

Es war einmal eine schöne Prinzessin, die lange, prächtige Haare hatte. Sie wohnte in einem großen Turm, der weder Treppe noch Türen hatte. Eines Tages kam ein Prinz zum Turm und schrie: "Hey, warum sehen die Verben in diesem Märchen so komisch aus?" und Rapunzel schrie zurück: "Darüber spricht Herr Antrim in diesem Video."

Hallo, Deutschlerner! In our previous grammar lesson, we talked about when to use the Präteritum tense and how to form it with regular verbs. Today, we're diving into the mysterious world of irregular verbs in the Präteritum tense.

This lesson is pretty long and detailed, so there are timestamps in the description to help you navigate to the parts of the lesson that you need the most. There is also a link to a video that simply has the example story from the end of the lesson.

Future videos will tackle more complexities such as modal verbs and a deep dive into haben and sein. So, if you're looking for more lessons about this tense, check the description for the link.

As a quick reminder, both the Perfekt and Präteritum tenses talk about past events, but the Perfekt tense says, "This is done!" while Präteritum claims, "This was happening." Although, in reality, Germans often opt for Perfekt in conversation and Präteritum in writing or storytelling. Now, let's crack the irregular code.

The basics of irregular verbs in the Präteritum tense are similar to the basics of the regular verbs. The ich and er, sie, es forms of the verbs don't get an ending and the other forms simply take the same endings they did in the present tense. The downside is that the stem for each verb is weird. There are some patterns, which we will talk about in a bit, but for the most part, you simply have to memorize each irregular verb as you come across it with this tense.

Let's start with a very common verb: gehen. The stem of this verb in the Präteritum tense is "ging". You could use it in the following sentences:

Ich ging die Straße entlang. - I went along the street.

Du gingst damals gerne in die Stadt. - You liked going into the city back then.

Der Prinz ging ein bisschen weiter. - The prince went a bit further.

1958 gingen wir ins Kino um Angriff der 20-Meter-Frau zu sehen. - In 1958 we went to the movie theater in order to see Attack of the 50 Foot Woman.

Ihr gingt gemeinsam zum Konzert. - You went to the concert together.

Meine Freunde gingen zur Party. - My friends went to the party.

So you see we have the base form of the verb "ging" and then we add endings. Ich and er, sie, es don't get endings. Du requires -st. Wir -en, ihr -t, sie, Sie -en. Let's try it with the verb helfen. The stem of this one becomes "half".

ich half - I helped

du halfst - you helped
er, sie, es half - he, she, it helped
wir halfen - we helped
ihr halft - you helped
sie, Sie halfen - they, you helped

Now it is your turn. How would you conjugate the verb "geben"? I'll give you a hint, the base form is "gab". Pause the video and try it for yourself before continuing.

And the correct conjugation is:

ich gab - I gave
du gabst - you gave
er, sie, es gab - he, she, it gave
wir gaben - we gave
ihr gabt - you gave
sie, Sie gaben - they, you gave

If a German verb's Präteritum base form has an S or ß it needs an E between the base form and the endings for du and ihr. You can see this in the verb "lesen", which becomes "las" in the Präteritum tense. Here is the full conjugation.

ich las - I read
du lasest - you read
er, sie, es las - he, she, it read
wir lasen - we read
ihr laset - you read
sie, Sie lasen - they, you read

My student's favorite verb in this tense is usually essen. The Präteritum version is aß. The conjugation of it is:

ich aß - I ate
du aßest - you ate
er, sie, es aß - he, she it ate
wir aßen - we ate
ihr aßet - you ate
sie, Sie aßen - they, you ate

Now you try it with the verb sitzen. The base form is "saß". Pause the video and try it for yourself before continuing.

The correct conjugation of sitzen in the Präteritum tense is:

ich saß - I sat

du saßest - you sat
er, sie, es saß - he, she it sat
wir saßen - we sat
ihr saßet - you sat
sie, Sie saßen - they, you sat

Similar to what happens in the Präsens tense D & T require the extra E, too. Take the verb “finden” as an example. The base form is “find”.

ich fand - I found
du fandest - you found
er, sie, es fand - he, she, it found
wir fanden - we found
ihr fandet - you found
sie, Sie fanden - they, you found

Another example would be the verb “tun”, which becomes “tat” in the Präteritum tense.

ich tat - I did
du tatest - you did
er, sie, es tat - he, she, it tat
wir taten - we did
ihr tatet - you did
sie, Sie taten - they, you did

Now you try it out with the verb “verstehen”, which becomes “verstand” in the Präteritum tense. Pause the video and try it out for yourself before continuing.

