

# General advice on writing in German

## Use of capital and small initial letters

The use of capital and small initial letters in German is governed by the following guidelines:

- The first word of a sentence has a capital initial letter.
- All true nouns have capital initial letters: *Himmel, Kindheit, Reichtum, Verständnis*
- All types of word have capital initial letters when they are used as nouns: *das Gute, der Abgeordnete, allerlei Schönes, etwas Wichtiges, die Deinigen, ein Achtel, das Auf und Nieder, das Entweder-oder, das Lesen, das Zustandekommen, das In-den-Tag-hinein-Leben*
- The polite form *Sie* and the accompanying possessive pronoun *Ihr* always have capital initials, but the reflexive pronoun *sich* always has a small initial: *Würden Sie mir bitte Ihr Programmheft leihen? Setzen Sie sich.*
- Words which are derived from geographical names and which end in -er have capital initial letters: *die Schweizer Industrie, eine Kölner Firma*
- Adjectives ending in -isch which are derived from geographical names have small initials unless they form part of a proper name: *chinesische Seide, westfälischer Schinken* but: *Holsteinische Schweiz*
- When nouns function other than as nouns they have small initial letters: *anfangs, abends, sonntags, ein bisschen, schuld sein*

## One word or two?

The continuing development of the conventions governing spelling and punctuation in German means that it is impossible to say for certain when words are written together (as one word) and when separately (as two words). The following examples are designed to serve as a general guide only. In cases of doubt write as two words.

- Words are written together if they combine to form a new meaning: *Er wird mir die Summe gutschreiben.*  
Words are written separately if they retain their original meanings: *Der Schüler kann gut schreiben.*
- Compounds formed with a noun are written as one word if the noun no longer embodies a separate concept: *wetterleuchten, infolge, zugunsten.*  
The continuing development of the language means that some words are found in both forms: *Dank sagen* and *danksagen, auf Grund* and *aufgrund, in Frage* and *infrage.*

## The comma

The role of the comma is to divide the sentence and indicate the pauses occurring in speech.

- In lists, the comma is placed between words of the same type or between similar groups of words if they are not linked by *und* or *oder*: *Feuer, Wasser, Luft und Erde. Wir gingen bei gutem, warmem Wetter spazieren. Das Autorennen findet am Montag, dem 5. Mai statt.*  
(Here, the comma divides two statements of time.)
- The comma separates following qualifying phrases from the rest of the sentence: *In Frankfurt, der bekannten Handelsstadt, befindet sich ein großes Messegelände. Das Schiff kommt wöchentlich einmal, und zwar sonntags. Das Autorennen findet am Montag, dem 5. Mai, statt.*  
(Here, an embedded phrase is enclosed by commas.)
- An infinitive phrase is usually divided from the rest of the sentence by a comma; *zu* + infinitive alone is not divided off. *Wir hatten keine Gelegenheit, uns zu sehen.* but: *Wir hatten keine Gelegenheit zu baden.*
- The comma separates main clauses but may also be omitted if the clauses are linked by *und* or *oder*. However the comma is never used between main clauses linked by *und* or *oder* if one part of the sentence is common to both clauses: *Ich kam, ich sah, ich siegte. Wir trinken noch ein Bier [,] und dann gehe ich nach Hause.* but: *sie bestiegen den Wagen und fuhren davon.* (*sie* is common to both clauses) *Er geht ins Kino und sein Bruder ins Konzert.* (*geht* is common to both clauses)
- The comma separates the subordinate clause from the main clause: *Dass du zuverlässig bist, freut mich. Alle Kinder, die fleißig sind, erhalten ein Buch.*

## Syllable division in German

Polysyllabic words are divided in accordance with the phonetic syllables which can be identified by pronouncing the word slowly:

- *Freun-de, Män-ner, for-dern, wei-ter, Or-gel, kal-kig, Bes-se-rung, Bal-kon, Fis-kus, Ho-tel, Pla-net, Kon-ti-nent, Fas-zi-kei, Re-mi-nis-zenz, El-lip-se, Ber-lin, El-ba, Tür-kei, las-ten, Diens-tes*

In such cases, a single consonant goes on to the following line; if there is a series of consonants, the last of these goes on to the following line:

- *tre-ten, nä-hen, Ru-der, rei-ßen, bo-xen, Ko-kon, Kre-ta, Chi-na, An-ker, Fin-ger, war-ten, Fül-lun-gen, Rit-ter, Was-ser, Knos-pen, kämp-fen, Ach-sel, steck-ten, Kat-zen, Städ-ter, Drechs-ler, dunk-le, gest-rig, an-de-re, neh-men, Ar-sen, Hip-pie, Kas-ko, Pek-tin, Un-garn, Hes-sen, At-lan-tik* (For exceptions see below.)

Suffixes which begin with a vowel take the preceding consonant when divided:

- *Freun-din, Bäcke-rei, Lüf-tung*

The consonant groups *ch* and *sch*- as well as *ph*, *rh*, *sh*, and *th* in foreign words - represent single sounds and are not divided:

- *Bü-cher, Fla-sche, Ma-chete, Pro-phet, Myr-rhe, Ca-shew-nuß, ka-tho-lisch, Grü-sse* (for: *Grü-ße*), *hei-ssen* (for: *hei-ßen*)

*ck* is regarded as a single consonant and is placed on the following line:

- *Zu-cker, ba-cken, Sen-ckenberg, Fran-cke, bismar-ckisch*

Words are not divided before the 'lengthening' letters *e* and *i*:

- *Wie-se, Coes-feld* (pronounced: *kɔs-*)

Compound words and words with a prefix are divided in accordance with their constituent word elements:

- *ein-armig, be-inhalten*

The same applies to foreign words:

- *Des-interesse, in-adäquat*

Many foreign words, however, may be divided according to phonetic syllables, as the constituent elements of a foreign word are not always generally known:

- *Epi-sode* (instead of: *Epis-ode*)  
*ab-strakt* (instead of: *abs-trakt*)

Word divisions which obey the rules but disrupt the flow of reading should be avoided:

- *Spar-gelder*, not: *Spargel-der*
- *be-inhalten*, not: *bein-halten*