



deutschwunder

A1 • BEGINNER

German Pronunciation Guide

Every German sound, with the English mouth position that gets you there — plus the spelling rules that tell you which sound to use.

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40+

SOUNDS & RULES

6

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1 The four sounds English doesn't have

Everything else in German you can already say. These four are the only genuinely new mouth positions — and each one has a shortcut.

LETTER	IPA	HOW TO MAKE IT	EXAMPLE
ä	/ɛ/ /ɛː/	No new position — it's the e in English <i>bed</i> .	die Männer — <i>the men</i>
ö	/œ/ /øː/	Say <i>eh</i> , hold it, then round your lips as if to whistle. Don't move your tongue.	schön — <i>beautiful</i>
ü	/ʏ/ /yː/	Say <i>ee</i> , hold it, then round your lips. Again: lips move, tongue doesn't.	über — <i>over, about</i>
ß	/s/	Not a <i>B</i> . A sharp, voiceless <i>s</i> — the <i>ss</i> in <i>kiss</i> . Never buzzes.	die Straße — <i>the street</i>

The lip trick

ö and ü are just **e** and **i** with rounded lips. Say *ee* — *ü* — *ee* — *ü* while looking in a mirror: your tongue should stay completely still and only your lips should move. If your tongue moves, you'll produce the English *oo* instead.

MINIMAL PAIRS — THESE CHANGE THE MEANING

WITHOUT UMLAUT

schon

already

WITH UMLAUT

schön

beautiful

WITHOUT UMLAUT

die Mutter

the mother

WITH UMLAUT

die Mütter

the mothers (plural)

WITHOUT UMLAUT

er kann

he can

WITH UMLAUT

Kännchen

small pot (of coffee)

Common mistake

Umlauts are not decoration. **Mutter** and **Mütter** are singular and plural; **schon** and **schön** are unrelated words. If you can't type them, write **ae oe ue ss** — that is the accepted substitute. Never just drop the dots.

Article colours used throughout: **der** (masculine) **die** (feminine) **das** (neuter)

2 Consonants that don't say what they look like

ch

Two different sounds, and the spelling tells you which. After **a, o, u, au** it's the throaty one. Everywhere else it's the soft one.

SPELLING	IPA	SOUND	EXAMPLE
ch	/x/	After a, o, u, au — throaty, like clearing your throat gently	das Buch — the book
ch	/ç/	Everywhere else — soft, like a strong h in English huge	ich — I
chs	/ks/	Like English x — not ch + s	sechs — six
sch	/ʃ/	English sh	schnell — fast
st-	/ʃt/	At the start of a word: sht , not st	die Stadt — the city
sp-	/ʃp/	At the start of a word: shp , not sp	sprechen — to speak
w	/v/	English v . Never English w .	das Wasser — the water
v	/f/	English f in German words — but /v/ in loanwords (Vase, Video)	der Vater — the father
z	/ts/	Always ts , as in English cats . Never a buzzing z .	die Zeit — the time
j	/j/	English y as in yes	das Jahr — the year
r	/ʁ/	Before a vowel — from the back of the throat, like a soft gargle	rot — red
-r	/ɐ/	After a vowel — barely a consonant at all, closer to uh	die Uhr — the clock
s	/z/	Before a vowel — buzzing, like English z	die Sonne — the sun
pf	/pf/	Both letters, in one push. Don't drop the p .	der Apfel — the apple
qu	/kv/	kv , not English kw	die Qualität — the quality
ng	/ŋ/	As in English singer — no hard g at the end	singen — to sing

SAY THIS

SHTRAH-se for *Straße*, **VAH-ser** for *Wasser*, **TSVYE** for *zwei*.

NOT THIS

STRAH-se, **WAH-ter**, **ZVYE** — the three giveaways of an English speaker.

3 Vowels: long or short, and how to tell

German vowels are *pure* — they hold one steady sound instead of gliding like English vowels do. The only question is how long you hold it, and the spelling always tells you.

Long Doubled vowel (**Saal**), followed by **h** (**Uhr**), or followed by a single consonant (**Tag**).

Short Followed by **two or more consonants** (**Mann, kalt, Tochter**). The doubled consonant is a length marker, not a doubled sound.

