

Der, die oder das? Genusregeln im Deutschen – ein Spickzettel // Noun gender rules in German – a cheat sheet

You'll usually be understood in German if you get the gender of a noun wrong, but you won't be able to progress beyond the basics without it. After all, the case endings in the singular depend on whether a noun is masculine, feminine or neuter.

It's better to get the wrong "article" (word for "the" or "a") than to leave it out altogether.

So, if you really have no idea, just guess. The odds of being right? The German *Duden* (standard dictionary) gives figures of 46% feminine, 34% masculine and 20% neuter. There are also other figures out there (Baayen, Piepenbrock, & Gulikers, 1995) suggesting masculine 43%, feminine 38% and neuter 19%. While these figures don't necessarily reflect the frequency of words they do suggest not to guess "das", *oder*?

It really helps to **learn nouns in the context of phrases**, with the article and case endings already there for you. That's the way that German-speaking children learn, without ever having to think about it.

For adult learners, though, there are also some really helpful regularities. On the one hand, some words can be **grouped masculine, feminine or neuter by meaning**.

On the other hand, the **endings** of many words give a strong clue as to their gender.

Here we go!

GROUPED BY MEANING	
Feminine by meaning	Exceptions
Most trees and flowers: die Birke, die Rose.	
Most rivers in the German speaking lands: die Spree, die Donau	But der Rhein – Vater Rhein, after all!. Those outside the German speaking lands are masculine: der Jordan, der Nil, der Mississippi but die Themse.
Planes, ships and motorbikes: die Boeing die Sportster XL....	(but der Airbus – because “der Bus”),
Nouns of number and size: die Eins, die Zwei, die Million. die Länge (length), die Breite (width)).	(but das Hundert, das Thausand).
Masculine by meaning	
Days, months, seasons: der Donnerstag, der Januar, der Sommer.	
Points of the compass, weather: der Norden, der Wind, der Frost (but die Brise, das Eis, and das Wetter itself).	
Rocks and minerals: der Diamant (not a girl’s best friend after all?), der Sand; der Schwefel.	(but die Kreide, das Mineral). Also see metals below (neuter by meaning).
Many drinks, especially booze (der Tee, der Kaffee, der Wein, der Vodka.	but das Bier.
Makes of car: der BMW, de Audi, der Hillman Imp (that’s the British one that you’ll see der Trabant overtaking in the fast lane of die Autobahn).	
Neuter by meaning	
Towns, countries, continents: das alte Berlin, das Europa, das moderne Afrika.	(but die Schweiz, die Bretagne, die Riviera, der Irak, der Lebanon).
Hotels, Cafés, Restaurants and Cinemas: das Hilton, das “Ritzy” (here in Brixton 😊).	

Units of measurement: das Kilo, das Gramm (Liter, Meter and their compounds like Kilometer are officially neuter in Germany. Also worth mentioning here are particles like das Molekül, das Atom, das Elektron, das Neutron.	They are often used as masculine nouns as well, though, and they are officially masculine in Switzerland).
Metals: das Gold, das Eisen, das Kupfer, das Uran, das Messing Metals: das Gold, das Eisen, das Kupfer, das Uran, das Messing.	(but die Bronze, der Stahl).
Colours: das Rote, das Blau.	(usually adjectives)
Languages: das Englisch, das Spanisch.	
Letters of the alphabet: das A, das B....).	
GROUPED BY ENDING	
Typical feminine endings	
-a (except -ma – see neuter, below);	-ik (die Musik, die Physik).
-anz/-enz (die Eleganz, die Instanz, die Intelligenz);	-in (die Freundin); many female versions of roles that people can have (with masculine form ending in -er) e.g. die Zuschauerin; die Besucherin, including many jobs and professions, e.g. die Ärztin; die Mechanikerin.
-e (thousands but key irregulars are der Name and der Käse; das Auge, das Ende). But <u>watch out</u> for the “weak” masculine nouns – the “n-Deklination”: der Bursche, der Affe and masculine or neuter adjectival nouns such as der Alte or der Blinde).	-ion (die Generation, die Expedition).
-ei (die Bücherei).	schaft (die Nachbarschaft, die Gesellschaft).
-ette (die Zigarette).	sis (die Basis).
-heit or -keit (die Gesundheit, die Schönheit).	-tät (die Universität); die Pubertät.

