

The Basics of the Perfekt Tense + Regular Verbs

Hallo, Deutschlerner. In my last video I introduced you to the Perfekt tense through a conversation about the question “Was hast du am Wochenende gemacht?” If you haven’t seen that video yet, I recommend you watch it first. There is a link in the description for that. Today I’m going to explain a bit about when to use the Perfekt tense, how to form it and how regular verbs work in this tense.

First let’s talk about the purpose of the Perfekt tense. The Perfekt tense is primarily used when speaking in German about events or actions that occurred in the past. It is also commonly used in emails and letters. The actions described in the Perfekt tense, however, must be complete and not continue on into the present. If an event continues into the present, you use the Präsens for that. The Perfekt tense, however, is only used for things that have already happened and are finished.

There is often a lot of confusion online around the translation of the Perfekt tense, because in English we have a thing called the present perfect tense. The word “perfect” and the fact that the way you form the present perfect is very similar to that of the Perfekt contributes to the issue of people online calling the Perfekt tense the German present perfect tense. The problem is that the use of the present perfect in English is completely different from that of the Perfekt in German.

I often get questions in the comments asking why I didn’t use the English present perfect tense to translate the German Perfekt tense. In English when we say something in the present perfect tense, we mean that the action is continuing on into the present, which as I already mentioned, requires the Präsens in German and not the Perfekt. The better translation from the German Perfekt into English is the English simple past tense. For this reason, you will see me use the English simple past as a translation for each sentence. I will point out the difference in meaning a few times throughout this video also, to highlight the reason why I chose this translation.

Now that we know when to use the Perfekt, let’s get into the creation of the Perfekt tense. The Perfekt tense requires two parts. The first is a helping verb. This tense uses “haben” or “sein” as the helper and you conjugate them just like you would if you used them in the present tense, which is likely the only way you have encountered these verbs so far in your German learning.

Traditionally German teachers have said that you use “sein” as a helping verb when the main verb shows motion or a change in location, but this causes confusion when the verbs “sein” and “bleiben” both use “sein” as a helper, but clearly don’t show motion or change in location.

I have argued for the terminology of “transitive” and “intransitive” verbs. “Transitive” verbs are those that require or often take a direct object. “Intransitive” verbs don’t get direct objects. This does require students to remember what those terms mean, but explains “sein” and “bleiben” better than the motion vs non-motion method.

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Unfortunately, this causes other issues, as verbs that have to do with your body and a whole lot of other verbs that don't have direct objects still use "haben" as the helper. So now in my classes I teach a kind of hybrid method. Use the "motion vs non-motion" methodology as your main rule, but remember that certain intransitive verbs ("sein" and "bleiben") require the use of "sein" without motion. Also, if you use a verb of motion with a direct object, you need to use "haben" instead of "sein" as the helper. This is due to the fact that you changed the verb into a transitive verb, which requires "haben".

Verbs like *reisen* (to travel), *wandern* (to hike), *fliegen* (to fly), and *fahren* (to drive) use "sein" in the Perfekt tense, but the verbs *fliegen* and *fahren* can use "haben" if you add in a direct object, for example you are flying a plane or driving a car. If you say that using the plane or car as the direct object, you need "haben" as the helping verb. Since those verbs are both irregular verbs, I'll show you examples of that in the next video.

Verbs like *haben* (to have), *machen* (to do), *arbeiten* (to work), *reden* (to speak) *fotografieren* (to photograph) and many more use "haben" as their helping verb. Most are due to the use of a direct object, but some have to rely on the non-motion verb rule, as "arbeiten" generally doesn't have a direct object, but has to have "haben" in the Perfekt tense.

The second component of the Perfekt tense is what's known as a past participle or in German a Partizip 2. Regular verbs follow a very distinct pattern and are easy to figure out just by looking at the infinitive of the verb. Irregular verbs, however, don't follow such clean patterns, so I'm saving those for my next video.

To form the Partizip 2 of a regular verb, start by removing -en from the end of the infinitive to reveal the verb stem. For example: the verb stem of "machen" would be "mach". Now we add ge- to the front and -t to the end of the verb. This gives us "gemacht" as the Partizip 2 of "machen". Since "machen" is not a motion verb and is a transitive verb, we use "haben" as a helper. Here is an example using "machen" in the Perfekt tense.

Was hast du am Wochenende gemacht? - What did you do this weekend?

As you can see in this example, I conjugated the verb "haben" to go with "du", which gave me "hast". I put "hast" where the conjugated verb usually goes, in this case after the question word "was". The Partizip 2 is put at the end of the sentence right before the punctuation.

Let's try another regular verb.

Infinitiv: *reisen*

Verbstamm: *reis*

Partizip 2: *gereist*

Example Sentence: *Ich bin im Sommer nach Deutschland gereist.* - I traveled to Germany in the summer.

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This time I used “sein” as a helping verb, because the verb “reisen” means “to travel” and obviously shows motion. It also doesn’t take a direct object, which makes it an intransitive verb. Since both rules point to “sein”, we use “sein” as the helping verb. I put “sein” where the conjugated verb goes, which, since this is a statement, is directly behind the subject “ich”. The Partizip 2 of “reisen” is “gereist”, which I put at the end of the sentence.

The verbs “machen” and “reisen” are regular verbs, which is why they added ge- to the front and -t to the end when making the Partizip 2. Other regular verbs do something similar, but not quite exactly the same. There are a few extra rules we need to know before we can claim to be the masters of all regular verbs in the Perfekt tense.

Rule Number 1: Verb stems that end with T or D require an added -e between the stem and the final -t in the Partizip 2. This also happens when there is a cluster of consonants that would make it difficult to pronounce without this additional -e. For example:

Infinitiv: arbeiten

Verbstamm: arbeit

Partizip 2: gearbeitet

Example Sentence: Mein Vater hat zwanzig Jahre bei dieser Firma gearbeitet. - My father worked at this company for 20 years.

