

A Course in Reading Written German for Linguists who speak English

Lesson 1

Concepts: Case and the Article and Adjectives

The Article

German is similar to English in many ways. One of which is its use of a distinction between a definite and an indefinite article. The German definite article is cognate with English *the*, and differs only in that it inflects for case, number, and gender. The indirect article is also cognate with English *a/an*, and more clearly reflects the derivation from the numeral *one*.

It is good practice to be able to identify the articles and to call them out by their true name, that is to be able to translate them with English *the* and *a/an* respectively. As your skill progresses and you become familiar with the grammatical genders of the nouns, you will be able to use case to help you determine the function of the noun in the sentence. It is common practice in written German to pull a naked (that is, unannounced by a preposition) accusative, dative, or genitive to the beginning of a sentence for emphasis. But fear not. A syntactically open and suspicious mind will allow you, once you have recognized the word as an article, to put it in its proper place.

Case and the Article

Modern Standard High German (Hochdeutsch) has four surviving cases: Nominative, Accusative, Dative, and Genitive. The latter is dying out in spoken and non-academic written German and being replaced by the dative.¹ It is however alive and well in academic and older written German as well as in several expressions.

If you wish to learn to speak and write German, you will be devastated to hear that the article cannot be mentioned without concomitantly discussing adjective (and noun) endings. The reason for this is that depending on whether the definite, indefinite, or no article precedes an adjective, the adjective's ending will be different. As a soon-to-be reader of German, however, this is very good news. There will be copious small indicators of case and number for you to feast your eyes upon. German is informative to the receiver and demanding on the producer.

¹ There is even a popular book series called *Der Dativ ist dem Genitiv sein Tod* "The Dative is the Death of the Genitive", which brilliantly uses the modern dative construction that is replacing the old genitive. It consists of the possessor in the dative followed by the possessive pronoun of the possessor and then then the possessed object. Translated literally into English, it would amount to "The Dative is for Genitive it's (i.e. the Genitive's) Death".

The Definite Article

The definite article is grammatically more informative than the indefinite article, as will be seen. Its corresponding effects on the adjective endings are therefore more milquetoast.

The articles will be discussed by gender and case. It should be mentioned first of all that the plural form of the article of each case will be the same in all three genders. The plural is progressive. The plural does not see gender. All are welcome. That is to say, formally, the plural acts as a sort of fourth gender. Additionally, regardless of case, the adjective ending of the plural is always *-en*.

The Nominative

In the nominative, we find our iconic trio: *der, die, das* or in English *the, the, the*.² The plural is *die*. The corresponding adjective ending for all genders in the singular is the most minimal possible³: *-e*. For the plural, it is (as always) *-en*.

Der Mann. Der gute Mann.	The man. The good man.
Die Frau. Die gute Frau.	The woman. The good woman.
Das Kind. Das gute Kind.	The child. The good child.
Die Kinder. Die guten Kinder.	The children. The good children.

The Accusative

All that changes in the accusative is that the masculine *der* changes to its very Indo-European nasal accusative morph *den*, whose adjective ending is then *-en* accordingly.

Ich sehe den guten Mann.	I see the good man.
Ich sehe die gute Frau.	I see the good woman.
Ich sehe das gute Kind.	I see the good child.
Ich sehe die guten Kinder.	I see the good children.

The Dative

The dative case is the first time where you might be tempted to give up. This is because suddenly the word *der* is used for the feminine. But don't worry! You will know that this *der* is not masculine singular, because the adjective ending is *-en*, not *-e*. Additionally, the plural is *den* with the adjective ending *-en*, just like the masculine accusative singular. Does that mean that they will look the same? No! Because, just to help you, the receiver, German adds an additional *-n* to the actual noun itself. The masculine and the neuter will, however, look identical as they both use the unique form of the article *dem* and the adjective ending *-en*. That is not a problem, as the gender is inherent to the word and thus does not change its meaning.

² I'll never do this again. I promise.

³ Unless chopped off for poetic effect (and replaced with an apostrophe), German attributive adjectives will always have at the very least an *-e* ending. If they have no ending, as you will see, they are being used either predicatively or as adverbs.