And the correct conjugation of “verstehen” in the Präteritum tense is:

ich verstand - I understood
du verstandest - you understood
er, sie, es verstand - he, she, it understood
wir verstanden - we understood
ihr verstandet - you understood
sie, Sie verstanden - they, you understood

There is a category of verbs in the Präteritum tense that some teachers call “weak irregular verbs”. They do this, because there is a stem change, but the verb still ends with -te, which makes it look and act like a regular verb. I don’t use this explanation, but I wanted you to be aware that it exists, in case you read someone else’s explanation online and you are wondering what is going on. An example of this is the verb “bringen”, which is “brachte” in the Präteritum. This makes the full conjugation:

ich brachte - I brought
du brachtest - you brought
er, sie, es brachte - he, she, it brought
wir brachten - we brought
ihr brachtet - you brought
sie, Sie brachten - they, you brought

As you can see, if you just start by knowing that “bringen” becomes “brachte” in the Präteritum tense, you don’t need to classify them in a new category of verb, as the endings (-st for du, -en for wir and the 2 sie’s and -t for ihr) are the same as all of the other irregular verbs. In fact, those are the same endings we use for regular verbs too, if you just think of the base form of a regular verb as whatever the usual stem is plus -te.

My complaint with the idea of weak irregular verbs is that it complicates things more than is needed. If a verb is regular, lose the -en at the end and add -te followed by the conjugation ending, if needed. If a verb is irregular, memorize the base form and add a conjugation ending, if needed. Making students learn that some verbs have a stem change and a -te at the end is just unnecessary memorization.


To prove to me that you think it is super easy to conjugate verbs like this, too, conjugate the verb “denken”, which becomes “dachte” in this tense. Don’t forget to pause the video and try it for yourself before continuing.

And the correct conjugation should be:

ich dachte - I thought
du dachtest - you thought
er, sie, es dachte - he, she, it thought
wir dachten - we thought
ihr dachtet - you thought
sie, Sie dachten - they, you thought

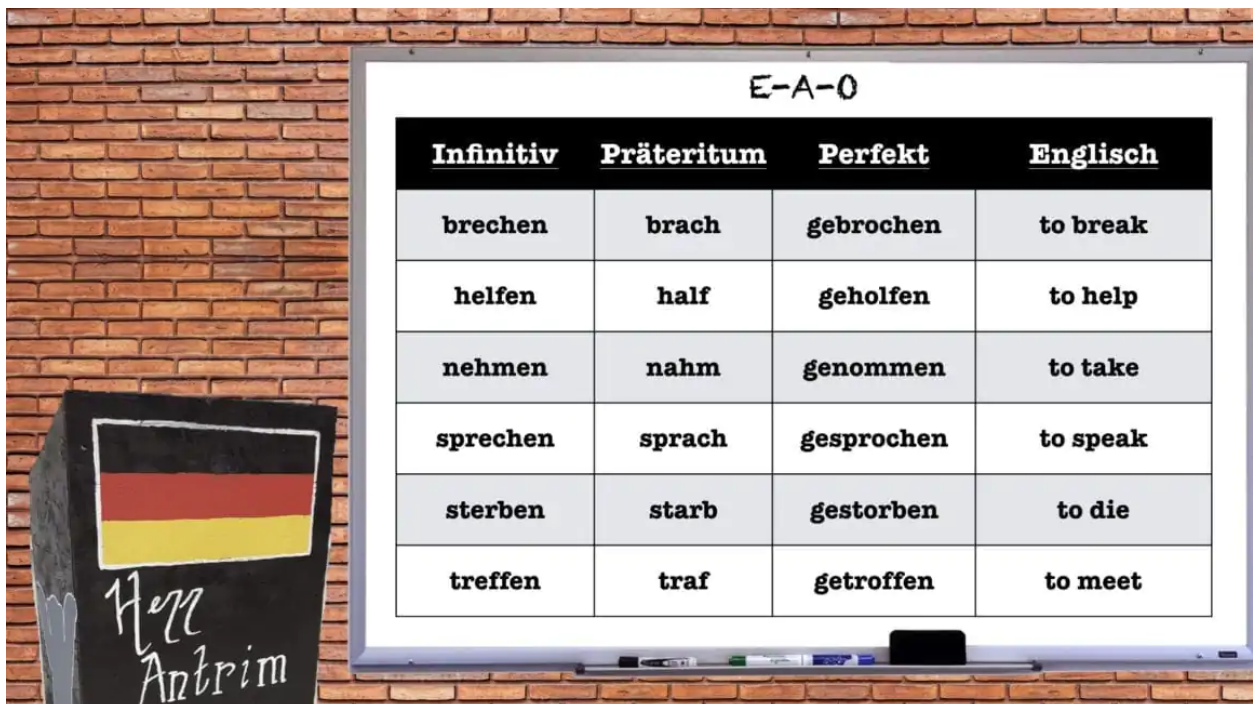
Now, I know what you are thinking, because it is the same reaction I get from my students every year that I teach this. How in the world do you know what a verb is going to change into with this tense? It seems so arbitrary. Well, unfortunately, the short answer is that you are just going to have to memorize them. The good news is that there are patterns that verbs follow. You may have already noticed some of them as we went through the examples.

