German sounds Die Aussprache

Good news: German is written the way it sounds. Learn the letters on this page and you can read almost any word aloud, even one you've never seen. The orange hints spell the sound the English way:

VAS-er	capitals: the part you stress	**eye vine**	the ei sound, as in eye and mine
ah ay ee oh oo	long, no glide: father, say, see, go, food	**ow oy**	as in how and boy
a e i o u	short: cat, bed, bit, hot, put	**kh**	the ach sound, as in Scottish loch
eh	the e of bed, held long	**hy**	the ich sound: a strong h, as in huge
öh ö üh ü	the umlauts, page 2	**ts ng**	as in cats and singer
uh	the weak e at the end of bitte	**r**	after a vowel: not said, as in British English
er	at the end: a light uh, no r	**|**	a tiny catch, page 5

The alphabet: what the letters are called

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O
ah	bay	tsay	day	ay	ef	gay	hah	ee	yot	kah	el	em	en	oh
P	**Q**	**R**	**S**	**T**	**U**	**V**	**W**	**X**	**Y**	**Z**	**Ä**	**Ö**	**Ü**	**ß**
pay	koo	air	es	tay	oo	fow	vay	iks	ÜP-si-lon	tset	eh	öh	üh	es-TSET

Spelling your name on the phone? J is yot, V is fow, W is vay and Z is tset: the four that trip up English speakers.

Letters that don't sound like English

w — sounds like v
Wasser **VAS-er**, wie **vee**

v — sounds like f, and v in some borrowed words
Vater **FAH-ter**, viel **feel** · Vase **VAH-zuh**, Klavier **kla-VEER**

z, tz — sounds like ts, even at the start
Zeit **tsite**, zehn **tsayn**, Katze **KAT-suh**

j — sounds like y
ja **yah**, Jahr **yahr**

s+vowel — sounds like z; anywhere else s
Sonne **ZON-uh**, sieben **ZEE-buhn**

ß, ss — sounds like s, never z
Straße **SHTRAH-suh**, Fluss **flus**

sch — sounds like sh
Schule **SHOO-luh**, Fisch **fish**

sp, st — sounds like shp, sht at the start of a word or word part
Sport **shport**, Stein **shtine** · but Fenster **FEN-ster**

qu — sounds like kv
Quatsch **kvach**, bequem **buh-KVAYM**

chs — sounds like ks
sechs **zeks**, Fuchs **fuks**

tsch — sounds like ch as in chip
Deutsch **doych**, tschüss **chüs**

ch: two sounds

After a, o, u and au: kh

The rasp in Scottish loch: the back of your tongue nearly touches the roof of your mouth. Not a k.

acht **akht** · **Buch** **bookh** · **auch** **owkh**

Everywhere else: hy

Say the y in yes with no voice: a strong h, as in huge. Not sh, not k. The ending -chen always takes this one.

ich **ihy** · **Milch** **milhy** · **Mädchen** **MEHT-hyuhn**

The sound swaps with the vowel: **Buch** **bookh** but **Bücher** **BÜH-hyer**. And -ig at the end sounds like ich: **König** **KÖH-nihy**, **zwanzig** **TSVAN-tsihy**, **richtig** **RIHY-tihy**. Add an ending and the g comes back: **Könige** **KÖH-ni-guh**.

This sheet is standard German as taught in Germany. Austria, Switzerland and many regions sound a little different: a rolled r, s instead of z at the start of a word, -ik for -ig. Everyone understands the standard.

Vowels Die Vokale

Keep them pure: English vowels slide. Go ends in a little w and say ends in a little y. German oh and ay stop dead: hold your mouth still while you say them.

Every vowel comes long or short

	Long	Short
a	Vater **FAH-ter** father	Mann **man** man
e	Tee **tay** tea	essen **ES-uhn** to eat
i, ie	Kino **KEE-noh** cinema	Tisch **tish** table
o	Sohn **zohn** son	kommen **KOM-uhn** to come
u	gut **goot** good	Mutter **MUT-er** mother

Long signs: a doubled vowel, **Boot** **boht**, **Haar** **hahr**; an h after the vowel, which is silent, **fahren** **FAH-ruhn**, **gehen** **GAY-uhn**; ie, **Liebe** **LEE-buh**; and a vowel at the end of a syllable, **Name** **NAH-muh**.