Note that here in the dative, along with the genitive, the adjective ending is always *-en* (also in the masculine accusative singular). Thus, if the adjective ending is *-en*, chances are the word is not nominative or accusative.

Gib <i>dem</i> <i>guten</i> Mann das Geschenk.	Give the good man the present.
Gib der <i>guten</i> Frau das Geschenk.	Give the good woman the present.
Gib <i>dem</i> <i>guten</i> Kind das Geschenk.	Give the good child the present.
Gib <i>den</i> <i>guten</i> Kindern das Geschenk.	Give the good children the present.

The Genitive

The genitive is exciting, as it is characterized in the masculine and neuter by the use of a form ending in *-s*. You might recognize this from the way English makes its possessives. The masculine and the neuter use the article *des* with the adjective ending *-en* AND the noun ending *-(e)s*. (If the word is one syllable, it takes *-es*; more than one and it takes *-s*.) You'll see these genitives from a mile away. The same cannot be said of the feminine and plural. They both use the article *der* and the adjective ending *-en*. Nor is there any helpful noun ending. You will at least be able to tell one from the other by the actual morphology of the noun itself (most plural forms are distinct from their singulars), even though the feminine genitive will be identical to the feminine dative. Context should help clear this up. It is more likely to see a dative at the beginning of a sentence than a genitive, as the genitive possessor often follows its possessed.

Again, note that here in the genitive, along with the dative, the adjective ending is always *-en* (also in the masculine accusative singular). Thus, if the adjective ending is *-en*, chances are the word is not nominative or accusative.

Das Haus <i>des</i> <i>guten</i> Mann <i>es</i> ...	The good man's house...
Das Haus der <i>guten</i> Frau...	The good woman's house...
Das Haus <i>des</i> <i>guten</i> Kind <i>es</i> ...	The good child's house...
Das Haus der <i>guten</i> Kinder...	The good childrens' house...

Strange Cases

Exceptions are a nightmare for the producer of German, but for you the receiver, they are delicious, generally helpful morsels of redundant morphology. The two most common are as follows:

1. Most masculine nouns that end in *-e* will receive an *-n* in the accusative. The only downside is that they also receive this *-n* rather than the normal *-(e)s* in the genitive. This may make it look like the dative plural, however. I suppose that is neither delicious nor helpful after all.

Ich sehe <i>den</i> <i>guten</i> Löw <i>en</i> .	I see the good lion.
Das Haus <i>des</i> <i>guten</i> Löw <i>en</i> ...	The good lion's house...
Ich sehe <i>den</i> <i>guten</i> Franzos <i>en</i> .	I see the good Frenchman.
Das Haus <i>des</i> <i>guten</i> Franzos <i>en</i> ...	The good Frenchman's house...

2. The genitive of *das Herz* ‘the heart’ is not **des Herzes* but rather *des Herzens*.

Practice

That was a whole lot of information to dump on you all at once. But don't be discouraged. Even without intimate knowledge of the changes to the definite articles and their associated adjective and nouns endings, you should generally be able to get through most texts. This topic will be explored in more detail under the sections on TVX Word Order (page X) and the various prepositions that require certain cases (pages X, X, X). For now, it will help to practice recognizing the differences in meaning that can be conveyed by the various cases. If you need extra help, feel free to use the dichotomous key on page X.

1. Der alte Mann gibt der Frau das neue Buch.	<i>alt</i> - old <i>der Mann</i> - man <i>gibt</i> - (he/she/it) gives <i>die Frau</i> - woman <i>neu</i> - new <i>das Buch</i> - book
2. Der kleinen Frau gibt die große Frau das Buch.	<i>klein</i> - small/short <i>groß</i> - big/tall
3. Die Frauen haben die Bücher.	<i>haben</i> - (they) have <i>Bücher</i> - plural of <i>das Buch</i>
4. Du siehst die offenen Fenster des vollen Herzens.	<i>du</i> - you <i>siehst</i> - (you) see <i>offen</i> - open <i>die Fenster</i> - plural of <i>das Fenster</i> (window) <i>voll</i> - full <i>das Herz</i> - heart (see special case #2)
5. Mit dem guten Kind geht der freundliche Vater zu den Festen.	<i>mit</i> - with (+ dative) <i>gut</i> - good <i>das Kind</i> - child <i>geht</i> - (he/she/it) goes <i>freundlich</i> - friendly <i>der Vater</i> - father <i>zu</i> - to (+ dative) <i>die Feste</i> - plural of <i>das Fest</i> (festival, party)

