

German for Beginners: Study Tips

Lerntipps - Learning Tips: How to be a better German-learner

Here are some study tips and practical advice to help make your learning of German more effective:

Use your first language to learn the second!

German and English are both Germanic languages with a lot of Latin and Greek thrown in. There are many **cognates**, words that are similar in both languages. Examples include: **der Garten** (garden), **das Haus** (house), **schwimmen** (swim), **singen** (sing), **braun** (brown) and **ist**(is). But also watch out for "false friends" — words that appear to be something they're not. The German word **bald** (soon) has nothing to do with hair!

Avoid language interference

Learning a second language is similar in some ways to learning your first, but... there is one big difference! When learning a second language (German), you have interference from the first (English or whatever). Your brain wants to fall back on the English way of doing things, so you have to fight that tendency.

Learn nouns with their genders

German, like most languages other than English, is a language of gender. As you learn each new German noun, learn its gender at the same time. Not knowing whether a word is **der** (masc.), **die** (fem.) or **das** (neut.) can confuse listeners and makes you sound ignorant and illiterate in German. That can be avoided by learning **das Haus** rather than just **Haus** for "house/building," for example.

Stop translating!

Translation should only be a **temporary** crutch! Stop thinking in English and trying to do things the "English" way! As your vocabulary grows, get away from translating and start thinking in German and German phrases. Remember: German-speakers don't have to translate when they speak. Neither should you!

Learning a new language is learning to think in a new way!

Das Erlernen einer neuen Sprache ist das Erlernen einer neuen Denkweise. - Hyde Flippo

Get a good German-English dictionary

You need an adequate (minimum 40,000 entries) dictionary and you need to learn how to use it! A dictionary can be dangerous in the wrong hands. Try not to think too literally and don't just accept the first translation you see. Just as in English, most words can mean more than one thing. Consider the word "fix" in English as one good example: "fix a sandwich" is a different meaning than "fix the car" or "he's in a fine fix."

Learning a new language takes time.

Learning German — or any other language — requires a long period of sustained exposure to German. You didn't learn your first language in a few months, so don't think a second one will come any faster. Even a baby does a lot of listening before talking. Don't get discouraged if the going seems slow. And use all the resources at your disposal for **READING**, **LISTENING**, **WRITING** and **SPEAKING**. This site can lead you to those resources.

The United States is the only country where people believe you can learn a foreign language in two school years. - Hyde Flippo

Passive skills come first!

A period of LISTENING and READING is important before you can expect to use the active skills of SPEAKING and WRITING. Again, your first language was the same way. Babies don't start talking until they've done a lot of listening.

Be consistent and study/practice on a regular basis.

Unfortunately, language is NOT like riding a bicycle. It's more like learning to play a musical instrument. You DO forget how to do it if you get away from it too long!

Language is more complex than we realize.

That's one reason computers are such lousy translators. Don't worry about all the details all the time, but be aware that language is much more than just stringing a bunch of words together. There are subtle things we do with language that even linguists have difficulty explaining. That's why I say, "Learning a new language is learning to think in a new way."

Sprachgefühl

You have to develop a "feeling for the language" to master German or any language. The more you get into German, the more this hard-to-describe *Sprachgefühl* should develop. It's the opposite of a rote, mechanical, programmed approach. It means getting into the language's sound and "feel."

There is no "right" way.

German has its own way of defining words (vocabulary), saying words (pronunciation), and putting words together (grammar). Learn to be flexible, to mimic the language, and to accept *Deutsch* the way it is. German may do things differently from your point of view, but it isn't a matter of "right" or "wrong," "good" or "bad." Learning a new language is learning to think in a new way! You don't really know a language until you can think (and dream) in that language.

Dangerous! - Gefährlich!

Some things to avoid:

- Avoid the most common beginner's mistakes. See The Top 10 German Mistakes Made by Beginners.
- Don't be overly ambitious. Set realistic goals and take things one step at a time. Our lessons are designed that way.
- Don't try to pretend you are a native-speaker of German (*Muttersprachler*) when you aren't. That means avoiding jokes, swearing and other linguistic minefields that can make you sound and look foolish.
- One more time: Stop translating! It gets in the way of real communication and should be left to skilled professionals.
- Also one more time: A dictionary is dangerous! Verify meanings by also looking up the word or expression in the opposite language direction.

Good reasons for learning German

Speaking German will enable you to communicate with over 100 million people worldwide

German is the official language in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Luxembourg. One quarter of Europeans speak German and German ranks among the top 10 most frequently spoken languages in the world.

Enhance your employment opportunities in the global economy

Germany has the largest economy in the European Union and the third largest in the world. It is the world's leading exporter and importer.

Get to know one of the great European cultures

German is a leading language of science, literature, philosophy, theology, history, music, film and art. Becoming acquainted with artists, composers, scientists, great thinkers and their contributions is very rewarding if done in their language.

Have a chance to study or research in Germany

The German education system has a long tradition (the oldest German university, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität in Heidelberg, was founded in 1386) and a good international reputation. Foreigners like coming to Germany to study.

Travel in Germany and other German-speaking countries

Millions of foreign tourists visit German-speaking countries every year. They want to see and experience King Ludwig's castles in Bavaria, the Austrian and Swiss Alps, German beer at the Oktoberfest or the stunning Rhine river.

Surf the internet

Of course, the internet speaks English - but German ranks as the second most frequently used language on the internet. According to "Netz-Tipp-Studie", 56.4% of web pages were in English, in the second place were 7.7% web pages in German.