VOWEL	IPA	SOUND	LONG / SHORT PAIR
a	/aː/ /a/	Open ah — like father, never like cat	Tag / Mann — day / man
e	/eː/ /ɛ/	Long: ay without the glide. Short: bed.	Weg / Bett — way / bed
i	/iː/ /ɪ/	Long: ee. Short: sit.	Kino / Kind — cinema / child
o	/oː/ /ɔ/	Long: oh without the glide. Short: off.	Brot / Sonne — bread / sun
u	/uː/ /ʊ/	Long: oo in food. Short: put.	Buch / Mutter — book / mother
e	/ə/	Unstressed, at the end of a word — a weak uh	bitte — please

VOWEL PAIRS — TWO LETTERS, ONE SOUND

PAIR	IPA	SOUND	EXAMPLE
ei	/aɪ/	English eye	die Zeit — the time
ie	/iː/	English ee	die Liebe — the love
au	/aʊ/	English ow in house	das Haus — the house
eu	/ɔʏ/	English oy in boy	neu — new
äu	/ɔʏ/	Same as eu — it only looks different	die Häuser — the houses

The ei / ie trap

These two are mirror images and beginners swap them constantly. The rule: **say the second letter's name**. **ei** → the letter **i** = eye. **ie** → the letter **e** = ee. So **Bier** is beer and **Wein** is vine.

Silent h

An **h** after a vowel is never pronounced — it only stretches the vowel: **gehen, Uhr, Jahr, ihm**. An **h** at the start of a word *is* pronounced: **Haus, haben**.

4 The endings and stress rules that catch everyone

FINAL DEVOICING — THE WRITTEN LETTER LIES

At the end of a word or syllable, **b, d, g** harden into **p, t, k**. The spelling never changes, so you have to hear it.

WRITTEN	SPOKEN	EXAMPLE	BUT NOT WHEN A VOWEL FOLLOWS
-b	/p/	halb — <i>half</i> → halp	halbe → halbe
-d	/t/	der Hund — <i>dog</i> → Hunt	Hunde → Hunde
-g	/k/	der Tag — <i>day</i> → Tak	Tage → Tage

ENDINGS THAT DON'T SOUND LIKE THEY LOOK

ENDING	IPA	SOUND	EXAMPLE
-er	/ɐ/	A weak uh. No r sound at all.	die Mutter → MUT-uh
-ig	/ɪç/	Ends in the soft ch, not a k	wichtig → VICH-tich
-en	/ən/	Swallowed — barely a vowel	sprechen → SHPRECH-n
-tion	/tsɪo:n/	tsee-OHN, and the stress lands on it	die Nation → nats-YOHN

WHERE THE STRESS GOES

Word type	Rule	Example
Most German words	Stress the first syllable	AR -beiten, MA -chen
Separable prefix verbs	Stress the <i>prefix</i>	AN -rufen, AUF -stehen
Inseparable prefixes (be-, ge-, er-, ver-, ent-, zer-)	Never stress the prefix	ver- STE -hen, be- KOM -men
Words ending -ieren	Stress the -ie-	stu- DIE -ren, pro- BIE -ren
Compound nouns	Stress the first part	HAUS -aufgabe

Why stress matters more than you think

German separable verbs change meaning with the prefix, and the prefix is where the stress lands. **ÜBER**-setzen (to ferry across) and **über**-**SETZEN** (to translate) are spelled identically. Stress is the only difference.

The glottal stop

German puts a tiny catch before words starting with a vowel, rather than gliding them together. *am Abend* is **am** | **Abend**, not *a-mabend*. This one habit does more for sounding German than any individual sound on this sheet.

5 The alphabet — for spelling your name out loud

You will be asked to spell your name at the Bürgeramt, on the phone, and at every counter in Germany. These are the *letter names*, which are not the same as the sounds the letters make.

A ah	B beh	C tseh	D deh	E eh	F eff
G geh	H hah	I ee	J yot	K kah	L ell
M emm	N enn	O oh	P peh	Q kooh	R err
S ess	T teh	U ooh	V fow	W veh	X iks
Y ÜP-si-lon	Z tsett	Ä ah-umlaut	Ö oh-umlaut	Ü ooh-umlaut	ß ess-tsett

The three letters that will get your name wrong

E sounds like the English letter A. **I** sounds like the English letter E. **J** sounds like the English letter Y. Spell *Mike* as *emm-ee-kah-eh* and you'll get it right; use the English names and you'll get *Make*.

6 One-minute summary

If you remember only this	Then you already sound German
w = v, v = f, z = ts	Fixes the three most common English-speaker giveaways
st- / sp- = sht- / shp-	At the start of a word, always
ö / ü = e / i + round lips	Tongue stays still, only the lips move
ei = eye, ie = ee	Say the second letter's name
-er = uh	No r sound at the end of a word, ever
Final b/d/g = p/t/k	Tag sounds like <i>Tak</i>
Stress the first syllable	Unless the prefix is be-, ge-, er-, ver-, ent-, zer-
Pause before vowels	am Abend, not a-mabend

Now practise it out loud

Reading a chart is not the same as saying the sounds. Deutschwunder has free pronunciation quizzes, listening practice and word games to drill exactly what's on these pages.

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