Practice Answers

1. The old man gives the woman the new book.
2. The word order here emphasizes the indirect object, perhaps implying that the question “To whom does the tall woman give the book?” has been asked. (It is) to the short woman (that) the tall woman gives the book. Or more basically The tall woman gives the short woman the book.
3. The women have the books.
4. You see the open windows of the full heart.
5. Confer #2 for the word order. (It is) with the good child (that) the friendly father goes to the parties. Or more basically The friendly father goes with the good child to the parties.

Definite Article Dichotomous Key

1. What article is being used?
 - If *der*, go to 2.
 - If *die*, go to 3.
 - If *das*, it is neuter singular, either nominative or accusative.
 - If *den*, go to 4.
 - If *dem*, it is dative singular (either masculine or neuter).
 - If *des*, it is genitive singular (either masculine or neuter).
2. What adjective ending is being used?
 - If *-e*, it is masculine nominative singular.
 - If *-en*, go to 5.
 - No adjective? You are either dealing with a masculine nominative singular, feminine dative singular, feminine genitive singular, or a genitive plural. Use sentence structure clues to decide which fits best.
3. What adjective ending is being used?
 - If *-e*, it is feminine singular and either nominative or accusative.
 - If *-en*, it is nominative or accusative plural.
 - No adjective? Go to 6.
4. Has an ending *-n* been attached to the noun?
 - If yes, got to 7.
 - If no, it is masculine accusative singular.
5. Is the noun plural?
 - If yes, it is genitive plural.
 - If not, it is feminine singular, either dative or genitive.
6. Is the noun plural?
 - If yes, it is nominative plural.
 - If not, it is feminine nominative singular.
7. Is the noun plural?
 - If yes, it is dative plural.
 - If no, it is masculine accusative singular (see special case #1).

The Indefinite Article

The indefinite article itself is not as grammatically informative as its definite relative. This is immediately apparent in the difference between the forms in the masculine nominative singular. The definite article is *der* while the indefinite article is *ein*. Where is the *-r* that shows us that it is masculine and nominative? Well, because the indefinite article itself is weak, the adjective endings have to do the work. Whereas with the definite article, the article itself is *der* and the adjective ending is the simplest possible *-e*, for the indefinite article *ein*, the adjective ending is *-er*. Lazy articles require informative adjective endings. This laziness however really only applies to the nominative. You will recognize some friendly old endings in the rest of the cases.

The Nominative

In the nominative, that iconic *der-die-das* trio gets shifted to the adjective endings. The masculine takes *ein* with an adjective ending *-er*. The feminine takes *eine* with an adjective ending *-e*. The neuter takes *ein* with an adjective ending *-es*. The plural, ever

faithful, takes *eine* and the familiar *-en*. Also note that *einer* is NOT the article for the masculine nominative singular. If you see *einer*, you are not looking at a nominative nor even a masculine noun.

Ein Mann. Ein guter Mann.	A man. A good man.
Eine Frau. Eine gute Frau.	A woman. A good woman.
Ein Kind. Ein gutes Kind.	A child. A good child.
Keine ⁴ Kinder. Keine guten Kinder.	No children. No good children.

The Accusative

Like with the definite article, all that changes in the accusative is the masculine. That trusty Indo-European accusative nasal ending strikes again, both on the article and on its corresponding adjective ending.

Ich sehe einen guten Mann.	I see a good man.
Ich sehe eine gute Frau.	I see a good woman.
Ich sehe ein gutes Kind.	I see a good child.
Ich sehe keine guten Kinder.	I see no good children.

The Dative

The endings on the definite articles will appear on the indefinite articles as well. Again, you will be able to distinguish between the *einen* of the masculine accusative and the *einen* of the plural because the plural will place an additional *-n* at the end of the noun. Like with the definite articles, the adjective endings in the dative and genitive are always *-en*.

Gib einem guten Mann das Geschenk.	Give a good man the gift.
Gib einer guten Frau das Geschenk.	Give a good woman the gift.
Gib einem guten Kind das Geschenk.	Give a good child the gift.
Gib keinen guten Kindern das Geschenk.	Give no good children the gift.

