

The only article you'll ever need to painlessly understand the frustrating German adjective declension

A few days ago a student of mine came to me frustrated:

"Manuel, I already completed a language course a long time ago and have already reached a B1 level, but if there is one thing that I still don't get, it's this weird German adjective declension.

I remember when the teacher started to throw in one table after another and started to talk about different endings, weak ones, mixed ones, strong ones, grammar rules, cases ... it made my eyes glaze over.

I remember thinking: "Please stop shooting at me." And I always tried to calm myself by saying: "I'll figure this out later."

But to be honest, it's still a mystery to me. How do I put the right endings to adjectives, and when and why?

I've never managed to figure out the exact endings of the adjectives. When I had to describe something by using adjectives I was afraid to pronounce the endings because I was afraid of making mistakes.

But speaking was not the most frustrating experience. When writing emails to customers I was rarely sure that I used them in the right way. The insecurity gets even higher when you are getting paid for the job you are doing. After years dealing with these endings, I came to the frustrating conclusion that it may just be a matter of time before I get used to them.

Manuel, I know that there is a logical system behind this, I know that even the German language is “Made in Germany”. But be honest with me: Is there a way to master this topic painlessly and without memorizing tons of tables and grammar rules?”

I said to him, “Yes, give me one session, and you'll be ready.”

He started to smile at me and said, “Really if it takes a few sessions, it's no problem. I remember it taking us several sessions to cover all the different cases, endings, articles ... arghhh this frustrating feeling is coming up again.”

I smiled at him and said, “Really, only this one session. And I'm gonna go even one step further: you'll only need to memorize just one table, and I'll show you a trick to achieving this in less than 1 minute.”

He said, “I don't believe you.”

I said to him, “So let's give it a try, and you can tell me if I'm right.”

So, here we go.

Why do adjectives have special endings?

In the beginning you may have learned **adjectives** and used them when they are at the end of a sentence.

Der Computer ist sehr *billig*. (*The computer is very cheap.*)

Die Suppe ist *salzig*. (*The soup is salty.*)

Das Auto ist *schnell*. (*The car is fast.*)

Die Autos sind *schnell*. (*The cars are fast.*)

But adjectives can also be in front of a noun.

Der *billig*e Computer. (*The cheap computer.*)

Die *salzig*e Suppe. (*The salty soup.*)

Das *schnell*e Auto. (*The fast car.*)

Die *schnell*en Autos. (*The fast cars.*)

You see that in this case the adjective gets a special ending.

Why?

Whenever the adjective is in front of the noun, it is part of it and it is affected by the case (For example: nominative, accusative, or dative).

Whenever the adjective is placed after the noun it is not affected.

Das *schnell*e Auto ist *schnell*. (*The fast car is fast.*)

So, what kind of ending will it take?

For now we will cover the case in which an **article with an ending** will accompany the noun. But what is an **article with an ending**?

- der, die, das, den, dem
- eine, einer
- keine, keiner
- meine, meiner

You see, the bold marked endings are all endings that reveal a certain case (nominative, accusative, dative). **They give a clear case signal.**

In this case the adjective will take a so-called “**weak ending**” according to this following table. (Don't freak out: you won't need to memorize this table now. In a minute I'll show you a trick to memorizing this in only a few seconds.)

Adjective “**weak**” endings

	masculine	feminine	neuter	plural
Nominative	-e	-e	-e	-en
Accusative	-en	-e	-e	-en
Dative	-en	-en	-en	-en

Why do we call them “weak**” endings?**

Since we already have a clear case signal from the **article with an ending**, we don't need any additional case signal. There is already a case signal so that the adjective takes just a “**weak**” ending. (We will later on cover articles that don't have endings or where there is no article at all and the adjective gets a “**strong**” ending.)

Ok, how do we memorize this table in just 1 minute?

You see that there are just 2 types of endings **-e** and **-en**.

In a first step, I think it should be easy for you to reproduce this following table since you've dealt with it before.

	masculine	feminine	neuter	plural
Nominative				
Accusative				
Dative				

Now notice the gray fields, the only ones where the ending **-e** is.

	masculine	feminine	neuter	plural
Nominative	e	e	e	en
Accusative	en	e	e	en
Dative	en	en	en	en

The fields that contain the **-e** ending can be memorized with the help of a toothbrush. Can you recognize the gray **toothbrush** in the table?

	masculine	feminine	neuter	plural
Nominative	e	e	e	en
Accusative	en	e	e	en
Dative	en	en	en	en

You see that all plural and dative forms will get the **-en** ending. All the nominative and accusative singular forms will get the **-e** ending, with the exception of the masculine accusative that is under the shaft of the **toothbrush**.

Ok, so now you understand the endings from the examples before.

