

Mastering German Word Order: An Absolute Beginner's Guide

André Klein · Wednesday, April 19th, 2023



Have you ever felt like putting German words together is a bit like trying to assemble furniture without the instruction manual? You're not alone!

The topic of German word order may seem daunting at first, but once you understand core mechanics and principles, it gets *a lot* easier.

The trick is to know what to focus on first. How can we reduce complexity without oversimplifying the process? Is there even a way to explain this without making one's head hurt? Well, you've come to right place!

*"If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough."
– Albert Einstein*

With a bit of patience and this beginner's guide to understanding German word order, you'll be putting together complex masterpieces in no time (without ever worrying about missing screws again). Ready to crack the code? Let's get start-

ed!

? Road Traffic Regulations

In German, the most basic sentence structure follows the Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order, similar to English. This means that the subject comes first, followed by the verb and then the object. For example, “Ich esse einen Apfel” (I eat an apple) follows the SVO structure.

Ich esse einen Apfel. (S/V/O)

Funnily, SVO in German is also an acronym for *Straßenverkehrsordnung* (“road traffic regulations”). Unlike in English, however, SVO is not an iron rule in German, so don’t expect your sentences to be pulled over for a violation just yet!

In fact it’s just one of many shapes a German sentence can take. To illustrate, you could easily switch up this sentence and put the object first:

Einen Apfel esse ich. (O/S/V)

This sentence is just as valid as the first. But why would one break a perfectly fine SVO structure? Why can’t you behave like your English sibling, German? Why do you always have to be *special*?!

Well, you could do this if you want to emphasise that you’re eating an apple *instead of* a banana. “Isst du eine Banane? (Are you eating a banana?) – “Nein! Einen Apfel esse ich!” (No! I’m eating an *apple*!)

This is just the first example of many to show how sentence order in German may be more complex than in English, but at the same time allows for new ways of creative expression.

So while the English language is mostly tied to the SVO order (unless you are Yoda), German is not bound by this rigid structure.

“Roads? Where we’re going we don’t need roads!” – Dr. Emmet Brown

As you may have already guessed, however, there are a bunch of other ~~rules~~ *recommendations* that govern where certain elements can be placed, depending on what you’re trying to say.

So, let’s try to unravel the mystery of German word order, step by step.

? The Golden Rule Of German Word Order

One of the golden rules in German main clauses is that the verb should always be the second element. Seems easy enough, right? But wait! That doesn’t mean it’s always the second *word*; it means it’s in the second position within the sentence.

For instance, “Heute abend **gehe** ich ins Kino” (Tonight, I’m going to the cinema). The verb “gehe” is the second element, even though it’s the third word in the sentence.

Or to make things even worse: “Am Ende eines langen stressigen Tages **trinkt** Peter ein Bier.” (“At the end of a long stressful day, Peter drinks a beer.”) the verb is still in second position, although it’s the 7th word! The phrase “am Ende eines langen stressigen Tages” simply occupies the first position of the sentence.

Confused? Most beginners struggle with the concept of “position” in a sentence. The key takeaway here is that “position” refers to a grammatical elements (which often consist of multiple words) that serve a specific *function* in a sentence. Those are like the gears of your sentence; each one may have multiple spokes and teeth, but they serve a single purpose within the grammatical machine which is your sentence.

Of course you could always try to play it by ear, but even just having a *basic* notion of core grammatical elements within a sentence will go a long way towards making German word order so much less confusing. And you don’t have to be no Chomsky, either! The first trick is not to look for single *words* but *phrases*.

In my experience teaching German as a foreign language I’ve often seen learners

hit a roadblock because they hadn't fully internalized the fundamentals.

So, let's have a brief look at the absolute basics again.

Core Phrases

Here are some examples of core phrases you'll encounter in any given German sentence (including key questions for spotting them):

Subject Phrase (Subjekt): This is the doer of the action in a sentence. It's usually a noun or a pronoun, or a noun plus article.

