

## 3 Simple Rules of German Negation: How To Position “Nicht” in A Sentence

André Klein · Thursday, February 27th, 2020



German syntax can be quite daunting. There are many moving parts. It can be helpful to split things up into smaller more manageable bits. Earlier today for example a question came up on the [newsletter](#) about the correct placement of the so-called *Negationspartikel* **nicht** in a sentence.

So here are 3 very simple rules (and some exceptions) for putting your **nicht** into the correct position in a sentence. Ready? *Los geht's!*

**Rule #1: By Default, Nicht Goes To The *End* Of The Sentence**

# RULE #1: BY DEFAULT, NICHT GOES TO THE END OF THE SENTENCE

“Isst du die Suppe?”

“Nein, ich esse die Suppe **nicht**.”

“Kaufst du das iPhone?”

“Nein, ich kaufe das iPhone **nicht!**”

When you're negating a verb, a noun or a whole sentence using **nicht**, it *generally* goes to the end of the sentence. This is the default setting.

Here are some examples:

“*Magst du Katzen?*”

“*Nein, ich mag Katzen **nicht**.*”

“*Kennst du den neuen Film mit Keanu Reeves?*”

“*Nein, ich kenne den Film **nicht**.*”

Simple enough, isn't it? But this rule only comes into play as long as rule 2 or 3 don't apply.

**Rule #2: If there's a Preposition, Nicht Goes *Before* It**

## RULE #2: IF THERE'S A PREPOSITION, NICHT GOES BEFORE IT

“Ich gehe **nicht** **ins** Kino.”  
“Sie fährt **nicht** **nach** Italien.”  
“Wir sitzen **nicht** **auf** dem Sofa.”

This is another very simple rule which should be fairly self-explanatory. As you may remember, some **prepositions** in German require the accusative case (durch, bis, für, ohne, entlang, gegen, um, etc.), others the dative case (bei, mit, seit, aus, zu, nach, von, etc.). But they all have one thing in common: when they appear in a sentence **nicht** goes first.

Here are some more examples:

“*Fliegst du im Sommer **nach** Amerika?*”

“*Nein, ich fliege **nicht nach** Amerika.*”

“*Fährst du **entlang** des Flusses?*” (*along the river*)

“*Nein, ich fahre **nicht entlang** des Flusses.*”

There is one little exception where this rule doesn't apply, which may not be that common, but I wanted to mention it anyway. If the preposition appears in position 1 in the sentence we revert to our default setting and *nicht* moves to the

end of the sentence.

“*Wartest du auf den neuen Marvel-Film?*”

“*Nein, auf den warte ich nicht.*”

“*Liegt Peter im Bett?*”

“*Nein, im Bett liegt er nicht.*”

Last but not least, this rule also applies to *modal adverbs*. Whenever there’s a word in your sentence that *qualifies* the verb, i.e. provides information how an action is being done, *nicht* goes first:

“*Fährt Peter langsam?*”

“*Nein er fährt nicht langsam.*”

“*Arbeitest du viel?*”

“*Nein, ich arbeite nicht viel.*”

“*Isst du gerne Pizza?*”

“*Nein, ich esse nicht gerne Pizza.*”

**Rule #3: If there’s a Verb at the End of a Sentence, Nicht Goes *Before* it**

## RULE #3: IF THERE'S A VERB AT THE END OF A SENTENCE, NICHT GOES BEFORE IT.

“Sie will die Suppe **nicht** essen.”  
“Ich **habe** das iPhone **nicht** verkauft.”  
“Der Zug **fährt** **nicht** ab.”

This may sound simple but requires a bit more explanation. Why? Because sometimes verbs consist of multiple parts that appear in different places. Remember separable verbs, i.e. “trennbare Verben”, those pesky German verbs that split in two, for example?

So let's make this as simple as possible. Whenever there's a verb **at the end** of the sentence, or even just **part of a verb**, put your *nicht* in front of it.

Here are some examples:

First of all, here's a case where the verb at the end is in *infinitive*:

“Kannst du **programmieren**?”

“Nein, ich kann **nicht** programmieren.”

Next up, here's an example where the verb is part of the *Perfekt*, i.e. perfect tense. Although the complete verb form consists of two verbs (auxiliary + participle), *nicht* always goes in front of the part of the verb at the end:

*“Hast du die Katze **gesehen**?”*

*“Nein, ich **habe** die Katze **nicht gesehen**.”*

The same thing happens with separable verbs, as mentioned before:

*“**Bringst** du deinen Freund **mit**?” (mitbringen: to bring along)*

*“Nein, ich **bringe** meinen Freund **nicht mit**.”*

*“**Bricht** Sarah ihr Studium **ab**?” (abbrechen: to drop out)*

*“Nein, Sarah **bricht** ihr Studium **nicht ab**.”*

## Summary

It's not always easy to analyze syntax and identify grammatical elements correctly. But if you memorize these three rules you should always be confident in placing your negation particle “nicht” exactly where it belongs.

Did you find this helpful? Would you like more explanations like these for other topics?

Just let me know!

Did you get everything right? If not, review the rules and try again!

## Understanding the Difference Between Nicht and Kein in German

Since this is somewhat related, many people are wondering when to use “nicht” vs “kein”. The answer is pretty simple:

In German, both “nicht” and “kein” are used to express negation, but they are used in different ways depending on the context.

1. “Nicht” is used to negate a verb, adjective or adverb. Examples:

- Er spricht nicht viel. (He doesn't speak much.)

- Das ist nicht schön. (That's not nice.)
- Ich gehe nicht oft ins Kino. (I don't go to the cinema often.)

2. "Kein" is used to negate a noun and means "not a" or "no." It is used to express the absence of something, and it changes its form depending on the gender and number of the noun it negates. Examples:

- Ich habe kein Auto. (I don't have a car.)
- Sie hat keine Bücher. (She doesn't have any books.)
- Das ist kein Problem. (That's not a problem.)

Further examples to show how nicht and kein correlate to the negated verbs, adverbs, adjectives and nouns:

1. Use "nicht" for negating verbs, adverbs and adjectives:

*"Ich gehe **nicht** oft ins Kino." nicht -> oft (adverb)*

*"Sie mag das Essen **nicht**." nicht -> mögen (verb)*

*"Sie sind **nicht** freundlich." nicht -> freundlich (adjective)*

2. Use "kein" for negating nouns:

*"Ich mag **keine** Hamburger." keine -> Hamburger (noun)*

*"**Kein** Mensch mag schlechtes Wetter." kein -> Mensch (noun)*

*"Wir verstehen **kein** Spanisch." kein -> Spanisch (noun)*

To simplify this rule:

If you want to negate a noun, use "kein". For everything else, use "nicht".

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