



## German spelling

### Comma placement

#### summary

#### **MUST-COMMA**

- rule K01:** coequal enumerations
- rule K02:** multi-part date and time declaration
- rule K03:** "sandwiched" appositions
- rule K04:** explanations "at the end"
- rule K06:** "add/follow" conjunctions
- rule K07:** complete comparison sentences
- rule K08:** subordinate conjunctions
- rule K09:** opposite conjunctions
- rule K10:** relative pronouns
- rule K13:** infinitive with zu + um|ohne|anstatt
- rule K14:** extended infinitive with, depends on noun
- rule K15:** extended infinitive with zu + es|damit|daran
- rule K19:** salutation, exclamation, affirmation/negation/request

#### **NO-COMMA**

- rule K05:** coequal conjunctions
- rule K16:** infinitive with zu + haben|sein|werden
- rule K17:** infinitive with zu + brauchen|pflegen|scheinen

#### **CAN-COMMA**

- rule K11:** simple infinitive with zu (explicit)
- rule K12:** extended infinitive with zu (explicit)
- rule K18:** extended past participle (explicit)



**rule K01: Put a comma for coequal enumerations.**

example(s)

- Sie ist ein **hübsches, intelligentes, nettes** Mädchen.  
(She is a beauty, intelligent, nice girl.)
- Wir **lachen, singen, tanzen**.  
(We laugh, sing, dance.)
- Er liebt **Ski fahren, viel lesen** und **gutes Essen**.  
(He loves skiing, reading a lot and good cuisine.)

hint(s)

The first example shows three (coequal\*) adjectives in row which are separated by comma.

The second example shows three verbs in row which are separated by comma.

In the third example are three word groups. Usually you add the third word group with "und".

The word und replaces the comma.

\* *coequal / no coequal adjectives*

You can find out with a relative simple trick if the adjectives are coequal or not:

If you can put theoretically an "und" between the adjectives and the sentences makes still sense, than the adjectives are coequal => put a comma.

**For the example above:** "Sie ist ein hübsches (und) intelligentes (und) nettes Mädchen. => The sentence makes sence with the "und" => coequal => comma.

**counterexample:** "Wir berichten über die jüngsten politischen Ereignisse." (We report about the latest political incidences.)

-> "Wir berichten über die jüngsten (und) politischen Ereignisse. => The sentence makes so sence with the "und" => no coequal => no comma.

**rule K02: Put a comma with multi-part date and time declaration, as well es with place+time declaration.**

- Wir treffen uns *am Mittwoch, den 18. Juni 2014*.  
(We'll meet on Wednesday, 18th June 2014.)

"part 1: am Mittwoch | part 2: den 18. Juni 2014

further examples:

- *Dienstag, der 11. September 2001* hat die Welt verändert.  
(Tuesday, the 11th of September 2001 has changed the world.)
- Er landet *am Freitag, den 12. Mai, um 15.00 Uhr* in Amsterdam.  
(He landed on Friday, the 12th May at 3pm in Amsterdam.)
- *Köln, (der) 09. Juni 2009*. (bei Briefen unterhalb der Unterschriftszeile)  
(Cologne, (the) 9th June 2009 - for letters underneath signature line)



**rule K03: Put commas with "sandwiched" appositions.**

example(s)

- example 1: Jane, **die Schwester von Cathy**, lebt in Amerika.  
(Jane, the sister of Cathy, lives in America.)
- example 2: Karl, **ein guter Freund der Familie**, hat uns letzte Woche besucht.  
(Karl, a good friend of our familie, visited us last week.)
- example 3: Peter, **28 Jahre alt und ledig**, sucht eine Freundin.  
(Peter, 28 years old and single, is looking for a girlfriend.)

hint(s)

Appositions are further information, which describe the noun additionally. They are sandwiched and separated by commas. The main sentence would make sense without the apposition, too. Appositions above are:

- example 1: die Schwester von Cathy (the sister of Cathy)
- example 2: ein guter Freund der Familie (a good friend of our family)
- example 3: 28 Jahre alt und ledig (28 years old and single)

**rule K04: Put a comma in front of explanations "at the end".**

example(s)