The Genitive

The endings of the definite articles will appear on the indefinite articles as well. Again, the masculine and neuter will add an extra *-(e)s* to the noun. And again the feminine and plural be identical to each other as well as to the feminine dative singular. The adjective endings, like with the dative, are always *-en*.

Das Haus eines guten Mannes...	A good man's house...
Das Haus einer guten Frau...	A good woman's house...

⁴ Of course, you cannot have the indefinite article in the plural, so it is conventional to use *kein* 'no, none' to demonstrate how related words function. In Lesson 2, you will learn that there are several other words that are declined in the same way as the indefinite article.

Das Haus eines guten Kindes...

A good child's house...

Die Häuser⁵ keiner guten Kinder...

No good childrens' houses...

Strange Cases

The strange cases are the same as for the definite article:

1. Most masculine nouns that end in *-e* will receive an *-n* in the accusative. The only downside is that they also receive this *-n* rather than the normal *-(e)s* in the genitive. This makes them look like the dative plural (not with *ein*, which obviously cannot be plural, but with *kein* which can be singular).

Ich sehe einen guten Löwen.

I see a good lion.

Das Haus eines guten Löwen...

A good lion's house...

Ich sehe einen guten Französer.

I see a good Frenchman.

Das Haus eines guten Französeren...

A good Frenchman's house...

2. The genitive of *das Herz* 'the heart' is not **eines Herzes* but rather *eines Herzens*.

Practice

1. Ein heiliger Mensch gibt der Mutter ein teures Buch.

heilig - holy | *der Mensch* - person | *gibt* - (he/she/it) gives | *die Mutter* - mother | *teuer*⁶ - expensive | *das Buch* - book

2. Einer lauten Tochter gibt die alte Oma den Kuchen.

laut - loud | *die Tochter* - daughter | *alt* - old | *die Oma* - grandma | *der Kuchen* - cake

3. Keine guten Freunde haben einen Feind.

gut - good | *die Freunde* - plural of *der Freund* (friend) | *haben* - (they) have | *der Feind* - enemy

4. Du merkst sofort ein klares Zeichen eines falschen Herzens.

du - you | *merkst* - (you) notice | *sofort* - immediately | *klar* - clear | *das Zeichen* - sign | *falsch* - false | *das Herz* - heart (see special case #2)

5. Mit einem guten Kind geht ein freundlicher Vater zu einem Fest.

mit - with (+ dative) | *gut* - good | *das Kind* - child | *geht* - (he/she/it) goes | *freundlich* - friendly | *der Vater* - father | *zu* - to (+ dative) | *das Fest* - festival, party

Practice Answers

1. A holy person gives the mother an expensive book.

2. (It is) to a loud daughter (that) the old grandma gives the cake.

⁵ To make the sentence sound more felicitous, as well as to put you in the Zone of Proximal Development, I have made this noun plural.

⁶ Note that the second *e* in *teuer* drops out in inflected (i.e. attributive) forms: *teu(e)res*

3. No good friends have an enemy.
4. You notice immediately a sign of a false heart.
5. (It is) with a good child (that) a father goes to a party.

Indefinite Article Dichotomous Key

For reference, here are the articles. The + indicates if an ending is accordingly attached to the noun:

		Definite			Indefinite		
		Masculine	Feminine	Neuter	Masculine	Feminine	Neuter
Singular	Nom.	der	die	das	ein	eine	ein
	Acc.	den	die	das	einen	eine	ein
	Dat.	dem	der	dem	einem	einer	einem
	Gen.	des +(e)s	der	des +(e)s	eines +(e)s	einer	eines +(e)s
Plural	Nom.	die			keine		
	Acc.	die			keine		
	Dat.	den +n			keinen +n		
	Gen.	der			keiner		

Adjective Endings that are not preceded by any Article

We find ourselves near the end of the story. You will have noticed, if you have done the practice exercises, that despite the lengthy explanations involved, with very little effort, you can understand German sentences quite easily. Only when unmarked word order is broken and some constituent moves to the beginning of the sentence is it really crucial to be able to determine the case and thereby the function of the clause.

