

word formation

grimm grammar

🧩 Miscellaneous : Wortbildung

As you may know, German is famous for its impressively long nouns. In order for you to speak German successfully too, it is helpful to learn various patterns of word formation (derivation) and compounding.

If you feel overwhelmed, just relax, and imagine how impressive you will sound at the next party when such beauties as these roll easily off your tongue ...

- ▶ **Donaudampfschiffahrtsgesellschaftskapitaenskajuetenklinkenputzergehilfe**
- Fussballweltmeisterschaftsqualifikationsspiel**
- Vierwaldstätterseedampfschiffahrtsgesellschaft**

Learning **derivational** patterns and **compounding** in German is also a practical way to expand your vocabulary.

❖ Derivation

Derivation is the process of altering the original stems of words to form (i.e., derive) new words (by adding affixes) or new categories of words (e.g., an adjective from a noun or a verb).

I. Adding affixes (prefixes, suffixes, circumfixes) to word stems to form new words

Beispiel: **sprechen** (to speak)

Adding a prefix

prefix = **be-**
 original = **sprechen**
 new = **besprechen**
 word

discuss

Adding a suffix

stem = **sprech**
 suffix = **+ t**
 new = **spricht**
 word

you guys speak/talk

Adding a circumfix (prefix and suffix)

prefix = **be-**
 suffix = **-t**
 stem = **sprech**
 new = **bespricht**
 word
you guys discuss

▶ <i>die böse Königin</i>	Was bespricht ihr denn so intensiv?	What are you guys discussing so intensely?
<i>Schneewittchen</i>	Wir besprechen die Details von unserem Rechtsstreit; Heidrun verklagt Disney, denn Hexen werden da immer noch so einseitig dargestellt!	We are discussing the details of our lawsuit; Heidrun is suing Disney, because witches are still portrayed so one-sidedly!
<i>die böse Königin</i>	Ach, darüber möchte auch ich mit dir sprechen , Schneewittchen! Es ist doch höchste Zeit, dass man von der Gleichberechtigung aller Märchenfiguren spricht !	Aha, I would also like to talk to you about that, Snow White! It's high time that we speak of equal rights for all fairy tale characters!
<i>Schneewittchen</i>	Eh ... das muss ich mir erst überlegen. Ich bin vielleicht nicht die beste Verteidigerin von bösen Königinnen.	Hmmm ... I'll have to think about that. I may not be the best defender of evil queens.

II. Changing word categories

Just as in English, there are several groups of endings that can help you expand your vocabulary by changing the way you use certain words.

For example, using the word (noun) **Sprache**, you can build at least 8 different new words:

▶ Sprache	noun, feminine	<i>speech</i>
sprechen	verb, infinitive	<i>speak</i>
Sprecher	noun, masculine	<i>speaker, spokesperson, announcer</i>

Sprecherin	noun, feminine	<i>speaker, spokesperson, announcer</i>
Sprechen	noun, neuter	<i>the act of speaking</i>
sprachlos	adjective (-less) or adverb	<i>speechless/speechlessly</i>

As another example, here are the different words that can be formed from the verb **verstehen**.

▶ verstehen	verb, infinitive	<i>understand</i>
Verstehen	noun, neuter	<i>the act of understanding</i>
Verständnis	noun, neuter	<i>understanding, sympathy</i>
Verstand	noun, masculine	<i>reason</i>
Verständigung	noun, feminine	<i>understanding, agreement</i>
verständlich	adjective (-lich) or adverb	<i>understandable/understandably</i>
verständnislos	adjective (-less) or adverb	<i>uncomprehending/uncomprehendingly</i>
verständnisvoll	adjective (-full) or adverb	<i>understanding/understandingly</i>
verständlich	adjective (-ig) or adverb	<i>reasonable, sensible/reasonably, sensibly</i>
verständigen	verb, reflexive (sich)	<i>make one's self understood</i>

▶ die alte Hexe	Babsi, ich habe halt Verständnis für deine Situation, aber sei verständlich , wer hätte Mitleid mit einer bösen Königin?	Babsi, I have sympathy for your situation, I really do, but be sensible , who on earth would have sympathy for an evil queen?
die böse Königin	Und du sprichst gerade! Wer hat kleine Kinder gegessen? Huh? Wer hat Dornröschen umbringen wollen? Und wer hat Schneewittchen den giftigen Apfel wirklich angeboten? Huh?	And you should talk ! Who ate little children, huh? Who wanted to kill Sleeping Beauty? And who really offered the poisoned apple to Snow White, huh?
die alte Hexe	Ich bin einfach sprachlos ! Schneewittchen, glaub ihr kein Wort; mit dem giftigen Apfel hatte ich gar nichts zu tun. Ich schwöre!	I am simply speechless ! Snow White, don't believe her; I had nothing to do with that apple. I swear!