Der billige Computer. (*The cheap computer.*) → nominative, masculine, singular → “weak” ending **-e**.

Die salzige Suppe. (*The salty soup.*) → nominative, feminine, singular → “weak” ending **-e**.

Das schnelle Auto. (*The fast car.*) → nominative, neuter, singular → “weak” ending -e.

Die eschnellen Autos. (*The fast cars.*) → nominative, plural, singular → “weak” ending -en.

So remember: you will use these “weak” endings whenever you have an **article with an ending**.

Der grüne Apfel. (*The green apple.*) → nominative, masculine, singular → “weak” ending -e.

Let's dissect the sentence: “Der” is an article with an ending (-er) → we have a clear case signal → the adjective will take a “weak” ending.

“Apfel” is here: nominative, masculine, singular → so the “weak” ending for the adjective is within the toothbrush → “weak” ending -e → grüne Apfel

Ich esse meinen grünen Apfel. (*I eat my green apple.*) → accusative, masculine, singular → “weak” ending -en.

Let's dissect one more example: “meinen” is an article with an ending (-en) → we have a clear case signal → the adjective will take a “weak” ending. “Apfel” is here: accusative, masculine, singular → so the “weak” ending for the adjective is under the shaft of the toothbrush → “weak” ending -en → grünen Apfel

Meine grünen Äpfel. (*My green apples.*) → nominative, plural → “weak” ending -en.

Ich esse keine grünen Äpfel. (*I eat no green apples.*) → accusative, plural → “weak” ending -en.

Eine gelbe Banane. (*A yellow banana.*) → nominative, feminine, singular
→ “weak” ending **-e**.

Das Kind mit einer gelben Banane. (*The child with a yellow banana.*) →
dative, feminine, singular → “weak” ending **-en**.

Keine gelben Bananen. (*No yellow bananas.*) → nominative, plural →
“weak” ending **-en**.

Das Kind mit den gelben Bananen. (*The child with the yellow bananas.*) →
dative, plural → “weak” ending **-en**.

And what about these so called “strong” endings?

So now let's cover the case when there is **no article** or an article **without ending**. To make this point clear, see here the difference between articles **with endings** and **without endings**.

definite	indefinite	possessive	negative
d <u>er</u>	ein*	mein*	kein*
da <u>s</u>	ein*	dein*	kein*
di <u>e</u>	ein <u>e</u>	sein <u>e</u>	kein <u>e</u>
d <u>en</u>	ein <u>en</u>	<u>unser</u> en	kein <u>en</u>
d <u>em</u>	ein <u>em</u>	<u>eur</u> em	kein <u>em</u>

Notice that the *-marked articles don't have endings. They don't give a clear case signal. When using these articles, the adjectives will take the endings of the definite articles.

Do you remember the definite articles?

At this stage you should be familiar with them. Here they are again.

Definite articles and “strong” endings

	masculine	feminine	neuter	plural
Nominative	d- <u>er</u>	di- <u>e</u>	da- <u>s</u>	di- <u>e</u>
Accusative	d- <u>en</u>	di- <u>e</u>	da- <u>s</u>	di- <u>e</u>
Dative	d- <u>em</u>	d- <u>er</u>	d- <u>em</u>	d- <u>en</u>

The red marked endings are the “strong” endings.

Why do we call them “strong” endings?

Since we **don't** have a clear case signal from the **article** (it has no ending or there is no article at all), this time we need an additional case signal. Now the adjective must give a clear case signal.

Or in other words: **it's as if the adjective has to include the correspondent definite article ending that is missing.**

Schnelle Autos sind teuer. (Fast cars are expensive.)

- There is no article so there is still no case signal. “Autos” is in this case: nominative, neuter, plural: die Autos → schnelle Autos

Ich trinke gerne heissen Kaffee. (I like to drink hot coffee.)

- There is no article so there is still no case signal. “Kaffee” is here: accusative, masculine, singular: den Kaffee → heissen Kaffee

Ein schnelles Auto. (A fast car.)

- Ein* is an article **without ending** so there is no case signal given by the article. “Auto” is here: nominative, neuter, singular: das Auto → schnelles Auto

Mein *stark*er Mann. (*My strong man.*)

- Mein_ is an article **without ending** so there is no case signal given by the article. “Mann” is here: nominative, masculine, singular: der Mann → *stark*er Mann

Let's summarize

- Whenever there is an adjective placed after its noun it will take no ending.
- Whenever there is an adjective in front of the noun, it will take a special ending
- If the noun is accompanied by an **article with an ending**, the adjective will take a “**weak**” ending
- If the noun is accompanied by an **article without an ending** or if there is **no article** at all, the adjective will take a “**strong**” ending
- You will just need to memorize **one table**, the one of the “**weak**” endings. But with the trick of the toothbrush, it should be easy to reproduce the table.
- You already know the “**strong**” endings because they correspond to the endings of the direct articles you know.