Short sign: a double consonant after the vowel: **Mann** **man**, **essen** **ES-uhn**. ck and tz count as double: **Glück** **glük**. That's also why ß follows long vowels and ss short ones: **Maße** **MAH-suh**, **Masse** **MAS-uh**, **Fuß** **foos**.

The umlauts: ä, ö, ü

ä

Like the e in bed. Long ä is the same sound held; many people just say ay.

Äpfel **EP-fuhl** apples

Käse **KEH-zuh** cheese

ö

Say ay and hold it. Now round your lips as if for oh, but keep your tongue where it was.

zwölf **tsvölf** twelve

hören **HÖH-ruhn** to hear

ü

Say ee and hold it. Now round your lips into a small circle, as if to whistle, tongue still.

fünf **fünf** five

müde **MÜH-duh** tired

No dots on your keyboard? write ae, oe and ue: Käse becomes Kaese. Never just drop the dots: they change the sound and often the meaning.

ei or ie? Say the second letter

The trick: say the English name of the second letter. ei ends in i, so it's eye. ie ends in e, so it's ee.

Wein	·	Wien	Leid	·	Lied	Beine	·	Biene
vine		**veen**	**lite**		**leet**	**BINE-uh**		**BEE-nuh**
wine		Vienna	sorrow		song	legs		bee

au, eu and äu

au is ow, as in how: **Baum** **bowm**, **Auto** **OW-toh**.

eu and äu are both oy, as in boy: **heute** **HOY-tuh**, **neu** **noy**, **Bäume** **BOY-muh**.

-e, -en and -er at the end

A last -e is always said, a short weak uh: **bitte** **BIT-uh**. In -en the e almost disappears: **haben** **HAH-buhn**.

-er has no r, just a light uh, a touch more open: **bitter** **BIT-er**. Say **bitte** **BIT-uh** and **bitter** **BIT-er** one after the other and hear the difference.

Consonants Die Konsonanten

Hard at the end: b, d and g at the end of a word or word part sound like p, t and k, and s is a plain s. Add an ending and the soft sound comes back.

b, d, g at the end: p, t, k

Hund · Hunde	Tag · Tage	gelb · gelbe	Haus · Häuser
hunt · **HUN-duh**	**tahk** · **TAH-guh**	**gelp** · **GEL-buh**	**hows** · **HOY-zer**
dog · dogs	day · days	yellow · yellow, before a noun	house · houses

Short words too: **ab** **ap**. Inside a word it happens at the end of each part: in **Handschuh** **HANT-shoo** the d is a t.

Two words, one sound: **Rad** **raht** and **Rat** **raht** sound exactly the same. The sentence tells you which one it is.

The German r: two kinds

Before a vowel: from the throat

Make it where you'd gargle, very softly: a light rasp at the back, never the English r. In the south, Austria and Switzerland many people roll it with the tip of the tongue instead. Both are fine.

rot **roht** · **Brot** **broht** · **Frau** **frow**

After a vowel: a light uh

At the end of a word or syllable the r turns into a light uh, just as in British English: **der** **dair**, **mehr** **mair**, **hier** **heer**, **Uhr** **oor**. The -er of **aber** **AH-ber** is the same.

When a vowel follows, the r comes back: **Tür** **tühr**, **Türen** **TÜH-ruhn**, like British far and far away.

l, pf and ng

l: always clear

Keep it light, like the l in leaf, even at the end. Never the dark l of English ball or feel.

Ball **bal** · **alt** **alt** · **viel** **feel**

pf: say both

Close your lips for p, then let it out through your teeth as f. Don't drop the p.

Pferd **pfairt** · **Apfel** **AP-fuhl** · **Kopf** **kopf**

ng: as in singer

Never as in English finger: no g after it. Only where two word parts meet is it n + g: **Eingang** **INE-gang**.

Finger **FING-er** · **Hunger** **HUNG-er** · **lang** **lang** · **singen** **ZING-uhn**

Same sound, other spelling

ck = k
Zucker **TSUK-er**

tz = ts
Katze **KAT-suh**

dt = t
Stadt **shtat**

th = t
Theater **tay-|AH-ter**

ph = f
Physik **fü-ZEEK**

v = f
Vater **FAH-ter**

Double letters are one sound: in **Mutter** **MUT-er** you hear one t, not two. The double letter only tells you the vowel before it is short.

Stress Die Betonung

Usually the first syllable: German leans hard on one part of a word, and in most words that's the first. The stressed part is pink.