Of course, articles are great. They allow us to distinguish between becoming *a mother* and becoming *the mother of dragons*. They aren't always needed, however. We can talk about good wine, dangerous animals, and chocolate rain without an article. German can do the same. How will you know the case number and gender? Well...with adjective endings of course! The system very nearly makes sense.

The Nominative

Imagine that the endings have been chopped off of the definite articles and attached to the adjectives. The masculine ending is *-er*, the feminine is *-e*, the neuter is *-es*, and the plural is *-e*. No longer is it the case that the plural adjective ending is always *-en*. When no article is present, the plural ending always mirrors the ending that the definite article would have were it present.

The Accusative

The Dative

The Genitive

Lesson 2

Concepts: TVX word order, Present Tense Verbs, Pronouns (Interrogative, Personal, Possessive)

TVX Word Order

It has often been claimed that there is a positive correspondence between inflectional complexity and freedom of word order. Empirical studies aside, when comparing English and German, this certainly holds true. Disregarding the adage that “correlation does not imply causation”, we can claim that thanks to the grammatical information that German encodes through nominal inflection, the order of syntactical constituents in standard written German is more akin to that allowed only in English poetry. Perhaps you could call it beautiful.

Even in its libertine beauty, German word order is not nearly as free as Cicero’s Latin. It can be described as TVX (Topic – Verb – Rest of Sentence). The emphasized clause moves to the front of the sentence, is nearly always followed by the finite verb (except in a subordinated clause), and then comes the rest of the information. This “rest”, puzzlingly enough, often includes the grammatical subject of the sentence. This may sound more exciting than it actually is, however, as unmarked German word order is still SVO.

Present Tense Verbs

Recall (or imagine), if you will, your high school Shakespeare. Besides the dirty jokes that can only be understood in Original Pronunciation⁷ and the coined expressions like “it’s Greek to me”, Shakespeare was priming you to read German. Forsooth, Bill the Bard’s English still conjugated second and third person singular verbs in the present tense in a fashion very similar to modern German.

2nd sg. pres. indic. act. “Why dost thou smile so?” (*Twelfth Night*)

3rd sg. pres. indic. act. “The lady doth protest too much methinks.” (*Hamlet*)

Wer reitet so spät durch Nacht und Wind?
Es ist der Vater mit seinem Kind:
Er hat den Knaben wohl in dem Arm,
Er fasst ihn sicher, er hält ihn warm.

„Mein Sohn, was birgst du so bang dein Gesicht?“
„Siehst, Vater, du den Erlkönig nicht?
Den Erlenkönig mit Kron’ und Schweif?“
„Mein Sohn, es ist ein Nebelstreif.“

„Du liebes Kind, komm, geh mit mir!
Gar schöne Spiele spiel’ ich mit dir;

⁷ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YiblRSqhL04>

Manch' bunte Blumen sind an dem Strand,
Meine Mutter hat manch gülden Gewand.“

„Mein Vater, mein Vater, und hörest du nicht,
Was Erlenkönig mir leise verspricht?“
„Sei ruhig, bleibe ruhig, mein Kind:
In dürren Blättern säuselt der Wind.“

„Willst, feiner Knabe, du mit mir gehn?
Meine Töchter sollen dich warten schön;
Meine Töchter führen den nächtlichen Rein
Und wiegen und tanzen und singen dich ein.“

„Mein Vater, mein Vater, und siehst du nicht dort
Erlkönigs Töchter am düstern Ort?“
„Mein Sohn, mein Sohn, ich seh es genau:
Es scheinen die alten Weiden so grau.“

„Ich liebe dich, mich reizt deine schöne Gestalt;
Und bist du nicht willig, so brauch ich Gewalt.“
„Mein Vater, mein Vater, jetzt fasst er mich an!
Erlkönig hat mir ein Leids getan!“

Dem Vater grauset's, er reitet geschwind,
Er hält in Armen das ächzende Kind,
Erreicht den Hof mit Mühe und Not:
In seinen Armen das Kind war tot.