When you take a step back and view the verb in the three main parts (infinitive, Präteritum, and Perfekt), you can see these patterns. For example: Some verbs change from EI in the infinitive to IE in the Präteritum and Perfekt forms. For example:



Infinitiv	Präteritum	Perfekt	Englisch
beweisen	bewies	bewiesen	to demonstrate
bleiben	blieb	geblieben	to remain, stay
entscheiden	entschied	entschieden	to decide
reiben	rieb	gerieben	to rub
schreiben	schrieb	geschrieben	to write
schweigen	schwieg	geschwiegen	to be silent
steigen	stieg	gestiegen	to climb
treiben	trieb	getrieben	to urge
vermeiden	vermied	vermieden	to avoid
heißen	hieß	geheißen	to be called

Some verbs have an E in the infinitive, an A in the Präteritum and an O in the Perfekt. For example:



Infinitiv	Präteritum	Perfekt	Englisch
brechen	brach	gebrochen	to break
helfen	half	geholfen	to help
nehmen	nahm	genommen	to take
sprechen	sprach	gesprochen	to speak
sterben	starb	gestorben	to die
treffen	traf	getroffen	to meet

You may notice another trend with those verbs. All of them also have a stem change in the Präsens, namely from E to I: brechen - bricht, helfen - hilft, nehmen - nimmt, sprechen - spricht, sterben - stirbt, treffen - trifft.

There are quite a few other patterns that verbs follow, so instead of listing them all out in this video, I'm just going to direct you to the videos linked in the description that are aimed at helping you learn these patterns and the irregular verbs in the past tenses of German. The best video I have made about this is from 2021, but it was so perfectly crafted, that recreating it would be a disservice to the original video.

Obviously the video for today so far is lacking in examples, so let's try out a story that mixes irregular and regular verbs in the Präteritum tense.

In einem kleinen Dorf lebten freundliche Menschen. Eines Tages entschieden sich einige von ihnen für ein Abenteuer.

Ein junger Mann namens Timo führte die Gruppe. Gemeinsam gingen sie den ganzen Tag durch den Wald. Timo erzählte Geschichten, und die anderen hörten zu.

Am Nachmittag trafen sie nette Leute aus einem anderen Dorf. Sie lachten, sangen und machten sogar ein Lagerfeuer.

In der Nacht hörten sie Tiere im Wald, aber das störte sie nicht. Sie fühlten sich sicher und genossen die Zeit.

Nach der Reise kehrten sie ins Dorf zurück. Timo erzählte die Geschichte, und alle lauschten gespannt.

Das Dorf hatte eine aufregende Zeit erlebt, und die Erinnerungen wurden zu spannenden Geschichten, die man sich noch lange erzählte.

Now it is your turn again. Try writing your own story in the comments below. I'll read your stories and give you feedback about your grammar and the story as a whole.

If you're eager to polish the skills you learned in this video, consider joining my Deutschlerner Club. It will take you through the A1 and A2 levels of German and will have you speaking with natives in no time. If you're ready for the next adventure, click here to take a deep dive into the other lessons in this series about the Präteritum tense. Bis dann. Tschüss!