Infinitiv: reden

Verbstamm: red

Partizip 2: geredet

Example Sentence: Die Mutter hat mit der Lehrerin geredet. - The mother talked with the teacher.

Infinitiv: atmen

Verbstamm: atm

Partizip 2: geatmet

Example Sentence: Wir haben tief durchgeatmet. - We breathed deeply.

Rule Number 2: If a verb has a separable prefix, the Partizip 2 requires the ge- between the prefix and the rest of the verb. For example:

Infinitiv: aufwachen

Verbstamm: wach

Partizip 2: aufgewacht

Example Sentence: Ich bin mitten in der Nacht aufgewacht. - I woke up in the middle of the night.

Infinitiv: vorstellen

Verbstamm: stell

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Partizip 2: vorgestellt

Example Sentence: Die Lehrerin hat den Kindern die neue Schülerin vorgestellt. - The teacher introduced the new student to the children.

Infinitiv: zuhören

Verbstamm: hör

Partizip 2: zugehört

Example Sentence: Hast du mir nicht zugehört? - Didn't you listen to me?

Rule Number 3: If a verb has an inseparable prefix, the Partizip 2 does not add ge- to the beginning. For example:

Infinitiv: erzählen

Verbstamm: erzähl

Partizip 2: erzählt

Example Sentence: Sein Vater hat ihm jede Nacht eine Geschichte erzählt. - His father told him a story every night.

Infinitiv: versuchen

Verbstamm: versuch

Partizip 2: versucht

Example Sentence: Sie hat versucht einen Kuchen zu backen. - She tried to bake a cake.

Infinitiv: verabreden

Verbstamm: verabred

Partizip 2: verabredet

Example Sentence: Wir haben verabredet, nicht mehr vor den Kindern zu streiten. - We agreed not to argue in front of the children anymore.

Rule Number 4: If a verb ends with -ieren, no ge- is added to the front of the Partizip 2. Fun extra fact, EVERY and I do mean EVERY verb that ends with -ieren is regular in every tense. For example:

Infinitiv: apportieren

Verbstamm: apportier

Partizip 2: apportiert

Example Sentence: Der Hund hat fast eine Stunde Bälle apportiert. - The dog fetched balls for almost an hour.

Infinitiv: fotografieren

Verbstamm: fotografier

Partizip 2: fotografiert

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Example Sentence: Als Kind habe ich fast alles fotografiert. - As a child I photographed almost everything.

Infinitiv: studieren

Verbstamm: studier

Partizip 2: studiert

Example Sentence: Ihr Bruder hat Chemie an der Uni studiert. - Her brother studied chemistry at the university.

I mentioned earlier that the Perfekt tense is usually used when speaking. What I didn't mention yet is the use of "haben" and "sein". Since "haben" uses "haben" as a helping verb in the Perfekt tense and "sein" uses "sein", it is often considered redundant to use these verbs in this tense. Most people will use the Präteritum tense of these two verbs when speaking instead of the Perfekt tense.

While you will often read online that the two versions of "haben" and "sein", Perfekt and Präteritum, can be used interchangeably, in practice this isn't really the case. This is another instance of native speakers overlooking a pattern, because it has become too familiar to them. Pay attention to the following examples:

Ich war im Club und meine Ex-Freundin ist auch da gewesen. - I was in the club and my ex-girlfriend was there too.

The first half was written in the Präteritum tense, as it was a continuing action in the past. It sort of sets the stage for when the second action occurred. The second half is an action that is done or complete. Let's switch the sentence around and see what happens.

Ich bin im Club gewesen und meine Ex-Freundin war auch da. - I was in the club and my ex-girlfriend was there too.

In this version the presence of the ex-girlfriend sets the time when something happens and the first half of the sentence shows what happened during that time frame.

Bottom line: The Perfekt tense is a completed action while the Präteritum (simple past) is an ongoing action occurring within the past. In practice, most people don't see a distinction, because the difference is so subtle. The real difference is when speaking Perfekt is more common and when writing Präteritum is more common.

The Präteritum tense is also often used with the modal verbs: dürfen, können, mögen, müssen, sollen, and wollen, but this has to do with the additional verb that would be used with the modal verb. Since modal verbs are often paired with another verb to convey the desired meaning, it just gets messy in the Perfekt tense.

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If you don't have an additional verb with the modal verb, however, the Perfekt tense is used. Most of the modal verbs are also sort of regular verbs in the Perfekt tense with one notable change. I say "sort of regular", because the ones with umlauts lose the umlaut in the Perfekt tense, but otherwise they are regular. There is also the verb "mögen" which is irregular, as the Partizip 2 is "gemocht". Here are a few examples using modal verbs in the Perfekt tense.

Meine Schwester kommt gegen 3 Uhr morgens nach Hause. Ich habe das nicht gedurft. - My sister comes home at 3 in the morning. I wasn't allowed to do that.

Ich habe diesen Film gemocht. - I liked this film.

Ich habe dieses Getränk nicht gewollt. - I didn't want this drink.

As I mentioned, the use of modal verbs with the Perfekt tense is pretty rare. If you want to learn more about the past tense of modal verbs, I have an excellent post about this on my website, which I have [linked in the description](#).

This video is already pretty long, so I will leave you with some homework. Go back to last week's lesson and rewatch it. While you are watching, see how many regular verbs you can find. My count is 23, but I could be mistaken. List as many of the regular verbs from last week's lesson in the comments below as you can. Extra bonus points if you include the example sentence or sentences in which they are used in the video. Das ist alles für heute. Danke fürs Zuschauen. Bis zum nächsten Mal. Tschüss.