

## Word Order in German: Summary

• adapted (modified and corrected) from <http://www.class.uh.edu/mcl/fl/Germ/order.html>

### First Sentence Elements

1. The most common first element in a German sentence is the grammatical **subject**.

• **Dieser Zug** fährt über Augsburg nach Frankfurt.

(This train travels to Frankfurt via Augsburg.)

2. **Words modifying the subject** are considered part of the first element.

• **Der letzte Zug aus München** fährt über Nürnberg nach Frankfurt.

(The last train out of Munich travels to Frankfurt via Nürnberg.)

3. When German speakers put adverbial expressions or prepositional phrases in first position for the sake of emphasis, the **subject moves to a position after the conjugated verb (red)**.

• In wenigen Minuten **wird der Zug** Frankfurt erreichen.

(In a few minutes, the train will reach Frankfurt.)

• Auf unseren Besuch in Frankfurt **freuen wir** uns sehr.

(We are very much looking forward to our visit in Frankfurt.)

4. **Direct objects, indirect objects, infinitives, and participles** can also occur in first position, but this is usually only in response to specific questions asking for information.

• **Blumen** hat er gekauft. (He bought flowers.) (direct object)

• **Meinen Eltern** schreibe ich. (I am writing my parents.) (indirect object)

• **Essen** wollen wir jetzt nicht. (We do not want to eat now.) (infinitive)

• **Verstanden** habe ich vom Vortrag überhaupt nichts. (I did not understand anything at all of the lecture.) (past participle)

5. **Ja, Nein, and nouns of address** are NOT considered first elements; they are set off by a comma, and the actual sentence begins after the comma.

• **Ja**, das ist die Liechtensteiner Polka, mein Schatz.

(Yes, that is the Liechtenstein polka, my dear.)

• **Mein lieber Mann**, das würde ich Ihnen nicht empfehlen.

(My dear fellow, I would not recommend that to you.)

## Position of the Conjugated Verb

1. In a statement, the **second sentence element** in a main clause is the conjugated verb, regardless of which element occupies the first position.

- Die Arbeit **geht** jetzt gut.
- Jetzt **geht** die Arbeit gut.
- Gut **geht** die Arbeit jetzt.

2. When a compound sentence consists of a **main/independent** clause and a **subordinate/dependent** clause (joined by a subordinating conjunction: dass, weil, obwohl, wenn, ob etc.), the conjugated verb in the subordinate/dependent clause goes to the end.

- Die Arbeit geht gut, weil wir mehr Zeit **haben**.

(The work is going fine, because we have more time.)

3. When a compound sentence begins with a **subordinate/dependent** clause, the main clause begins with the verb.

- Weil wir mehr Zeit haben, **geht** die Arbeit jetzt gut.

(Because we have more time, the work is going fine now.)

4. When a compound sentence consists of **2 main/independent** clauses (connected by a coordinating conjunction: aber, denn, oder, sondern, and und) the conjunction is NOT considered to be part of either clause. Thus, the position of the conjugated verb in the second clause does NOT change.

- Sie studiert in Heidelberg, aber ihre Familie **wohnt** in Köln.

(She is studying in Heidleberg, but her family lives in Cologne.)

5. The conjugated auxiliary verb in a subordinate/dependent clause **follows infinitives and past participles**.

- Ex: Sie gingen heim, nachdem sie Lebensmittel eingekauft **hatten**.

(They went home after they had shopped for groceries.)

6. The conjugated auxiliary verb in a subordinate clause **precedes a double infinitive** in final position.

- Ex: Wir wissen, daß er sie **hat** besuchen wollen.

(We know that he wanted to visit her.)

7. As in English, the **subordinating conjunction [daß - that]** may be omitted. When this happens, the second clause is considered a main clause and the verb stays in second position.

•Ex: Ich weiß, daß er lieber zu Hause **ißt**.

(I know that he prefers to eat at home.)

•Ex: Ich weiß, er **ißt** lieber zu Hause.

(I know he prefers to eat at home.)

