

word order

grimm grammar


Conjunctions : Wortstellung

Word order (also called syntax) in German is usually driven by the placement of the verb. The verb in German can be in the second position (most common), initial position (verb first), and clause-final position.

The finite verb in second position

a) general statements


The most basic word order in German, just like in English, is the **subject-verb-direct object** sequence:

 <i>die böse Königin</i>	Die Zwerge lieben die junge Prinzessin.	The dwarves love the young princess.
	Warum auch nicht? Sie putzt ihr Haus und kocht ihr Essen!	And why not? She cleans their house and cooks their food!

As you can see, the finite verb (the conjugated verb) is in second place in each sentence. This is the most common, basic position for conjugated verbs.

b) questions with question-words

In the presence of question words (**wer, wann, wo, wie**, etc.), the finite verb still stays in second position and the subject moves into position three.


 <i>die böse Königin</i>	Wo wohnen sie nochmal?	Where do they live again?
	Was tut sie den ganzen Tag?	What is she doing the whole day?

The finite verb in first position

The finite verb can be in the first position in yes/no questions, and in commands (the imperative).


a) yes/no questions

The finite verb moves to the beginning of the yes-no questions:

 <i>die böse Königin</i>	Wohnen die 7 Zwerge und Schneewittchen in der Mitte des Waldes?	Do the 7 dwarves and Snow White live in the middle of the forest?
	Soll ich sie besuchen? Haha!	Should I go visit her? Haha!

b) commands

Similarly, when giving commands, the conjugated verb is in the first position.

 <i>die böse Königin</i>	Mach die Tür auf, mein Schatz! Kauf meine Waren!	Open the door, dearie! Buy my goods!
	Siehe diesen Apfel! Probier ihn mal!	Look at this apple! Try it, go on!



❖ The finite verb in clause-final position

In a few instances, the finite verb can also be at the end of a clause, at the end of the dependent clause. This happens when the clause is introduced by a subordinating conjunction (e.g., **weil**, **ob**, **nachdem**).

a) subordinating conjunctions

Typically (unless it's during an ongoing oral discussion), subordinating conjunctions are part of a larger sentence that also has a main (independent) clause. The dependent clause, the one introduced by the subordinating conjunction, explains or expands the information presented in the independent clause. The subordinate clause can precede or follow the independent clause.

There will be a finite verb in each clause. The **finite verb of the independent clause** will be in second position. The **finite verb of the dependent clause** will be in the clause-final position.

▶ <i>die böse Königin</i>	Ich hoffe , dass sie bald in den Apfel beisst ! Ich kann kaum warten, bis sie stirbt !	I hope that she takes a bite of the apple soon! I can hardly wait until she dies !
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Each sentence begins with the independent (main) clause. The first position is occupied by the subject 'ich' (in both sentences), and the second position by the finite verb of the independent clause 'hoffe' and 'kann'.

After the comma comes the subordinate clause, introduced by the subordinating conjunction **dass** and **bis**. The finite verb of the subordinate clause, **beisst** and **stirbt** are in clause-final position.

Contrast this arrangement with the following example, in which the dependent clause begins the sentence:

▶ <i>die böse Königin</i>	Nachdem du meinen Apfel gegessen hast , willst du nie wieder irgendwas anderes essen! Haha!	After you eat my apple, you will not want to eat anything else ever again! Haha!
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This sentence begins with the subordinate clause (introduced by the subordinating conjunction **nachdem**). The finite verb **gegessen hast** is in the clause-final position, immediately preceding the comma that separates the dependent and independent clauses.

The second clause is the independent clause. The finite verb **willst** is in the second position; the first position of the sentence is occupied by the entire subordinate clause!

b) relative clauses

The effect of relative pronouns is the same as the subordinating conjunctions: the finite verb goes to the end of the clause that is introduced by the relative pronoun.

▶ <i>die böse Königin</i>	Ach, diese ist das Mädchen, das mir so viele schlaflose Nächte bereitet ! Ich bin aber keine böse Königin, die so etwas ohne weiteres erlaubt !	Ah, this is the girl who has caused me so many sleepless nights! I am, however, not an evil queen who just lets these things happen without any further ado!
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✦ Movement from main to secondary verb

There are some instances in which an original finite verb from a simple statement is ousted by a newcomer.

