

BACK TO GRAMMAR WORKSHEETSHandout: Infinitivsätze

You have probably noticed that in many German sentences, infinitives appear with a "zu" before them. These "zu + infinitive" structures are called infinitive clauses, and they're quite common -- and luckily fairly easy. We have infinitive clauses in English, too. For example:

Sie hat keine Zeit zu lesen.

*She has no time to read.*

Er hat vergessen, seine Hausaufgaben zu machen.

*He forgot to do his homework.*

The one possible confusion between German and English arises because in English, we use a 'to' with some modal verbs, but German does not. Remember that when using a modal verb in German, you simply place the infinitive verb at the end of the clause; in English we sometimes (with certain constructions) add a 'to'.

Er will tanzen. (no zu)

*He wants to dance.*

Er muss nach Hause gehen.

*He has to go home (or: He must go home.)*

The difference between modal verb constructions and infinitive clauses is that modal verbs function as helping verbs, whereas in infinitive clauses, there are two main verbs which exist independently of each other. For clarification: with modal verbs, you cannot remove the infinitive and still have a complete sentence. ('He wants' is not a complete sentence; it needs the full infinitive, 'He wants to dance.') With infinitive clauses we have two separate complete thoughts ('She has no time. She doesn't read.' ⇒ 'She has no time to read.')

Infinitive clauses can provide additional information, or they can substitute for a subject or an object in a sentence. If your infinitive clause has a direct or indirect object make sure to put it in its appropriate case:

Das ist leicht zu verstehen.

*[more information, no objects]*

Es macht mir viel Spaß, mit dir zu tanzen.

*[object of prepositional phrase]*

Ich habe Lust, diesen Film zu sehen.

*[direct object]*

Es ist schwer, ihm zu helfen.

*[dative verb object]*

Ich habe vor, meiner Schwester den Hut zu geben.

*[direct object / indirect object]*

Note on comma placement: In German, you usually add a comma when there are any elements other than just the "zu + infinitive". Under the new spelling rules, the comma is completely optional, but it still is used frequently in long clauses.

Infinitive clauses often appear with common phrases, such as:

Es macht Spaß ...

*It's fun to ...*

Es ist leicht/schwer ...

*It's easy/hard to ...*

Ich habe Lust ...

*I want to / I feel like ...*

With separable prefix verbs, everything gets put together into one word: *prefix+zu+verb*:

Ich darf nicht vergessen, meine Mutter anzurufen.

*I mustn't forget to call my mother.*