The Perfekt Tense

We’re finally going to learn to talk about past events in German! You’re about to learn what’s called the ‘present perfect’ tense in English, or Das Perfekt in German. (Don’t be confused by the word ‘present’ -- this is a past tense that talks about past events -- it’s the English terminology that’s confusing.) Although there are two different past tenses in German (as in English), the Perfekt that you are learning is used most often in conversational (spoken) German. You will learn the other past tense (the narrative or simple past tense) in third-semester German.

The first thing we need to talk about when learning to form the Perfekt is the difference between strong and weak verbs in German. We have the same difference in English, too. Consider the following examples:

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Like English, German has a group of ‘regular’ (termed ‘weak’) verbs that always add a -t ending for the past participle, but another very different group of ‘irregular’ (termed ‘strong’) verbs that add an -en. We will be learning both kinds today, but for just now, we’re going to focus on the (easier) weak verbs.
To form the past participle of the German Perfekt tense for weak (regular) verbs, you need to take the stem of the verb (the infinitive minus the -en ending) and add a ge- prefix and a -t suffix.

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<th>fragen</th>
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There are two exceptions to this nice regularity. The first is that verbs that have an ending -ieren, like fotografieren, diskutieren, studieren, etc., do NOT get a ge- prefix. (These verbs can be easily recognized as English-French cognates, and they all end with -ieren, so it’s a pretty easy group to remember.)

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The other exception is for inseparable prefixes, like ver-, be- and miss-. When a verb has an inseparable prefix, it does NOT get a ge- prefix for the participle form.

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What happens with separable-prefix verbs? As you might expect, the prefix gets ‘stuck’ back on to the participle at the end, but the ge- prefix ends up in the middle of the word:

Wir haben die Tür zugemacht.  We closed the door.
Hast du dein Zimmer aufgeräumt?  Did you clean up your room?
Now that you can form the participle form of the verb, we need to learn the complete syntax for a past tense sentence. To form a complete German past tense sentence, you need to add a helping verb, either ‘haben’ or ‘sein’. Let’s look at the verbs that take ‘haben’:

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As you can see, the helping verb (haben in these sentences) is conjugated to match the subject, while the participle (ge-stem-t) remains constant. Also note that the participle occurs at the very end of the sentence, while the conjugated helping verb is in the normal verb position (second element for statements, first for questions).

Let’s try a few simple sentences for practice. These are all weak (‘regular’) verbs.

1. to make = ____________________
   participle = ____________________
   Did you make the bed? = ____________________

2. to clean up = ________________
   participle = ________________
   I cleaned up my room yesterday. = ____________________
3. to have = 
participle = 
*Tom had a party on Monday.* = 

4. to cost = 
participle = 
*How much did your bike cost?* = 

5. to wait = 
participle = 
*I waited 20 minutes!* = 

Now we need to learn about the other type of verb, the **strong verb**. These verbs are harder, because they often change their stem vowel in unpredictable ways, so they need to be memorized. Still, they do build their participle form in a regular fashion: a *ge*-prefix is added, and an *-en* (**NOT** *-t*) suffix. The stem vowel will often change, but not always. See the separate chart for details on stem vowel changes.

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There are a handful of strong verbs that don’t just change their vowel, but the whole stem. These irregular verbs just need to be memorized, but fortunately they’re the most common verbs (go, come, be, do), so you’ll see them a lot and get familiar with them very quickly.

- gehen - gegangen
- stehen - gestanden
- sein - gewesen

The same rules for inseparable prefixes (no ge- added to participle) and separable prefixes (added back on before the ge-) hold true for all verbs, strong, mixed and weak.

- weggehen - weggegangen
- anrufen - angerufen
- verstehen - verstanden

In addition to the strong verbs, there is a very small handful (about six) of verbs that are called ‘mixed’ verbs, because they act like a mix between strong and weak verbs. They take a ge-++t form like weak verbs, but their stem vowels change. Again, these verbs just need to be memorized.

- denken - gedacht
- bringen - gebracht
- kennen - gekannt
Let’s try a few sentences again. These are all strong or mixed verbs, so you’ll need to look at your chart/list.