Modal verbs

Finite verbs can be replaced by **modal verbs** (which, as the name suggests, modify the meaning of the former main verb). As a result of the incoming modal verb (which is conjugated, and is the new finite verb), the original verb turns into an **infinitive**.

▶ <i>die böse Königin</i>	Haha! Ich bin die allerschönste Frau in der ganzen Welt! Tja, das stimmt doch nicht. Ich möchte nur die allerschönste Frau in der ganzen Welt sein !	Haha! I am the most beautiful woman in the whole world! Well, that's actually not true. I only would like to be the most beautiful woman in the whole world!
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Auxiliary verbs

Auxiliary verbs - such as the 'haben' or 'sein' that form the present perfect, the 'hätte' or 'wäre' that form the past subjunctive or 'werden' that forms the future tense also bump the **original finite verb** into the clause-final position. With haben/sein and hätte/wäre, the original finite verb becomes a participle. With werden, it becomes an infinitive.

▶ <i>die böse Königin</i>	Ich habe mich daran gewöhnt , die allerschönste Frau der ganzen Welt zu sein. Vielleicht wenn ich das nicht gemacht hätte , müsste sie jetzt nicht sterben, aber so ist das Leben. Absolut unfair!	I got used to the fact that I was the most beautiful woman in the whole world. Maybe if I hadn't done that, she wouldn't have to die right now, but that's life. Absolutely unfair!
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Weil ich eine böse Königin bin, **werde** ich keine winzige Sekunde damit **verschwenden**, meine schreckliche Tat zu bereuen! Das Leben ist ganz einfach, wenn man böse ist!

Because I am an evil queen, I **will** not **waste** even a teensy second by regretting my horrific deed! Life is really simple when one is evil!

❖ The sequencing of nouns and pronouns

Accusative and dative

Good news! The only thing you have to remember vis-à-vis the placement of nouns is the sequencing of the **direct** and **indirect** objects, i.e., the dative and accusative nouns and the possible pronouns that replace them.

▶ <i>die böse Königin</i>	OK. Wie war das noch mal? Ich gebe der Prinzessin einen Apfel , und sie isst ihn. Aha. Das darf ich nicht vergessen!	OK. How did it go again? I give the princess an apple , and she eats it. Aha. I can't forget that!
	Also, ich gebe ihr einen Apfel . Ich gebe ihn der Prinzessin . Ich gebe ihn ihr ! Wenn ich das pausenlos wiederhole, werde ich es bestimmt nicht vergessen, wem ich was geben soll.	So, I give her an apple . I give it to the princess . I give it to her ! if I keep repeating it without stopping, I'll definitely not forget, whom I am supposed to give what !

Please note:

- if you have two nouns (one accusative, one dative), the *dative noun precedes the accusative noun*!
- pronouns precede nouns
- an accusative pronoun precedes the dative pronoun

Dative noun	Accusative noun
Pronoun	Noun
Accusative pronoun	Dative pronoun

When you gain more confidence with German, you can experiment with the word order of nouns and pronouns, and see how mixing the elements leads to differential emphases in a sentence. Secret: you can actually switch the dative and accusative nouns around if you really want to emphasize the recipient of an action - if there is unusual placement of elements, they tend to draw extra attention to themselves!

❖ The sequencing of adverbs

Time/location: less to more specific information

When using expressions of time or place, the more general information comes first, then the more specific.

▶ <i>die böse Königin</i>	Ich bin letzten Monat jeden Donnerstag um 3 Uhr am Zwerghaus vorbeigegangen, und versuchte sie zu töten. Und ich gehe gar nicht gern in den Wald zu diesem miesen Häuschen ! Ich habe Angst vor der Dunkelheit! Doof, nicht?	Last month I went to the dwarves' house every Thursday at 3 o'clock and tried to kill her. And i really don't like to go to that crummy little house in the forest ! I am afraid of the dark! Silly, eh?
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Sequencing of other adverbs

The typical adage is that adverbs of time precede adverbs of manner, which precede adverbs of place (i.e., time - manner - place). In reality, the adverbs should be in the following order:

time - place - manner

Manner is always last, since it gives the most new information - and new information is emphasized by being placed

very first or very last.