### Subjects, Direct Objects, and Indirect Objects

1. **Indirect** (dative) objects precede **direct** (accusative) objects.

• Gestern kaufte Tina **ihrer Mutter ein Geschenk**.

(Yesterday, Tina bought her mother a present.)

2. An accusative (direct) object **pronoun** precedes a dative (indirect) object, even if the dative object is also a pronoun.

•Ex: Gestern kaufte Tina **es ihr/ihrer Mutter**.

(Yesterday, Tina bought it for her/her mother.)

3. A direct object noun (but, NEVER a pronoun) may sometimes be placed after the indirect object for **emphasis**.

• Ex: Tina kaufte ihrer Mutter zum Geburtstag **ein Geschenk**.

• Ex: Tina hat ihrer Mutter zum Geburtstag **ein Geschenk** gekauft.

(Tina bought her mother a present for her birthday.)

### Adverbial Expressions after the Main Verb

Adverbial expressions NOT in first position follow the sequence **Time, Manner, Place**

• Ex: Peter hat mich heute früh nach Hause gebracht.

(Peter brought me home early this morning.)

• Ex: Peter hat mich in seinem Auto nach Hause gebracht.

(Peter brought me home in his car.)

• Ex: Peter hat mich heute früh in seinem Auto nach Hause gebracht.

(Peter brought me home early this morning in his car.)

## The Position of Verbal Complements

1. In German, the most important **information complementing or completing the idea of the conjugated** verb tends to be in final position within a sentence. Such elements are called verbal complements.

2. Common verbal complements: **seperable prefixes, past participles, and infinitives.**

•Ex: Sie schreibt seinen Namen **auf**.

(She writes down his name.) (seperable prefix)

•Ex: Wir haben keine Blumen im Garten **gefunden**.

(We found no flowers in the garden.) (past participle)

•Ex: Wir werden/wollen viele Gäste zur Party **einladen**.

(We will/want invite many guests to the party.) (infinitive)

•Ex: Die Katze hat alles **aufgefressen**.

(The cat ate everything.) (seperable prefix + past participle)

## Positions of the Conjugated Verb in Questions

1. The conjugated verb takes the **first position in yes-no questions**, followed immediately by the subject.

•Ex: **Geht** die Arbeit jetzt gut?

(Is the work going well now?)

2. The conjugated verb **follows an interrogative** word or expression.

•Ex: Was **macht** die Arbeit so schwer? (What makes the work so difficult?)

•Ex: Bei was für einer Firma **arbeitest** du? (For what sort of company do you work?)

3. In indirect questions, the question itself is a subordinate clause and the verb stands in final position within this clause.

•Ex: Sie fragt, bei was für einer Firma du **arbeitest**.

(She is asking what sort of company you work for.)

## Relative Clauses

A relative clause (introduced by a relative pronoun: der, die, das [who, that, which]) is a subordinate/dependent clause; the conjugated verb occupies the **final position** within this clause.

- Ex: Ich bewundere Menschen, die Sport **treiben**.  
(I admire people who engage in sports.)

## Position of Nicht

The position of nicht is determined by various elements in the sentence.

Nicht **follows**:

- the finite verb (Ruth **arbeitet** nicht.)
- nouns used as direct and indirect objects (Sie macht **ihre Arbeit** nicht.)
- pronouns used as direct and indirect objects (Ich glaube **es** nicht.)
- specific adverbs of time (Warum arbeitet sie **heute** nicht?)

Nicht **precedes** most other kinds of elements:

- predicate nouns (Gerd ist nicht **mein Freund**.)
- predicate adjectives (Er ist nicht **nett**.)
- adverbs (Ich arbeite nicht **gern** mit ihm zusammen.)
- general time adverbs (Ich sehe ihn nicht **oft**.)
- prepositional phrases (Ich fahre nicht **zu ihm**.)
- separable prefixes (Er kommt auch nicht **vorbei**.)
- infinitives (Ich kann ihn nicht **verstehen**.)
- past participles (Warum hat er nicht **angerufen**?)