

wer, wen, wem, wessen

Hallo, Deutschlerner. Today's video is going to be the first of a series of videos in which I explain every question word the German language has to offer including how to use them and any quirks that might throw you off when you first learn about them. Today we are concerning ourselves with the question words for people. There are four of them, one for each case in the German language: wer, wen, wem and wessen.

Once you finish learning about these question words in this video, don't forget to try writing your own questions in the comments so you can check your understanding. I'll be active in the comments checking your grammar and making sure you really understand the concepts. So without further ado, let's take a look at our first question word.

One of the first question words most German learners will encounter is the question word "wer". "Wer" is used when we want to know the identity of the subject of the sentence, essentially it is the same as the English word "who". For example:

Wer ist das? - Who is that?

Wer kauft die Karten? - Who is buying the tickets?

Wer hat dich eingeladen? - Who invited you?

Wer hat das Buch geschrieben? - Who wrote the book?

Wer kann mir helfen? - Who can help me?

Wer war der erste Mensch auf dem Mond? - Who was the first person on the moon?

When you are deciding whether or not you need "wer" in the question, you need to answer two parts. "Is the question asking for a person in the answer?" And "Is that person the subject of the sentence?" If the answer to both of those questions is "yes", you need "wer" as your question word.

The only problem with translating "wer" with "who", is that native English speakers don't use their own language properly. It is common in spoken English to use the question word "who" to inquire about people regardless of how they appear in the sentence. This means "who" can be a subject or an object. In German, the question word "wer" is exclusively used as the subject of the sentence.

This brings us to our second question word for the day, "wen". This word is best translated into English with the question word "whom". Ask any native English speaker to explain how to use "whom" properly or what the difference between "who" and "whom" is and you will be greeted with blank stares and slack jaws. Well, luckily for you, I happen to be one of about a dozen native English speakers who know the difference.

"Who" is exclusively used as the subject of the sentence, just like "wer" in German. "Whom" is used when we are inquiring about a person who is not the subject of the sentence. In German we have to be slightly more specific than that. "Wem" is used when the person about whom we are inquiring is used in the accusative case. This could be a direct object (the person being acted upon in the sentence). For example:

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Wen ruft er an? - Whom is he calling?

Wen möchtest du zur Party einladen? - Whom would you like to invite to the party?

Wen möchte sie besser kennenlernen? - Whom would she like to get to know better?

You can also use “wen” with a preposition and the accusative case, for example:

Für wen arbeitest du? - For whom do you work?

Auf wen wartet der Lehrer? - For whom is the teacher waiting?

Gegen wen hast du gespielt? - Against whom did you play?

Über wen spricht ihr? - About whom are you speaking?

In wen bist du verliebt? - With whom are you in love?

I used two categories of prepositions in those examples. “Für” and “gegen” are prepositions that always use the accusative case, conveniently called “accusative prepositions” while “auf”, “über” and “in” are all “two-way prepositions” or “Wechselpräpositionen”, which only require the accusative case in certain circumstances. I have videos about both of those categories linked in the description if you want to take a deeper dive into those topics.

Similar to the logic behind “wer”, when deciding to use “wen” as your question word, you need to answer two questions. “Is this question asking about a person?” And “Is the person in the accusative case in this question?” If the answer to those two questions is “yes”, you need “wen”.

While English only has one “whom” to worry about, German has two. In addition to the accusative question word “wen”, there is also a dative version “wem”. This question word is used to inquire about people in the indirect object position of the sentence. This is essentially the person to whom or for whom something is done within the sentence. Generally this person is receiving whatever the direct object of the sentence is. For example:

Wem hast du das Geld gegeben? - Whom did you give the money?

Wem schreibt er einen Brief? - Whom is he writing a letter?

Wem hat die Bibliothekarin das Buch geliehen? - Whom did the librarian lend the book?

English Grammar Nerd Side Note

If you are an English native speaker wondering why I phrased the English sentences like I did, you’re not alone. Even Google thinks I wrote these sentences wrong, because no English speakers use proper grammar anymore. Google Docs wants me to change these sentences to include the word “to” at the end of the sentence, but as your English teacher has probably taught you, prepositions are not something we end sentences with.