1. **to write** = 
   participle = 
   *Yesterday I wrote a letter.* =

2. **to speak** = 
   participle = 
   *My grandfather spoke German.* =

3. **to drink** = 
   participle = 
   *Did you guys drink a lot of beer?* =

4. **to see** = 
   participle = 
   *Whom did you see?* =

5. **to know** (facts) = 
   participle = 
   *I didn’t know the answer.* =
Almost done! The last thing to learn about the *Perfekt* tense is that sometimes ‘*haben*’ is not the right helping verb to use. Rather, you need to use the helping verb ‘*sein*’ (*er ist, ich bin, etc*) for verbs that meet both of these criteria:

a) the verb indicates a **change of position or condition**, or a crossing of a ‘boundary’
   e.g. *gehen, kommen, wandern, sterben* (=to die), *einschlafen* (=to fall asleep)

b) the verb is **intransitive** (= does NOT have a direct object)
   e.g. *fahren* (*ich bin nach Milwaukee gefahren*,
       BUT *ich habe mein Auto gefahren*)

In addition, the three verbs *sein* (to be) and *bleiben* (to stay) and *passieren* (to happen) both take ‘*sein*’ as a helping verb, although they don’t match the criteria above.
Consider these examples:

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<td>Paul ist ein fleißiger Student gewesen.</td>
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Once again, practice by making complete sentences. All of these verbs take ‘sein’ as a helping verb, but some are strong verbs (ge-stem-en) while others are weak (ge-stem-t).

1. to come =
   participle =
   Sandra didn’t come to class. =

2. to travel =
   participle =
   We travelled to Europe last year. =

3. to fly =
   participle =
   Have you ever (=jemals) flown to Australia? =

4. to be =
   participle =
   I have never (=niemals) been in China. =

5. to go =
   participle =
   They went to the movies on Saturday. =
Now we need to mix things up. Below are blanked out sentences: some verbs take ‘sein’ as a helping verb, others ‘haben’. Try to determine which helping verb to use.

1. Wir _______________ nach Hause gegangen.
2. Paul _______________ uns gesehen.
3. Wir _______________ Pizza gegessen.
4. _______________ ihr um zehn Uhr eingeschlafen?
5. _______________ du gestern Fußball gespielt?
6. Tante Uschi _______________ Pharmazie studiert.
7. _______________ Sie zur Uni gelaufen?
10. Sie _______________ ihr Fahrrad gefahren.

Finally, let’s mix everything together. Below are sentences with missing verbs. Fill in the helping verbs (either ‘haben’ or ‘sein’) and also the participles (either strong or weak). Take it slow! It’s hard at first, but it will get much better with a little practice.

1. arbeiten / lernen: Wir _______________ den ganzen Tag
   ______________________, aber wir _______________ nichts
   ______________________.
2. **aufstehen / essen**: Ich _______ heute um 6 Uhr ________, und dann _________ ich Frühstück ________.

3. **fragen / sagen**: Du _______ mich ________, und ich _______ “nein” _________.

4. **mitkommen / bleiben**: _______ Georg zur Party ________? -- Nein, er _________ zu Hause ________.

5. **passieren / fahren**: Was _______ hier ________? -- Mein Auto _______ gegen einen Baum _________.

6. **schneien / regnen**: _______ es gestern ________? -- Nein, aber es _________ _________.

7. **tanzen / lachen / trinken**: Auf der Party _________ wir viel ________, _______ und auch sehr viel _________.

8. **sprechen / verstehen**: Er _______ mit mir ________, aber ich _______ ihn nicht ________.
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Like English, German has a group of ‘regular’ (termed ‘weak’) verbs that always add a -t ending for the past participle, but another very different group of ‘irregular’ (termed ‘strong’) verbs that add an -en. We will be learning both kinds today, but for just now, we’re going to focus on the (easier) weak verbs.
To form the past participle of the German *Perfekt* tense for **weak (regular) verbs**, you need to take the **stem** of the verb (the infinitive minus the -*en* ending) and add a **ge-** prefix and a **-t** suffix.

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1. **to make** = **machen**
   partiicle = **gemacht**
   Did you make the bed? = Hast du das Bett gemacht?

2. **to clean up** = **aufräumen**
   participle = **aufgeräumt**
   I cleaned up my room yesterday. = Ich habe gestern mein Zimmer aufgeräumt.
3. to have = haben
   participle = gehabt
   Tom had a party on Monday. = Tom hat am Montag eine Party gehabt.

4. to cost = kosten
   participle = gekostet
   How much did your bike cost? = Wieviel hat dein Fahrrad gekostet?

5. to wait = warten
   participle = gewartet
   I waited 20 minutes! = Ich habe 20 Minuten gewartet!

Now we need to learn about the other type of verb, the strong verb. These verbs are harder, because they often change their stem vowel in unpredictable ways, so they need to be memorized. Still, they do build their participle form in a regular fashion: a ge-prefix is added, and an -en (NOT -t) suffix. The stem vowel will often change, but not always. See the separate chart for details on stem vowel changes.

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Let’s try a few sentences again. These are all strong or mixed verbs, so you’ll need to look at your chart/list.