And to encourage you to start learning German

please keep in mind that German is as easy to learn as any other language. You already know much more German vocabulary than you think: Professor, Kindergarten, Angst, etc.

German bridges the world

Learners of German at the worldwide network of Goethe-Institutes have been asked the question "What does German mean to you? What impact did learning German have on your life and your personal / professional development?"

Here are some of the students' answers to why they learned German, which range from political enlightenment, joy of immersion in the arts to enhanced chances for research and study, desired career opportunities and broadening of personal horizons.

Which would be your motivation to learn German?

Language learning is like moving to another country

I started learning German because I needed a new challenge. For a long time I had been bored at work, always performing the same tasks. One option would have been to study a profession, but this would have still be too limiting as I wanted to learn more about the world outside my country. As it would be too difficult for me to suddenly move to another country, I decided to learn another language.

(Cesar Providenti, Toronto/Canada)

Language is the key to any culture

Above all, I want to learn German because I want to understand the culture; and the language is the key to any culture and its idiosyncrasies.

I like the language structure; it is like a Lego game kit, where new words can be created by putting two or three other words together. My favourite so far: Sonnenuntergang.

(Enrique Campos, Toronto/Canada)

German for the Work

I work in marketing and often need to call Germany. Although many people speak English, it is helpful in my profession to learn German.

(Anonymous)

Become Part of the Family

I began studying German about two years ago because my partner's family comes from Germany. My inability to speak any German and their inability to speak any English made it very hard for us to get to know one another. I value family very much and not being able to share their stories, laugh at a joke together, or even ask how his mom prepared that delicious meal we just ate was very difficult for me. Although it is a long and slow journey, studying German at the Goethe-Institut has allowed me to read the thoughtful cards, I am sent for my birthday, provide updates on my life, exchange those recipes and most importantly become a part of the family.

(Tammy Kramchynsky, Toronto/Canada)

"Set the tongue free"

When asking what learning German
Has come to mean to me
I have to state it's more
Than "setting my tongue free"

It includes appreciation
For a culture rich and bold
It's expanding my horizons
Developing friendships new and old.

(Brenda Benett-Learmonth, Toronto/Canada)

German Canadian Heritage

I am a first generation German Canadian who is very proud of his heritage. By studying I feel closer to the proud heritage household in which I grew up. Studying German enriches me as an individual who can contribute to the Canadian mosaic.

(Alfred Drose, Toronto/Canada)

Why German?

The Indo-German Chamber of Commerce had offered me a job at their Bangalore office although I did not know a word of German. But it was made clear to me that learning German was an essential part of the job. This was what made me enroll for my first course in German. (...)

The famous German Wilhelm von Humboldt once clearly stated that the character and structure of a language express the inner life and knowledge of its people and that languages differ from one another in the same way and to the same extent as those who use them. When we learn a foreign language, we can not only communicate better but also understand the culture.

(Audrey D'Souza, Bangalore/India)

Research Opportunities

I am a doctoral student at the Institute for Political Science of the Polish Academy of Science, and postgraduate student at the Collegium Civitas - Social Science University, currently preparing my doctoral dissertation in history. My main field of interest are Polish-German relations in the second half of the 20th century. (...)

My main motivation to learn German is my dissertation. At least half of the sources for my doctoral thesis are in German. I am also planning to spend some time doing research in Germany (literature, archives etc.) and to study at one of the universities. This would be very complicated without a good knowledge of German.

(Dominik Pick, Warsaw/Poland)

Taking off my sunglasses

When you learn a foreign language you get the same weird feeling you do when you take off your sunglasses on a bright, sunny day. Suddenly, your eyes see light and the images around you become more vivid than ever before. (...)

I am glad that both my German language skills and the knowledge of their culture give me a big advantage at work. I can predict how Germans will think differently from the Japanese and react accordingly. I am well prepared and communication is usually a success. Furthermore, I am pleased that I can help my Japanese colleagues, who do not speak German, to understand the German way of thinking, or to describe how the Germans perceive the Japanese, especially when there appears to be a misunderstanding. Learning about another culture also gave me a deeper understanding of my own country, Japan.

Quelle: Bridging the world, Goethe-Institut Australien

(Kumiko Andoh, Tokyo/Japan)

Bridging the World

German language bridges the world. Experiences and impressions - Be part of it!

Is German a beautiful language?

This is what Russell Smith, a Canadian author, says about the beauty of the German language:

"I doubt that there can ever be any consensus on what makes a word pretty. And our perception of sound is always biased by meaning. Many English speakers have a perception of German, for example, as a harsh and ugly language. Nothing could be farther from the truth: when spoken softly, particularly by a female voice, every sentence can sound like a particularly, lulling and melancholic poem. Obviously, the negative perception comes from dated clichés of German culture, which are inescapable to those listening to the language"

Russell Smith, Beauty is in the thesaurus of the beholder, Globe and Mail, 02/12/04.

German as career enhancer

Knowledge of German improves your chances of employment. German companies abroad and foreign companies in Germany seek experts with a knowledge of German. Staff in international companies also enjoy an advantage if they know German. In the European Union there are interesting training, study and employment opportunities for specialists with this knowledge.

The enlargement of the EU continues to open up markets in Central and Eastern Europe for personnel who know German. Anyone who speaks German has much better prospects for a great career.

Professionals who know other languages are called on to travel and exchange information with people in other countries throughout their careers. Knowing more than one language enhances employment opportunities in government, business, law, medicine and health care, teaching, technology, the military, communications, social service, and marketing.

An employer will see you as a bridge to customers if you know a second language. You are also more likely to win the trust and friendship of people whose languages you know even if you don't speak it fluently.