For example, in the sentence "Der Hund spielt im Park" ("The dog plays in the park"), "Der Hund" is the subject phrase. (article + noun)

? Question: **Who is doing the action?**

Verb Phrase (Prädikat): This is the heart of the sentence, describing the action or state of being.

In German, the verb is typically the second element in a statement. In our example, "spielt" ("plays") is the verb.

? Question: **What's happening?**

Object Phrase (Objekt): Objects are generally speaking the receivers of the action. There are a bunch of different ones, but the most common ones are direct (Akkusativobjekt) or indirect (Dativobjekt).

In the sentence "Die Katze jagt die Maus" ("The cat chases the mouse"), for example, "die Maus" is the direct object because it's directly affected by the action.

Sometimes objects also include **prepositions**, in which case we call the phrase a prepositional object.

? Question: **To whom/what is something being done?**

Adverbial Phrase (Adverbiale Bestimmung): These phrases give more information about the verb, like how, when, or why the action occurs.

In “Der Hund spielt fröhlich im Park” (“The dog plays happily in the park”), “fröhlich” is an adverbial phrase describing how the dog plays.

? Question: **How is the action occurring?**

There are many other phrases as well, but especially for beginners, familiarizing yourself with the above first will be most helpful.

Note: not all sentences contain adverbs or objects, but you’ll always find at least a verb and a subject. If you want to get technical the absolut minimal sentence in German can just be one word such as “Iss!” – Eat!”

So far for the basic theory. Now let’s do a quick exercise to see if you can spot core phrases:

A Bag Full Of Phrases

Okay, now let’s have a look at how multiple phrases can be positioned in a sentence. Let’s start with a basic example which contains all of them:

Ich putze sonntags mein schönes neues Auto in der Garage.

(On Sundays I clean my beautiful new car in the garage.)

Notice how multiple words are grouped together in phrases? We have even two adverbial phrases that specify a) when and b) where our action is taking place. This is basic SVO with the verb in second position.

Now let’s see what other word orders are possible while keeping the verb in its correct place:

Sonntags putze ich mein schönes neues Auto in der Garage.

In this case the temporal adverbial phrase “sonntags” occupies the first position and the verb “putze” the second.

In der Garage putze ich sonntags mein schönes neues Auto.

Now we’ve moved the local adverbial phrase “in der Garage” into the first position. The verb remains in position #2.

Mein schönes neues Auto putze ich sonntags in der Garage.

In this example we’ve shifted the whole object phrase “mein schönes neues Auto” into the first position. And still the verb didn’t budge! It’s sitting cozily in its preferred position (#2).

In other words, we can move *any* of the other phrases into the first position! You have complete freedom, based on what you want to *emphasize*. Just remember to keep the verb in second position, and you’re golden.

So far, so good?

Perhaps you’re wondering about the German word order when you have multiple adverbs? It’s a common question and easier than you may think:

? Adverbs and Adverbial Phrases: Adding Flavor

Adverbs are like the seasoning in a dish, giving it flavor and depth. In German, adverbs can be placed in different positions within a sentence, depending on their type.

Time adverbs *usually* come first, followed by manner adverbs, and finally, place adverbs. There’s an easy mnemonic device for this: **ZAP** (Zeit-Art-Platz) (Time--Manner-Place).

We say *usually* because even here you have a lot of freedom. Based on what you want to emphasize you can just put your priority adverb in first position!

Heute arbeite ich schnell zu Hause.

(Today, I work quickly at home)

The time adverb “heute” comes first, followed by the manner adverb “schnell,” and finally, the place adverb “zu Hause.”

But any of these adverbs will fit in the first position just fine:

Schnell arbeite ich heute zu Hause.

Zu Hause arbeite ich heute schnell.

Note how the remaining adverbs not in first position still generally follow the ZAP rule.

? Making Verb Sandwiches

Are you still with us? Good! So far we’ve looked at very basic examples where the verb only consisted of one word.

But a verbal phrase can often include more than one word. And then something very interesting happens. Meet the “Satzklammer” (sentence bracket)!