- Auf den Philippinen gibt es viele Probleme, **z.B.** die Armut der Leute.  
(There are many problems in the Philippines e.g. the poverty of people.)
- Ich spiele gerne Tischtennis, **d.h.** wenn ich die Zeit dafür finde.  
(I like playing table tennis that is I find time to do it.)
- Nicole mag Zeichentrickfilme, **und zwar** Filme mit Barbie.  
(Nicole likes cartoons namely movies with Barbie.)

hint(s)

Explanations "at the end" start usually with:

- z.B. = zum Beispiel (for example)
- d.h. = das heißt (that is / to wit)
- und zwar (namely)
- nämlich (namely)
- insbesondere (particularly)

**rule K05 Put no comma with coequal conjunctions.**

hint(s)

Coequal conjunctions are:

- **und** (and)
- **oder** (or)
- **sowie** (plus)
- **beziehungsweise = bzw.** (respectively)
- **weder ... noch** (neither ... nor)
- **sowohl ... als auch** (both ... and)
- **entweder ... oder** (either ... or)
- **nicht ... noch** (not ... nor)



example(s)

- Er kann singen **und** tanzen.  
(He can sing and dance.)
- Kannst du singen **oder** tanzen?  
(Can you sing or dance?)
- Er hat Geld, Autos **sowie** einige Häuser.  
(He's got money, cars plus some houses.)
- Das Geld hat nicht gereicht **bzw.** wir wollten auch nicht mehr ausgeben.  
(The money was not enough respectively we didn't want to spend more.)
- Wir waren **sowohl** in New York **als auch** in Dallas.  
(We were both in New York and Dallas.)
- **Entweder** du kommst mit **oder** du bleibst den ganzen Sommer bei Opa.  
(Either you come with us or you'll stay all summer with gradpa.)
- Wir vertrauen ihm **nicht noch** vertraut er uns.  
(We don't trust him nor he trust us.)

**rule K06: Put a comma with "add/follow" conjunctions.**

hint(s)

"add/follow" conjunctions are:

- je, desto ...(the ... the)
- einerseits, andererseits ...(on the one hand ... on the other hand)
- zum einen, zum anderen ... (on the one hand ... on the other hand)
- nicht nur, sondern ...(not just ... but)
- teils, teils ... (partly ... partly)
- zwar, jedoch ... (namely ... but)

example(s)

- **Je** mehr du lernst, **desto** besser werden deine Zensuren.  
(The more you learn the better become your marks.)
- **Einerseits** möchte ich hier bleiben, **andererseits** freue ich mich auf zu Hause.  
(On the one hand I want to stay here on the other hand I'm looking forward to going home.)
- **Zum einen** brauchten wir mehr Mitglieder, **zum anderen** müssen wir die Kosten reduzieren.  
(On the one hand we need more members on the other hand we have to reduce the costs.)
- Philippinische Frauen sind **nicht nur** hübsch, **sondern** auch sehr fleißig.  
(Philippine women are not just beautiful but diligent too.)
- Er hatte **teils** Angst, **teils** war er aufgeregt.  
(Partly he was afraid partly he was excited.)
- Ich hatte **zwar** gelernt, **jedoch** hat es mit der Prüfung trotzdem nicht geklappt.  
(Namely I learnt but I failed nevertheless.)

**rule K07: Put a comma for complete comparison sentences with "als" and "wie".**

example(s)

- Er kann schneller laufen, **als** ich dachte.  
(He can run faster than I thought.)
- **Wie** wir gestern besprachen, erhalten Sie anbei die Unterlagen.  
(As we discussed yesterday you'll find enclosed the documents.)
- Das Hotel was so schön, **wie** wir es erwartet hatten.  
(The hotel was as nice as we expected.)



hint(s)

"Als" and "wie" for comparison are a clear indicator for a comma.

exception(s)

The rule is only true if both sentences are complete. If one of the sentences is incomplete (e.g. the noun or verb is missing) don't put a comma.

A: Er kann schneller laufen **als** sein Bruder. (He can run faster than his brother.)