ie (die Chemie).	-ur (die Natur, die Figur. But der Flur).
-ik (die Musik, die Physik).	-ung (die Übung, die Bedeutung, die Zeitung).
Typical masculine endings	
-ant/-ent (der Student).	-ling (der Lehrling, der Flüchtling).
-ast (der Ast, der Palast).	-ist (der Polizist, der Pianist).
-er (when referring to people, like der Arbeiter, der Lehrer – see below for corresponding female forms).	-or (der Traktor, der Motor).
-ich (der Teppich, der Meerrettich).	us der Sozialismus and, erm, der Feminismus).
-ig (der Käfig, der Honig).	
Typical neuter endings	
-chen (das Mädchen).	-lein (das Fräulein).
-en (infinitives used as nouns like das Gehen, das Teetinken) das Gehen.	-ment (often loan words like das Medikament (drug), das Appartement, das Testament but der Zement];
ett (often loan words – das Tablett).	-o (das Büro, das Konto but der Espresso).
-icht (das Licht).	-tel (das Drittel).
-il (das Wohnmobil but der Stil).	-tum (often loan words but Germanic ones too, such as das Wachstum).
-ma das Thema (often loan words remember die Oma!).	-um (often loanwords like das Studium, das Album. Note: der Reichtum).
-it (das Dynamit).	

There are also **endings which TEND to have a certain gender** but where there are far more exceptions:

So: **-el, -er, -en endings** are 60% masculine, 25% feminine and 15% neuter (on the latter – see above).

Nouns with the **prefix “ge-”** are 90% neuter (but der Gehalt (in the sense of “contents” (das Gehalt – “salary”), der Gewinn profit, die Geburt, die Geschichte).

Nouns ending **-nis and -sal** are often neuter (about 70% – das Gebäude, das Gespräch, the rest feminine – die Besorgnis, die Erkenntnis).

Compound nouns – of which there are so many in German – almost always take the **gender of the last element**: die Autobahn; der Sozialversicherungsfachangestelltenauszubildender.]

Abbreviations take the gender the abbreviated substantive would have in full: “die DB” (die Deutsche Bahn – because “die Bahn”); “die BRD” (die Bundesrepublik Deutschland because “die Republik”).

The gender of some words **varies by meaning**, for example der Band (book or volume) and das Band (tape, band or ribbon); die See (sea) or der See (lake – remember “am Bodensee”). Others are der Kiefer (jaw) and die Kiefer (pine tree); der Leiter (leader) and die Leiter (ladder) or die Steuer (tax) und das Steuer (steering-wheel or helm of ship). The plurals of such words often differ, too.

Some words have a **gender that varies** by dialect, region or country: die Butter in Germany, der Butter in Austria. Das Radio in northern Germany, der Radio in the south and Austria. Mainly das Marzipan in the Federal Republic and der Marzipan in Austria.

When talking about **jobs**, In English, the modern preference is to ditch the old female forms (e.g. manager and poet not manageress, poetess). In German you do the opposite and make a point of using both forms (if men and women are meant). Many masculine nouns for jobs can be made feminine by adding **-in** (plural – innen): Lehrer/-in; Steuerberater/-in (tax advisor), Bundeskanzlerin.

Recent loan words from English are 60% masculine: der Job, der Jazz. The rest are generally neuter: das Baby, das Poster. Some are feminine by analogy (die City like die

Stadt, die Party like die Feier). Some are of unstable gender, for now: die/das Cola, der/die Forehand (i.e. in tennis)).

That's it. Ok, I set out to help, but maybe I overwhelmed you?

Take heart! (That'll be "das Herz", of course.)

When you're **just starting a language**, it seems like there's such a lot to learn....and there is!

If you're a **beginner**, take the practical tips from this piece and start to get a sense of the groups. Look at this post as **setting the scene** and as something to **come back to repeatedly** during the course of your progress towards fluency and beyond. Whatever you do, don't let the travails of remembering German noun gender get in the way of enjoying the language as you learn!

Remember, natives sometimes make mistakes or are unsure of the gender.

Usually, you'll be understood.

As you get better, it starts to feel good to start getting the hang of the system.

Bleib daran!

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