It’s a fancy way to describe the way certain elements in a German sentence “hug” or “frame” the core of the sentence. Picture a cozy little linguistic sandwich, with the bread being the Satzklammer and the tasty fillings being the core of the sentence. Yum!

The concept of Satzklammer is particularly important when dealing with separable verbs, modal verbs, or auxiliary verbs (used in various tenses). In these cases, the main verb or its prefix usually takes the second position in the clause (the

first slice of bread), while the other part of the verb, the infinitive verb, or the separable prefix (the second slice of bread) moves to the end of the clause.

For example, with a separable verb like “anrufen” (to call), the sentence “Ich rufe dich heute an” (I’ll call you today) displays the Satzklammer: “rufe” takes the second position, while “an” is at the end, framing the sentence.

We’ll take a closer look at these types of verbs soon. But first, let’s have a look at modals:

Modal Verbs and Infinitives: The Dynamic Duo

Modal verbs are the superheroes of German grammar, swooping in to give your sentences an extra layer of meaning. They express ability, permission, obligation, or possibility and are used together with an infinitive verb.

When you have a modal verb in your sentence, it takes the second position, while the infinitive verb moves to the end of the clause.

Examples:

Ich habe gestern einen Film gesehen.
(I have seen a film yesterday.)

Peter will einen Kuchen backen.
(Peter wants to bake a cake.)

As previously discussed, the same process also happens when we’re dealing with the infamous separable verbs:

Separable Verbs: Splitting Up is Never Easy, Except in German

Separable verbs in German are like an on-again, off-again couple. They just can’t seem to stick together. These verbs consist of a core verb and a prefix, which, as the name suggests, separates from the core verb in certain situations.

In main clauses, the prefix moves to the end of the sentence, while the core verb stays in the second position. For example, “Ich stehe um 7 Uhr auf” (I get up at 7 am). The verb “aufstehen” is split, with “stehe” as the second element and “auf” at the end.

Verb: abfahren

Der Zug fährt um 9 Uhr ab.

(The train departs at 9 o'clock.)

Verb: aussteigen

Peter steigt aus dem Zug aus.

(Peter gets off the train.)

Verb: anrufen

Sonntags rufe ich meine Mutter an.

(On Sundays I call my mom.)

? Note: when combined with a modal verb or any other structure where the verb is required in infinitive, separable verbs will not split!

Der Zug soll um 9 Uhr abfahren.

(The train is supposed to depart at 9 o'clock.)

Peter will aus dem Zug aussteigen.

(Peter wants to get off the train.)

Sonntags will ich meine Mutter anrufen.

(On Sundays I want to call my mom.)

Here's a table of other notable separable verbs in German:

VERB	TRANSLATION
abfahren	to depart
abholen	to pick up
absagen	to cancel
anfangen	to begin
ankommen	to arrive
anrufen	to call (on the phone)
aufhören	to stop
aufstehen	to get up
aussteigen	to get off
einladen	to invite
einsteigen	to board
mitbringen	to bring along
mitkommen	to come along
umsteigen	to transfer (trains, buses, etc.)

VERB	TRANSLATION
wegbringen	to carry off
vorbereiten	to prepare

This is not a complete list, of course. Search online for more exhaustive [lists of separable verbs](#).

???? Questions and Imperatives: Shaking Things Up

In questions, the verb sometimes takes the lead, jumping to the first position, but **only** for yes/no questions, like “Hast du Hunger?” (Are you hungry?).

For W-questions (who, what, where, when, why, how), the verb remains in our standard #2 position. For example, “Wo ist das Badezimmer?” (Where is the bathroom?).

Regular W-Question:

Wo ist meine Brille?

(Where are my glasses?)

Wann beginnt der Film?

(When does the movie start?)

For these types of questions, the question word goes to the first position and the verb remains in our trusted second position.

Yes/No-Questions:

Ist meine Brille im Badezimmer?

(Are my glasses in the bathroom)

Kommt Peter aus Australien?

(Is Peter from Australia?)

Imperative: Thou Shalt Take The Pole Position!