B: **Wie** gestern besprochen erhalten Sie anbei die Unterlagen. (As discussed yesterday you'll find enclosed the documents.)

In example A in the second sentence the verb is missing. The second sentence is not complete => no comma.

In example B in the first sentence the noun is missing. The first sentence is not complete => no comma.

**rule K08: Always put a comma to separate a subordinate clause from a main clause.**

repetition

The **main clause** is a complete\*, independent\*\* sentence:

\* complete = The main clause has a subject, a verb and as the case may be an object.

\*\* independent = The main clause can stand alone. It makes sense without further sentences / sentence parts.

A **subordinate clause** depends on a main clause.

A subordinate clause can't stand alone and makes no sense alone.

How can a recognize a subordinate clause?

Subordinate clauses are introduced by subordinate conjunctions.

There are different types of subordinate conjunctions:

**conjunctions of concession:**

- **ob**
- **obwohl**
- **obschon**
- **wenngleich**

**conjunctions of place:**

- **wo**
- **woher**
- **wohin**

**conjunctions of time:**

- **wann**
- **wenn**
- **während**
- **als**



- **bevor**
- **nachdem**
- **bis**
- **solange**
- **seit**
- **seitdem**
- **sobald**
- **kaum dass**
- **wie oft**
- **wie lange**

**conjunctions of condition:**

- **wenn**
- **falls**
- **sofern**

**conjunctions of purpose:**

- **damit**
- **dass / sodass**
- **um / um zu**

**conjunctions of reason:**

- **warum**
- **weshalb**
- **wieso**
- **wozu**
- **weshalb**
- **weil**
- **denn**
- **da**

**conjunctions of the way:**

- **wie**
- **indem**
- **statt**
- **anstatt**
- **ohne ... dass**

**wo-compounds:**

- **woran**
- **woher**
- **wovon**
- **worüber**
- **wonach**
- **worauf**
- **wozu**



**subordinate clause with "dass":**

- **dass**

**conjunctions of comparison:**

- **als**
- **wie**
- **als ob**

see rule: K07

example(s)

Hallo Herr Höfler,

wie telefonisch besprochen anbei eine Email der Firma [redacted]  
zur Geplanten Verlegung einer Gashochdruckleitung im Bereich der [redacted] brücke mit der  
Bitte um Stellungnahme  
und der Frage ob Sie an dem Termin teilnehmen können.

Mit freundlichen Grüßen  
im Auftrag

- Sagen Sie bitte Bescheid, **ob** Sie kommen.  
(Please tell me if you'll come.)
- Weißt du, **woher** er kommt?  
(Do you know where he is coming from?)
- Sie ermordeten ihn, **während** er schlief.  
(They killed him while he was sleeping.)
- Gib ihr das Geld, **falls** sie kommt.  
(Give the money to her if she comes.)
- **Damit** es nicht wieder passiert, musst du besser aufpassen.  
(You must watch out so that it won't happen again.)
- Ich habe Nicole belohnt, **weil** sie fleißig war.  
(I rewarded Nicole because she was diligent.)
- Sie lernt Deutsch, **obwohl** sie keine Lust hat.  
(She studied German even though she didn't feel like doing.)
- Ich hatte keine Ahnung, **wie** er es machen wollte.  
(I had no idea how he wanted to do it.)
- Weißt du, **worauf** ich mich freue?  
(Do you know what I'm looking for?)
- Er wusste, **dass** sie ihn liebt.  
(He knew that she loves him.)

**rule K09: Put a comma in front of opposite conjunctions like aber, sondern, doch.**

example(s)

- Deutsch ist schwer, **aber** andere Sprachen auch.  
(German is hard but other languages as well.)
- Er will kein Geld, **sondern** Anerkennung.  
(He doesn't want money but appreciation.)