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Erlkönig*

Lesson 3

Concepts: Accusative prepositions, Dative prepositions, Relative Pronouns, Perfect Tense, Perfect Passive Participle

Unter Latein – ohne weiteren Zusatz gebraucht – verstehen wir meist das klassische Latein Ciceros und Caesars. Bereits Quintilian gilt es als die erstrebenswerte Norm (*ille se profecisse sciat, cui Cicero valde placebit*, Inst. 10,1,112) und wird zur Basis für Grammatikbeschreibung und -unterricht. Doch lässt schon die Lektüre von Sallust oder gar Plautus, erst recht die Beschäftigung mit Inschriften aus der altlateinischen Periode Abweichungen von der „klassischen Norm“ erkennen, deren Zahl mit zunehmendem zeitlich Abstand immer größer wird. Denn in den rund sechs Jahrhunderten, in denen wir anhand von Textzeugnissen die Entwicklung der vorklassischen Sprache verfolgen können, hat das Latein – wie jede natürliche Sprache – starke Veränderungen durchgemacht. Diese Sprachwandelprozesse sind mit der Etablierung der klassischen Norm selbstverständlich

nicht abgeschlossen, sondern dauern im gesprochenen Vulgärlatein der Kaiserzeit weiter, bis dieses in den romanischen Sprachen (seit dem 8. Jh. n. Chr.) seine natürlichen Fortsetzer findet.

Gerhard Meiser, *Historische Laut- und Formenlehre der lateinischen Sprache*

Lesson 4

Concepts: Preterit/Imperfect

Der Steppenwolf war ein Mann von annähernd fünfzig Jahren, der vor einigen Jahren eines Tages im Hause meiner Tante vorsprach und nach einem möblierten Zimmer suchte. Er mietete die Mansarde oben im Dachstock und die kleine Schlafkammer daneben, kam nach einigen Tagen mit zwei Koffern und einer großen Bücherkiste wieder und hat neun oder zehn Monate bei uns gewohnt. Er lebte sehr still und für sich, und wenn nicht die nachbarliche Lage unsrer Schlafräume manche zufällige Begegnung auf Treppe und Korridor herbeigeführt hätte, wären wir wohl überhaupt nicht miteinander bekannt geworden, denn gesellig war dieser Mann nicht, er war in einem hohen, vor mir bisher bei niemandem beobachteten Grade ungesellig, er war wirklich, wie er sich zuweilen nannte, ein Steppenwolf, ein fremdes, wildes und auch scheues, sogar sehr scheues Wesen aus einer anderen Welt als der meinigen.

Hermann Hesse, *Der Steppenwolf*

Es war spät abends, als K. ankam. Das Dorf lag in tiefem Schnee. Vom Schloßberg war nichts zu sehen, Nebel und Finsternis umgaben ihn, auch nicht der schwächste Lichtschein deutete das große Schloß an. Lange stand K. auf der Holzbrücke, die von der Landstraße zum Dorf führte, und blickte in die scheinbare Leere empor.

Dann ging er, ein Nachtlager suchen; im Wirtshaus war man noch wach, der Wirt hatte zwar kein Kammer zu vermieten, aber er wollte, von dem späten Gast äußerst überrascht und verwirrt, K. in der Wirtsstube auf einem Strohsack schlaffen lassen. K. war damit einverstanden. Einige Bauern waren noch beim Bier, aber er wollte sich mit niemandem unterhalten, holte selbst den Strohsack vom Dachboden und legte sich in der Nähe des Ofens hin.

Franz Kafka *Das Schloß*

12. Einsamkeit

Wie eine trübe Wolke
durch heit're Lüfte geht,
wenn in der Tanne Wipfel
ein mattes Lüftchen weht:

So zieh ich meine Straße
dahin mit trägem Fuß,
durch helles, frohes Leben,
einsam und ohne Gruß.

Ach, daß die Luft so ruhig!
Ach, daß die Welt so licht!
Als noch die Stürme tobten,
war ich so elend nicht.

Franz Schubert *Winterreise*, Lyrics by Willhelm Müller

Verb Conjugation

Modal Verbs

Gender

Cases

Nominative

Accusative

Dative

Genitive

Article

Article – Information – Substantive construction

Adjective Endings

Tenses

Participles

Da-Compounds

Word Order

Syntax

Plurals

Prepositions

Pronouns

Relative Pronouns

Subjunctive 1 and 2

Comparative, Superlative

Adverbs

Prefixes

Separable

Unseparable