Arbeit **AR-bite** work	**Spra**che **SHPRAH-khuh** language	**Ant**wort **ANT-vort** answer	**Sams**tag **ZAMS-tahk** Saturday

These starts are never stressed: be- ge- er- ver- zer- ent- emp- miss-

be**kom**men **buh-KOM-uhn** to get	Ge**sicht** **guh-ZIHYT** face	er**zäh**len **er-TSEH-luhn** to tell	ver**kau**fen **fer-KOW-fuhn** to sell
zer**stö**ren **tser-SHTÖH-ruhn** to destroy	ent**de**cken **ent-DEK-uhn** to discover	emp**feh**len **emp-FAY-luhn** to recommend	miss**lin**gen **mis-LING-uhn** to go wrong

One exception: in nouns miss- does take the stress: das **Miss**verständnis **MIS-fer-shtent-nis**.

Separable starts take the stress

arrive or understand?

ankommen **AN-kom-uhn** to arrive	ver**ste**hen **fer-SHTAY-uhn** to understand

An splits off to the end of a sentence and keeps the stress: Ich komme morgen **an**. Ver- never splits off.

More that split off and take the stress

an, auf, aus, ein, mit, vor, weg, zurück...

aufstehen **OWF-shtay-uhn** to get up	**ein**kaufen **INE-kow-fuhn** to go shopping	zu**rück**kommen **tsu-RÜK-kom-uhn** to come back

Same spelling, different stress

über**set**zen **üh-ber-ZET-suhn** to translate	**ü**bersetzen **ÜH-ber-zet-suhn** to ferry across	
Au**gust** **ow-GUST** August, the month	**Au**gust **OW-gust** August, the name	
mo**dern** **mo-DERN** modern	**mo**dern **MOH-dern** to rot	

Borrowed words: stress at or near the end

Mu**sik** **moo-ZEEK** music	Ho**tel** **ho-TEL** hotel	Pro**blem** **pro-BLAYM** problem	Stu**dent** **shtoo-DENT** student
Na**tur** **na-TOOR** nature	Bäcke**rei** **be-kuh-RYE** bakery	stu**die**ren **shtoo-DEE-ruhn** to study	Universi**tät** **oo-ni-ver-zi-TEHT** university

Endings that pull the stress: -ei, -ent, -ieren, -ität and -ur, as in the words above.

Compounds: stress the first part

Haustür **HOWS-tühr** front door	**Kühl**schrank **KÜHL-shrank** fridge	**Bahn**hof **BAHN-hohf** station	**Fuß**ball **FOOS-bal** football	**Hand**schuh **HANT-shoo** glove

German builds long words from short ones, and the first part takes the stress. A few break the rule: **Jahrhundert** **yahr-HUN-dert**, century.

Spoken German Gesprochenes Deutsch

Subtitles tidy it up: they often write the full words while the actor says a shorter version. Here's how the two drift apart in everyday speech.

Written, then what you hear

WRITTEN
Wir haben Zeit.
YOU HEAR
Wir ham Zeit.
veer ham tsite
We've got time.

WRITTEN
Ich habe Hunger.
YOU HEAR
Ich hab Hunger.
ihy hap HUNG-er
I'm hungry.

WRITTEN
Ist es weit?
YOU HEAR
Isses weit?
IS-uhs vite
Is it far?

WRITTEN
Gehst du mit?
YOU HEAR
Gehste mit?
GAY-stuh mit
Are you coming too?

WRITTEN
Ich weiß nicht.
YOU HEAR
Ich weiß nich.
ihy vice nihy
I don't know.

WRITTEN
Hast du eine Idee?
YOU HEAR
Haste 'ne Idee?
HAS-tuh nuh ee-DAY
Any ideas?

WRITTEN
Nur ein bisschen.
YOU HEAR
Nur 'n bisschen.
noor n BIS-hyuhn
Just a bit.

WRITTEN
Wie geht es dir?
YOU HEAR
Wie geht's dir?
vee gayts deer
How are you?

Endings melt: **haben** becomes **ham**, and the e of -en often goes: **gehen** sounds like gayn. In ich forms the last e drops: ich hab, ich geh.

du sticks to the verb: **gehst du** becomes **gehste**, **hast du** becomes **haste**, **kannst du** becomes **kannste**. **ein**, **eine** and **einen** shrink to **'n**, **'ne** and **'nen**.