- Ich schreibe ihr jede Woche, **doch** sie antwortet nicht.  
(I write to her every week but she doesn't answer.)

hint(s)

Opposite conjunctions are:

- aber (but)
- sondern (but)
- doch (but / however / yet)
- jedoch (however / yet)
- vielmehr (rather)
- allein (reclusive)

**rule K10: Put a comma in front of a relative pronoun.**

example(s)

- Ich kenne den Mann, **der** gestern hier war.  
(I know the man who was here yesterday.)
- Ich kenne den Mann, **den** die Leute hassen.  
(I know the man who the people hate.)
- Sie hat die Arbeit, von **der** ich immer geträumt habe.  
(She's got the job I've ever dreamed of.)

hint(s)

A relative pronoun is word which introduces a relative clause.

The relative pronoun refers back to a noun (=subject or object) in the main clause.

The relative pronouns in German are der, die, das, welche, welcher, welches.

The relative pronouns can occur in other cases like in the second example (den = accusative).

If the relative clause has a verb with a preposition like "träumen von" the preposition goes at the beginning of the relative clause and so follows the comma.

**Infinitive with zu**

Comma placement with "infinitive with zu" is not easy.

Basically: You can put a comma, but you must not, unless exception rules no. K13 to K15 come into effect.

**rule K11: You need not put a comma with "simple infinitive mit zu", if no misunderstandings occur.**

example(s)

- example 1: Sie versuchte(,) zu helfen.  
(She tried(,) to help.)
- example 2: Wie empfehlen(,) zu folgen.  
(We recommend(,) to follow.)
- example 3: Seine Angst(,) zu versagen(,) war sehr groß.  
(His fear(,) to fail(,) was very big.)

hint(s)

With "einfachen simple infinitive with zu" misunderstandings can hardly occur.

But you can put the comma, to structure the sentence more like in example no. 3.





**rule K12: You need not put a comma with "(extended) infinitive with zu", if no misunderstandings occur.**

example(s)

- example 1: Ich versuchte, ihm zu folgen.  
(I try to follow him.)

Example 1 is without any doubt. There are no misunderstandings.

You can leave out the comma but you need not.

- example 2a: Wir empfehlen ihm, zu folgen (Wir geben ihm den Rat, mit uns zu kommen).  
We recommend him to follow. (We give the advice to him to follow us.)
- example 2b: Wir empfehlen, ihm zu folgen (Wir empfehlen, mit ihm zu gehen).  
We recommend to follow him. (Our advice: follow him.)

In example 2 you must put the comma. Otherwise the sentence is not definite.

- example 3a: Ich bat,, Cathy vorsichtig nach Hause zu fahren (Ich bat jemand anderes, Cathy vorsichtig nach Hause zu bringen.).  
I asked to drive Cathy home safely.
- example 3b: Ich bat Cathy, vorsichtig nach Hause zu fahren (Ich bat Cathy, vorsichtig nach Hause zu fahren.)  
I asked Cathy to drive home safely.
- example 3b: Ich bat Cathy vorsichtig, nach Hause zu fahren (Ich bat Cathy vorsichtig (höflich), nach Hause zu fahren.)  
I asked Cathy discreet to drive home safely.

In example 3 you must put the comma. Otherwise the sentence is not definite.

**rule K13: Put always a comma with "infinitive with zu", which starts with um, ohne, außer, statt, anstatt, als .**

example(s)

- Cathy kam nach Deutschland, **um** mich zu heiraten.  
(Cathy came to Germany to marry me.)
- Er ging weg, **ohne** sich zu verabschieden.  
(He left without saying bye bye.)
- Wir spielten Fußball, **statt** zu lernen.  
(We played soccer instead of studying.)
- Ich schickte einen Brief, **anstatt** anzurufen.  
(He sent a letter instead of calling.)
- Ich hatte keine andere Chance, **als** zu kündigen.  
(He had no other chance than to resign.)

hint(s)

It doesn't matter, if the infinitive is simple or extended.

With um, ohne, außer, statt, anstatt, als always put a comma.

- *Ich schickte einen Brief, **anstatt** anzurufen. (simple infinitive with zu)*
- *Ich schickte einen Brief, **anstatt** sie anzurufen. (extended infinitive with zu)*



**rule K14: Put always a comma, if the extended infinitive with zu depends on a noun.**

hints(s)

It is easy to find out if the extended infinitive depends on a noun.

If the main sentence ends with a noun, followed by a possible comma and the extended infinitive, depends the infinitive on the noun.