I’m sure they phrased it differently to avoid using “with” at the end of the sentence, but this version makes me smile, so I did it anyway. Technically, if you do add the word “to” to these sentences, it should be before the word “whom”, which again, would result in no preposition at

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the end of the sentence. To whom did you give the money? To whom is he writing a letter? To whom did the librarian lend the book?

Back to the German question word “wem”. In addition to the use of the dative case as an indirect object, you might remember that the dative case is used with certain verbs, which require dative objects, conveniently called “dative verbs”. When the question word is the object of one of these dative verbs, you need the dative question word “wem”. For example:

Wem hilft sie mit den Hausaufgaben? - Whom is she helping with the homework?

Wem dankt der Kellner? - Whom is the waiter thanking?

Wem gehört dieses Auto? - To whom does this car belong?

There is still one more dative case use for the question word “wem”. Just as there are accusative prepositions, there are dative prepositions. You can use those in front of question words. When you do this, you need to use “wem”. For example:

Mit wem gehst du ins Kino? - With whom are you going to the movie theater?

Neben wem sitzt er im Bus? - Next to whom does he sit on the bus?

Vor wem hat Joker Angst? - Of whom is Joker afraid?

Von wem hat er das gehört? - From whom did he hear that?

One more time, you can ask yourself two questions. “Is the question asking for a person?” and “Is that person in the dative case?” If the answer to both questions is “yes”, you need “wem”.

If you are looking for a more thorough explanation of indirect objects, dative verbs or dative prepositions, I have links in the description for videos about all of those topics, too.

And now for a German grammar power tip!

An easier way to decide if you need “wer”, “wen” or “wem”, is to rewrite the question into a statement with a masculine pronoun instead of the question word. The question word and the masculine pronoun will always have the same last letter. For example:

Wer kauft die Karten? - Who is buying the tickets?

Er kauft die Karten. - He is buying the tickets.

Both “wer” and “er” have the same last letter.

Wen ruft er an? - Whom is he calling?

Er ruft ihn an. - He is calling him.

The pronoun to which the question word “wen” refers is “ihn” in the statement version. This tells us we need an N at the end of our question word as well.

Wem hast du das Geld gegeben? - To whom did you give the money?

Ich habe ihm das Geld gegeben. - I gave him the money.

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The question word “wem” is used, because the dative case is needed and we can see that expressed through the pronoun “ihm” in the statement version.

English Grammar Side Note

One super cool part about this, is that it works in English to a certain extent too. If you would say “him” in English, you should be using “whom” in a question version of that sentence. You need an M at the end of the question word when there is an M at the end of the pronoun in a statement. For example:

Who is buying the tickets? He is buying the tickets.

Whom is he calling? He is calling him.

Whom did you give the money? I gave him the money. or To whom did you give the money? I gave the money to him.

The last question word for today is used to inquire about the genitive case. The question word “wessen” is most easily translated into English with the word “whose”. This word will most likely be followed by a noun, especially for those of you who aren't very far in your German learning. Here are a few example of how you can use “wessen” in questions.

Wessen Idee war das? - Whose idea was that?

Wessen Auto steht vor dem Haus? - Whose car is parked in front of the house?

Wessen Laptop hast du dir ausgeliehen? - Whose laptop did you borrow?

Mit wessen Eltern bist du nach Hause gefahren? - With whose parents did you drive home?

Now to show me that you were really paying attention throughout this video, write a comment that includes one question for each of the four question words in this video. I'll check your grammar and make sure you know what you are doing.

If you really want to practice what you have learned in this video, you can get extra materials to go with this lesson by becoming a member of my Deutschler Club. There is a link in the description for that.

As I mentioned at the beginning of this video, this is just the first of several videos I plan to make about question words. The question words for today are all used to ask questions to which the answer is a person or multiple people. In future lessons I will cover all of the other question words you will ever need to know.