1. to write =  **schreiben**
   participle =  **geschrieben**
   Yesterday I wrote a letter. =  **Gestern habe ich einen Brief geschrieben.**

2. to speak =  **sprechen**
   participle =  **gesprochen**
   My grandfather spoke German. =  **Mein Großvater hat Deutsch gesprochen.**

3. to drink =  **trinken**
   participle =  **getrunken**
   Did you guys drink a lot of beer? =  **Habt ihr viel Bier getrunken?**

4. to see =  **sehen**
   participle =  **gesehen**
   Whom did you see? =  **Wen hast du gesehen?**

5. to know (facts) =  **wissen**
   participle =  **gewusst**
   I didn’t know the answer. =  **Ich habe die Antwort nicht gewusst.**
Almost done! The last thing to learn about the *Perfekt* tense is that sometimes ‘*haben*’ is not the right helping verb to use. Rather, you need to use the helping verb ‘*sein*’ (*er ist, ich bin, etc*) for verbs that meet both of these criteria:

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  BUT *ich habe mein Auto gefahren*)

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Ich bin um 7 Uhr nach Hause gekommen.  *I came home at 7 o’clock.*
Bist du schon eingeschlafen?  Have you fallen asleep already?
Paul ist ein fleißiger Student gewesen.  *Paul was a hard-working student.*
Once again, practice by making complete sentences. All of these verbs take ‘sein’ as a helping verb, but some are strong verbs (ge-stem-en) while others are weak (ge-stem-t).

1. **to come =** \underline{kommen}  
   **participle =** \underline{gekommen}  
   Sandra didn’t come to class. = Sandra ist nicht zur Klasse **gekommen**.

2. **to travel =** \underline{reisen}  
   **participle =** \underline{gereist}  
   We travelled to Europe last year. = Wir sind letztes Jahr nach Europa **gereist**.

3. **to fly =** \underline{fliegen}  
   **participle =** \underline{gefllogen}  
   Have you ever (=jemals) flown to Australia? = Bist du jemals nach Au. **gefllogen**?

4. **to be =** \underline{sein}  
   **participle =** \underline{gewesen}  
   I have never (=niemals) been in China. = Ich bin niemals in China **gewesen**.

5. **to go=** \underline{gehen}  
   **participle =** \underline{gegangen}  
   They went to the movies on Saturday. = **Sie sind am Samstag ins Kino gegangen**.
Now we need to mix things up. Below are blanked out sentences: some verbs take ‘sein’ as a helping verb, others ‘haben’. Try to determine which helping verb to use.

1. Wir ______ nach Hause gegangen.
2. Paul ______ uns gesehen.
3. Wir ______ Pizza gegessen.
4. ______ ihr um zehn Uhr eingeschlafen?
5. ______ du gestern Fußball gespielt?
6. Tante Uschi ______ Pharmazie studiert.
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Finally, let’s mix everything together. Below are sentences with missing verbs. Fill in the helping verbs (either ‘haben’ or ‘sein’) and also the participles (either strong or weak). Take it slow! It’s hard at first, but it will get much better with a little practice.

1. arbeiten / lernen: Wir ______ den ganzen Tag
   ______ gearbeitet, aber wir ______ nichts
   ______ gelernt.

2. ______ nach Hause gegangen.
3. ______ uns gesehen.
4. ______Pizza gegessen.
5. ______ ihr um zehn Uhr eingeschlafen?
6. ______ du gestern Fußball gespielt?
7. ______ Sie zur Uni gelaufen?
8. ______ im Jahre 1978 gestorben.
9. ______ nach Las Vegas gefahren.
10. ______ ihr Fahrrad gefahren.
2. **aufstehen / essen**: Ich **bin** heute um 6 Uhr **aufgestanden**, und dann **habe** ich Frühstück **gegessen**.

3. **fragen / sagen**: Du **hast** mich **gefragt**, und ich **habe** "nein" **gesagt**.

4. **mitkommen / bleiben**: Ist Georg zur Party **mitgekommen**? -- Nein, er **ist** zu Hause **geblieben**.

5. **passieren / fahren**: Was **ist** hier **passiert**? -- Mein Auto **ist** gegen einen Baum **gefahren**.

6. **schneien / regnen**: **Hat** es gestern **geschneit**? -- Nein, aber es **hat** **geregnet**.

7. **tanzen / lachen / trinken**: Auf der Party **haben** wir viel **getanzt**, **gelacht** und auch sehr viel **getrunken**.

8. **sprechen / verstehen**: Er **hat** mit mir **gesprochen**, aber ich **habe** ihn nicht **verstanden**.