However, adverbs are quite a bit more flexible in terms of sequencing, and their order really depends on what information you want to emphasize.



Place I (subject or component of emphasis)	Place II (conjugated verb)	Place III	Place IV	Place V	Emphasis
Die 7 Zwerge und Schneewittchen (subject)	wohnen	am Anfang (adverb of time)	friedlich (adverb of manner)	in der Mitte des Waldes. (prepositional phrase, place)	Wer (who)?
Am Anfang (adverb of time)	wohnen	die 7 Zwerge und Schneewittchen (subject)	friedlich (adverb of manner)	in der Mitte des Waldes. (place)	Wann (when)?
Friedlich (adverb of manner)	wohnen	die 7 Zwerge und Schneewittchen (subject)	am Anfang (adverb of time)	in der Mitte des Waldes. (place)	Wie (how)?
In der Mitte des Waldes. (place)	wohnen	die 7 Zwerge und Schneewittchen (subject)	am Anfang (adverb of time)	friedlich (adverb of manner)	Wo (where)?

You will need to keep adverbs of place separate from verbal complements that are descriptions of place.

Verbal complements are essential to the meaning of the verb (e.g., she went home - 'went' is not meaningful without 'home').

Adverbs of place are not really necessary for the meaning of the verb, they merely give additional information about the location of an event (e.g., she went to her home by the forest - 'home' is essential for 'went' but 'by the forest' is not - that is an adverb instead of a verbal complement).

❖ The position of 'nicht'

The last piece of information regarding word order we'll deal with here is the placement of the negative particle **nicht** (and other negative elements, such as **nie** or **kaum** - *never* and *hardly*).

Nicht ...

1. is placed at the end of a clause (BUT before any verbal complements, such as a participle or infinitive after a modal verb or a direct object)
2. follows all adverbs except for adverbs of manner (schnell, gut, gern, etc.)
3. precedes an element if that's the only thing in the sentence it is meant to negate (as opposed to negating the entire clause or sentence)



1.	die böse Königin: Mein Schatz, kauf ruhig diesen schönen Apfel, ich habe ihn nicht vergiftet! Warum isst du ihn nicht ?	Dearie, don't worry, go ahead and buy this apple, I didn't poison it! Why don't you eat it?
2.	Magst du Äpfel nicht ?	Don't you like apples?
1.	Du willst meinen Apfel nicht essen? Was soll dass denn heißen?	You don't want to eat my apple? What is that supposed to mean?
3.	Hmmm ... wenn nicht diesen schönen Apfel, dann kauf mindestens diesen wunderbaren Kamm!	Hmmm ... if not this beautiful apple, then buy at least this wonderful comb!
1.	Hey, hast du meine Frage nicht gehört? Warum antwortest du nicht ? Oho! Sie ist tot!!!! Ich bin die schönste Frau im ganzen Land - oder vielleicht auch nicht ...	Hey, didn't you hear my question? Why don't you answer? Aha, she's dead!! I am the most beautiful woman in the whole country - or maybe not ...



grimm exercises



Übung

The evil queen has left the Zwerghaus. Find out how her life continues by re-writing the slashed sentences.

1. die böse Königin / nach Hause / laufen / schnell

2. warten / der alte König / im Schloss / auf sie / schon

3. sie / ihn / sehen / nicht / aber / weil / in den Turm / müssen / gehen / sofort / sie

4. die böse Königin / ihren Spiegel / fragen / ob / die schönste Frau / sein / im Lande / sie

5. ihr / antwortet / zuerst / der Spiegel / nicht

6. antworten / mir / warum / du / nicht / ?

7. nicht / bis jetzt / antworten (pres. perfect) / ich / Ihnen / weil / sein / Sie / nicht / die schönste Frau
im Lande / und / weil / Angst / haben / vor ihnen / ich
-
8. du / sein / verrückt / ?
-
9. nicht / lügen / ich / und / immer noch / sein / Schneewittchen / die schönste Frau
-
10. ich / um 16 Uhr / explodieren (future) / diesen Nachmittag
-
11. können / kaum / wir / erwarten / bis / Sie / gehen / später / in die Luft / !
-
12. nicht / passieren (future) / das / weil / unsere Autorin / zu sehr / mich / lieben
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