true of any other dependent clauses, **like relative or infinitive constructions**:

*Da ist der Mann, denn wir* ***suchen!***

There’s the man who(m) we’re looking for!

*Ich finde es schwer, über mich selbst* ***zu reden.***

I find it hard **to talk** about myself.

However, with a few common conjunctions (**and/or/but**), **the standard main-clause word order is kept in both clauses**:

*Die Sonne scheint* ***und*** *die Vögel singen.*

The sun is shining **and** the birds are singing.

These are called **coordinating conjunctions**, and the ones that introduce a subordinate clause (like **because**) are called **subordinating conjunctions**. When we cover all the German conjunctions in VII.2, we’ll present them in these two groups. So don’t worry if you’re not exactly clear on what a subordinate clause is – you’ll just learn to tell from the conjunction whether the verb goes at the end or not.

In questions, **the conjugated verb is again in the second position**:

*Was* ***hast*** *du* ***gemacht?*** *Warum* ***sagst*** *du das?*

What **have** you **done?** Why do you **say** that?

In an imperative statement (a direct order), **the conjugated verb comes first**, just like in English:

***Sei*** *still!* ***Gib*** *mir das!*

**Be** quiet! **Give** me that!