You only have to put the comma with the extended infinitive. With the simple infinitive with zu the comma is optional. Whether the infinitive is simple or extended check the following example:

example 1

- Ich habe den **Wunsch**, *nach Amerika* zu fahren.  
 (I've got the wish to go to America.)

The extended infinitive depends on the noun (here: Wunsch=wish). The main clause ends with a subject (Wunsch=wish). The infinitive with zu is "zu fahren". The extension is "nach Amerika".

counterexample 1

- Ich habe den **Wunsch**(,) zu fahren.  
 (I I've got the wish to go.)

"The infinitive with zu" is not extended, so a simple infinitive. You can put a comma, but you must not.

Further examples with dependence on a noun:

- Er hat die **Aufgabe**, *die Toilette* sauber zu machen.  
 (His task is to clean the toilet.)
- Sie hatte keine **Möglichkeit**, *sich* zu waschen.  
 (She had possibility to wash herself.)
- Er gab mir sein **Wort**, *nichts* zu sagen.  
 (He promised nothing to tell.)
- Wir hatten das **Ziel**, *eine neue Gemeinde* zu gründen.  
 (Our aim was to establish a new church.)
- Ich hatte keine **Lust**, *das Buch* zu lesen.  
 (I didn't feel like reading the book.)
- Der **Versuch**, *die Bank* zu überfallen, kostete ihn das Leben.  
 The trail to hit the bank cost his life.

The last example shows a sandwiched extended infinitive with zu. Here too, the first part of the main clause ends with a noun (Versuch), followed by the comma and the extended infinitive with zu.

**rule K15: Put always a comma, if outside the extended infinitiv with zu es, damit, daran, dafür, darauf (=announcement word) occurs.**

You only have to put the comma with the extended infinitive. With the simple infinitive with zu the comma is optional. Whether the infinitive is simple or extended check the following example:

- Er denkt **daran**, *ins Ausland* zu gehen.  
 (He is thinking about going abroad.)

The infinitive with is "zu gehen". The extension is "ins Ausland" => You must put a comma.



Further examples for "announcement words" are *es, damit, daran, dafür, darauf, ...*

- Ich freue mich **darauf**, *dich* wieder zu sehen.  
(I'm looking forward seeing you again.)
- Ihr müsst **damit** rechnen, *viel Geld* zu investieren.  
(You must expect to invest a lot of money.)
- Das Auto ist nicht **dafür** gedacht, *Rennen* zu fahren.  
(The car isn't supposed to have a race.)
- **Es** gefällt uns, *früh* aufzustehen.  
(We like to get up early.)

**rule K16: Put never a comma with "infinitive with zu" + a form of haben | sein | werden .**

In this case the "infinitive with zu" forms together with the auxiliary verb (haben, sein, werden) a so called multi-part predicate.

- Sie *war* nicht mehr *zu sehen*.  
(She wasn't seen anymore.)

War and "zu sehen" form the multi-part predicate --> no comma.

Further examples for multi-part predicates:

- Das Auto *ist* nicht kaputt *zu kriegen*.  
(The car can't be damaged.)
- Sie *hat* viel *zu erledigen*.  
(She has to do a lot.)
- Er *wird* damit *zu kämpfen* haben.  
(He will struggle with this.)

**rule K17: Put never a comma with brauchen | pflegen | scheinen | verstehen | wissen + infinitive.**

- Du *brauchst* dich nicht *zu kümmern*.  
(You need not handle this).

"Zu kümmern" depends on the verb "brauchen" -> no comma.

further examples:

- Du *brauchst* morgen nicht *zu kommen*.  
(You need not come tomorrow.)
- Ich *pflege* abends ein Glas Wein *zu trinken*.  
(I like to drink a glass of wine in the evening.)
- Sie *scheint* aus den Philippinen *zu kommen*.  
(She seems to come from the Philippines.)
- Er *versteht* andere Leute *zu überzeugen*. (aber: Er versteht es, andere Leute zu überzeugen.)  
(He knows how to convince people.)
- Sie *weiß* sich *zu helfen*.  
(She knows how to find a way.)