Similar to yes/no questions, when it comes to imperatives, the verb takes the first position, followed by the object (if there is one) and any other elements. For example, “Gib mir das Buch!” (Give me the book!) or “Sei still!” (Be quiet!).

Iss dein Gemüse!

(Eat your veggies!)

Mach schnell deine Hausaufgaben!

(Do your homework quickly!)

? Passive Sentences: When the Subject Takes a Break

Passive sentences are like a vacation for the subject, where it gets to relax and let someone or something else take the spotlight.

In passive sentences, the focus shifts from the subject to the action or the receiver of the action. The verb remains in second position, but the subject is often

placed later in the sentence. For example, “Das Buch wird von mir gelesen” (The book is being read by me). Notice how the focus is on the book, not the reader.

In a nutshell, in a passive sentence, what used to be the object becomes the subject (and vice versa), but the grammatical structure stays the same. Let’s do a quick comparison:

Active:

Ich verschicke morgen die Bestellung.

(I’m sending out the order tomorrow.)

Passive:

Die Bestellung wird morgen von mir verschickt.

(The order is being sent out tomorrow by me.)

Note how using the passive (wird + verb) opens up another Satzklammer “sandwich” (wird ... verschickt) which is filled with an adverb and an object.

Active:

Die Reinigungsfirma putzt den Teppich.

(The cleaning service cleans the carpet.)

Passive:

Der Teppich wird von der Reinigungsfirma geputzt.

(The carpet is being cleaned by the cleaning service.)

Constructing passive sentences in German requires a bit more explanation (there are various kinds), but for now, just note that the same rule applies as with separable verbs and modals. The principle is always the same:

As soon as your verb phrase consists of more than one word, only the first part occupies our default second position, whereas the second one goes to the end of the sentence.

? Subordinate Clauses: Where the Verb Takes a Back Seat

German word order gets a little bit more interesting when we talk about subordinate clauses. These are secondary sentences connected to the main clause, often with a [conjunction](#).

In this case the verb moves to the end of the sub clause. For example, “Ich weiß, dass du das Buch gelesen hast” (I know that you have read the book). The verb “hast” is at the end of the subordinate clause “dass du das Buch gelesen hast.”

Here are some more examples:

Ich bleibe zu Hause, wenn es regnet.

(I stay at home when it rains.)

The comma designates the boundary between the two sentences or clauses. Analyze them separately. Note how each clause has their own subject (ich/es) and verb (bleibe/regnet), but for the subordinate clause the verb slips towards the end.

Ich mag Action-Filme, weil sie spannend sind.

(I like action movies, because they are thrilling.)

You can also switch up the order if you like, moving the sub-clause first, but since it's subordinated, the verb still remains at the end:

Weil sie spannend sind, mag ich Action-Filme.

(Because they are exciting, I like action movies)

Eagle-eyed readers will have noticed how the subject "ich" of the main clause has shifted position in this order? Well-spotted!

This is because now the sub-clause occupies the first position of the sentence!

[Weil sie spannend sind], mag ich Action-Filme.

You see? Not only can you place adverbs or objects into the first position, but even whole sentences!

Common Mistakes and Misconceptions: Embrace the Imperfections

As with any new skill, learning the German word order can be challenging, and making mistakes is part of the process.

Some common errors include misplacing verbs in main and subordinate clauses, incorrect positioning of adverbs (mind the ZAP!), and getting confused with separable verbs and modal verbs. Don't worry, though; practice makes perfect (or as we say in German, "Übung macht den Meister").

If there's just one thing you should take away from this guide then it's wrapping

your head around the concept of 2nd position, because it applies almost anywhere and spotting it will help make sense of even the most complex sentences. In my experience, understanding this basic idea is one of the most important keys to unlocking German syntax.



Free German Worksheets & Exercises for Beginners and Intermediate Learners

So, there you have it—a beginner’s guide to German word order. With a little practice and a lot of patience, you’ll be stringing together flawless German sentences in no time. Now, go forth and conquer your German clauses, one well-ordered phrase at a time. *Viel Erfolg!*

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