Not quite nicht: in the north and in much of everyday talk it loses its t: **nich**. In the south and Austria you'll hear **net**.

The catch: how German keeps words apart

A tiny stop before a vowel

English and French run words together: an apple can sound like a napple. German puts a tiny catch before any word or word part that starts with a vowel, like the break in uh-oh. It's why German can sound clipped.

am Abend **|am |AH-buhnt** · **beachten** **buh-|AKH-tuhn** · **Theater** **tay-|AH-ter** · **Spiegelei** **SHPEE-guhl-|eye**

The catch changes the word

vereisen
fer-|EYE-zuhn
to freeze over

verreisen
fer-RYE-zuhn
to go away on a trip

With the catch, ver + eisen, you hear ice. Without it, ver + reisen, you're off on a trip.

Little words you'll hear in every scene

ähm
ehm
um, er

na ja
na yah
well...

halt
halt
just, that's how it is

doch
dokh
yes it is! (after a no)

ne
nuh
right? (in the north)

gell
gel
right? (in the south)

Next: listen for these in a German show you like. Once you've caught ham, nich and 'ne a few times, you'll hear them everywhere.

Practice Übung

6 · pairs, tongue twisters, ten sentences

How: say each pair slowly, then fast, until the two words sound clearly different.

Long or short?

Miete **MEE-tuh** rent	Mitte **MIT-uh** middle
Beet **bayt** flower bed	Bett **bet** bed
Staat **shtaht** country, state	Stadt **shtat** town
Ofen **OH-fuhn** oven	offen **OF-uhn** open
Hüte **HÜH-tuh** hats	Hütte **HÜT-uh** hut
fühlen **FÜH-luhn** to feel	füllen **FÜL-uhn** to fill

Dots or no dots?

schon **shohn** already	schön **shöhn** beautiful
kennen **KEN-uhn** to know	können **KÖN-uhn** can
lesen **LAY-zuhn** to read	lösen **LÖH-zuhn** to solve
vier **feer** four	für **führ** for
Tier **teer** animal	Tür **tühr** door
Kiste **KIS-tuh** box	Küste **KÜS-tuh** coast

Tongue twisters

Fischers Fritz fischt frische Fische, frische Fische fischt Fischers Fritz. — sch and f, and short i

Zehn zahme Ziegen zogen zehn Zentner Zucker zum Zoo. — z is ts, every time

Blaukraut bleibt Blaukraut und Brautkleid bleibt Brautkleid. — au and ei, bl and br

Wenn Fliegen hinter Fliegen fliegen, fliegen Fliegen Fliegen hinterher. — the light l and ie

Ten sentences: cover the right side

1	Wir fahren morgen nach München.	**veer FAH-ruhn MOR-guhn nahkh MÜN-hyuhn.** We're going to Munich tomorrow.
2	Ich habe meinen Schlüssel vergessen.	**ihy HAH-buh MINE-uhn SHLÜS-uhl fer-GES-uhn.** I've forgotten my key.
3	Das Mädchen trinkt heute keine Milch.	**das MEHT-hyuhn trinkt HOY-tuh KINE-uh milhy.** The girl isn't drinking any milk today.
4	Wann kommt der Zug in Berlin an?	**van komt dair tsook in ber-LEEN an?** When does the train get into Berlin?
5	Meine Mutter arbeitet in einem Hotel.	**MINE-uh MUT-er AR-bye-tuht in INE-uhm ho-TEL.** My mum works in a hotel.
6	Ich rufe dich später an.	**ihy ROO-fuh dihy SHPEH-ter an.** I'll ring you later.
7	Entschuldigung, wo ist der Bahnhof?	**ent-SHUL-di-gung, voh ist dair BAHN-hohf?** Excuse me, where's the station?
8	Das Wetter ist heute wirklich schön.	**das VET-er ist HOY-tuh VIRK-lihy shöhn.** The weather's really lovely today.
9	Wir haben zwanzig Minuten gewartet.	**veer HAH-buhn TSVAN-tsihy mi-NOO-tuhn guh-VAR-tuht.** We waited twenty minutes.
10	Können Sie mir bitte helfen?	**KÖN-uhn zee meer BIT-uh HEL-fuhn?** Could you help me, please?

Meet a word you don't know? In Kitsumi, hover any word in subtitles to see what it means.