**rule K18: You can put a comma with the "extended" past participle.**

example(s)

- example 1: Der Mann(,) **durch den Unfall gelähmt**(,) war sehr traurig.  
(The man, paralyzed by the accident, was very sad.)
- example 2: John. F. Kennedy(,) **1963 bei einem Attentat ermordet**(,) war amerikanischer Präsident.  
(John. F. Kennedy, killed 1963 by an assassination, was an American President.)
- example 3: Er fiel(,) **von der Kugel getroffen**(,) tot um.  
(He dropped dead, hit by a bullet.)

hint(s)

The "extended" participle consists of past participle of the verb and the extension.

In example 1 is the past participle of "lähmen" -> gelähmt and the extension "durch den Unfall".

The same if the past participle is not sandwiched.

You can put a comma to structure the sentence, but you need not. (analog "extended" infinitive with zu").

- *In Paris angekommen*(,) schauten wir uns als erstes den Eiffelturm an.  
(Arrived in Paris, we visited at first the Eiffel Tower.)
- Der Krieg begann(,) *ausgelöst durch einen dummen Zwischenfall*.  
(The war began, triggered by a stupid incident.)

**rule K19: Put a comma with salutation, exclamation, affirmation/negation/request.**

example(s)

**salutation**

- **Sehr geehrter Her Müller**, anbei erhalten Sie den Vertrag.  
(Dear Mr Müller enclosed you'll find the contract.)
- **Liebe Jane**, es ist schon lange her, seit ich dir geschrieben habe.  
(Dear Jane it's been a while since I wrote to you.)
- **Werte Gäste**, ich freue mich, Sie begrüßen zu dürfen.  
(Dear guest, I'm happy to welcome you.)
- **Erik**, räum endlich dein Zimmer auf!  
(Eric clean up your room!)

**exclamation**

- **Oh**, das tut mir aber leid.  
(Oh, I'm sorry.)
- **Ach**, daran habe ich gar nicht gedacht.  
(Ach, I don't think of this matter.)
- **Was**, du bist auch hier?  
(What, you are here?)
- Das hättest du nicht gedacht, **hä?**  
(You can't believe it, do you?)



**affirmation/negation/request**

- **Ja**, ein Glas Wein nehme ich noch.  
(Yes, I'll take one more glass of wine.)
- **Nein**, das will ich nicht.  
(No, I don't want this.)
- **Danke**, ich gehe lieber zu Fuß.  
(Thank you, but I'll go by foot.)
- **Bitte**, nehmen Sie doch Platz.  
(Please, take your seat.)

**Tip 01: Put a comma between two verbs in a row.**

example(s)

- Seit ich ihn **kenne**, **spielt** er Tischtennis.  
(Since I've known him he's been playing table tennis.)
- Während er **schief**, **ging** sie einkaufen.  
(While he's been sleeping she went for shopping.)
- Bevor der reagieren **konnte**, **waren** seine Sachen weg.  
(Before he could react his clothes were gone.)

hint(s)

Two verbs in a row is a clear indicator of "separation point" of the sentences.

It doesn't matter if the verbs are main verbs (singen, laufen, reden) or auxiliary verbs (haben, sein, ...).

The first verb marks the end of the first sentence and the second the beginning of the second sentence.

Mostly this word order occurs if the subordinate conjunctions (seit, damit, weil ...) was put at the beginning of the subordinate clause.

exception(s)

The rule is only true if both sentences are complete. If one of the sentences is incomplete (e.g. the noun is missing) don't put a comma. A classic is the beginning of a formal letter: ""Wie gestern **besprochen erhalten** Sie anbei die Unterlagen." (As discussed yesterday you'll find enclosed the documents).

In the first sentence noun and object are missing. The sentence is incomplete. That's why don't put a comma between "besprochen" and "erhalten".

**summary**

Remember: You must NOT put a comma with coequal conjunctions (und, oder ...), with "Infinitiv mit zu" + haben/sein/werden and with "Infinitiv mit zu" + brauchen/pflegen/scheinen (rules K05, K16, K17).

For all other cases you must or you can put a comma. If you doubt put a comma.