Ok, I understand the “technical part”, but how can I apply this spontaneously when speaking?

Well this will take time and practice, of course. But now you should be able to figure out the correct endings in an easier way, and be able to correct yourself over time.

To start practicing this approach you can [find here](#) a worksheet that will help you understand the difference between articles with endings and

without endings. The worksheet will also help you start noticing when to use **weak** endings and **strong** endings.

[Get here](#) also access to a special audio I've recorded where I go through this entire topic in detail with many examples that will give you a better “feeling” for the adjective declension while you listen to it.

And what about the Genitive case that we haven't covered so far?

I haven't cover the Genitive case since the most used cases are just the nominative, accusative and dative and the Genitive case is more for upper levels of German once you enter C1/C2.

But now that we understand the basic principle let's head over to the Genitive and see that the same rules apply with one tiny addition.

Remember the basic principle:

- **We will only ever need 1 case signal**

First let's start with the “**weak** endings”. The Genitive will take the same “**weak** endings” as the Dative ones in case of having a case signal in the article that accompanies the noun.

	masculine	feminine	neuter	plural
Nominative	e	e	e	en
Accusative	en	e	e	en
Dative	en	en	en	en
Genitive	en	en	en	en

So pretty simple since you can stick to the same one table for the **weak**

endings and use the same trick to memorize this table. You will just have to add one line for the Genitive case.

Dieser Ferrari ist das Auto des reichen Mannes. (*This Ferrari is the rich man's car.*)

Dieser Ferrari ist das Auto der reichen Frau. (*This Ferrari is the rich woman's car.*)

Dieser Ferrari ist das Auto des reichen Mädchens. (*This Ferrari is the rich girl's car.*)

Dieser Ferrari ist das Auto der reichen Männer. (*This Ferrari is the rich men's car.*)

And what about the **strong** endings in the Genitive?

You remember, the **strong** endings are basically the endings of the definite articles. Here they are completed with the Genitive definite articles.

Definite articles and “**strong**” endings

	masculine	feminine	neuter	plural
Nominative	d- er	di- e	da- s	di- e
Accusative	d- en	di- e	da- s	di- e
Dative	d- em	d- er	d- em	d- en
Genitive	d- es (- en *)	d- er	d- es (- en *)	d- er

You see that I've marked the Genitive masculine and neuter articles and added the “**weak**” endings **-en**.

Why?

Well, you may already know that we add an additional **-s** to the Genitive nouns in the masculine and neuter.

Der Kauf *teuren* Weines ist sehr beliebt. (*The purchase of expensive wine is very popular.*)

Der Kauf *deutschen* Biere ist sehr beliebt. (*The purchase of German beer is very popular.*)

In these examples there is no article at all, so there is no case signal given by an article. BUT since we already have a clear case signal given by this additional Genitive **-s** in the noun, the adjectives will take just the “**weak**” endings. We don't need any additional case signal or the “**strong**” endings, because we already have a clear case signal provided by the ‘**s**’ added to the noun, not by articles before the adjective as is normally the case.

And of course we use the “**weak**” endings also when a noun is accompanied by an article with ending.

Der Kauf *der* *frischen* Milch ist sehr beliebt. (*The purchase of the fresh milk is very popular.*)

- “*der*” is an article with an ending (**-er**) → “Milch” is here: genitive, feminine, singular → “**weak**” ending **-en** → *der* *frischen* Milch

Der Kauf *der* *gesunden* Lebensmittel ist sehr beliebt. (*The purchase of healthy food is very popular.*)

- “*der*” is an article with an ending (**-er**) → “Lebensmittel” is here: genitive, plural → “**weak**” ending **-en** → *der* *gesunden* Lebensmittel

And when do we use the “strong**” endings?**

Well, as you can see on the table, we will use the “**strong**” endings just for the feminine and plural forms and of course in case we don't have a case signal.

Der Kauf *frisch*er Milch ist sehr beliebt. (*The purchase of fresh milk is very popular.*)

- There is no article and still no case signal. “Milch” is in this case: genitive, feminine, singular: der Milch → *frisch*er Milch

Der Kauf *gesund*er Lebensmittel ist sehr beliebt. (*The purchase of healthy food is very popular.*)

- There is no article and still no case signal. “Lebensmittel” is in this case: genitive, neuter, plural: der Lebensmittel → *gesund*er Lebensmittel

I know this was a lot of information, do you want to review this topic again with some extra material?

[Get here](#) a cheatsheet, a worksheet and a detailed audio file to review and reinforce this topic in detail.

What is still your single biggest challenge with learning German? Let me know in the comments below!