Here is a quick overview of some of the endings you can add to words to create **adjectives** or **adverbs**, since in German, they both look the same. But do watch out for the different meaning! You can also use most participle forms of verbs as adjectives (die **gebratene** Hexe ..., der **vergiftete** Apfel ..., und so weiter).

▶ -bar	-ible/able	lesbar (legible)
-d	-ing	sitzend (sitting)
-frei	-free/-less	koffeinfrei (caffeine free)
-haft	-ous/-ly	fabelhaft (marvelous)
-ig	-y	missmutig (grumpy)
-isch	-ic	problematisch (problematic)
-lich	-ual	pünktlich (punctual)

-los	-less	pietätlos (irreverent)
-sam	-y	langsam (slow/slowly)
-voll	-full	geheimnisvoll (full of secrets, mysterious)

Nouns can be formed with a handful of suffixes (e.g., **-heit**, **-keit**). These are the most common suffixes. This list is not meant to be exhaustive (although it may very well be exhausting):

▶ -chen/-lein	diminutive suffixes	Mädchen (little girl)
-er	masculine person	Zauberer (magician)
-in	feminine person	Zauberin (female magician)
-heit	-ness	Gesundheit (health)
-keit	-ity	Ewigkeit (eternity)
-nis	-ing	Verständnis (understanding)
-schaft	-ship	Bürgerschaft (citizenship)
-tät	-ity	Formalität (formality)
-ung	-ing/-ity	Gleichberechtigung (equality)

Nouns can also be formed by making the infinitive into a noun (always neutral).

▶ sehen (to see)	das Sehen	the act or concept of seeing
lesen (to read)	das Lesen	the act or concept of reading

Or by shortening the infinitive ... Sometimes the vowel will change; the noun will almost always be masculine.

▶ streiten (to argue)	der Streit	argument
sprechen (to speak)	der Spruch	saying, such as a proverb or set expression

Finally, **verbs** can be formed with all the [different prefixes](#) you have already learned about.

❖ Compounding

Compounding is the process of joining two or more words together to form new words; in the case of the German language, the more the merrier (just read Mark Twain's *A Tramp Abroad*).

The difference between German and English compounds lies in the way they are written. While English compounds tend to be written as separate words, German compounds tend to be written as one (very) long word.

Here are some examples for the word **sprechen**; see if you can identify the components of the new compound nouns, adjectives, etc.:

▶ die Sprechstunde	office hours, consultation session
die Sprachwissenschaft	linguistics (language science)
die Sprachschule	language school
der Sprachunterricht	language instruction
sprachbegabt	linguistically talented
das Sprichwort	proverb
die Sprachkenntnisse	language skills

German is a so-called 'left-branching' language, so compounds are created (and thus, are to be deciphered) backwards. In other words, the key information is the last component of the compound, with the preceding elements adding further information as you go leftwards. The gender of the compound noun, as a result, is determined by the last element of the compound:

▶ die Lebensgefahr	=> die Gefahr (danger) + das Leben (life) + 's (possessive)	ergo: danger of one's life
die Altbauwohnung	=> die Wohnung (apartment) + der Bau (building) + alt (old)	ergo: an apartment in an old building
das Schlüsselerlebnis	=> das Erlebnis (experience) + der Schlüssel (key)	ergo: a key experience (one that can alter one's life)

die Straßenbahnhaltestelle => die **Stelle** (spot) + halten (stop) *ergo*: where the
+ die **Bahn** (track) + die **Straße** streetcar stops (tram
(street) stop)

You will encounter many a compound noun in German texts, and many of these will not be in your dictionary. Don't lose heart, decipher them backwards and hope for the best. :-) Eventually you will get a sense for these, and you will be able to understand them readily. Until then, enjoy the puzzle!