

The 20 hardest points of Dutch grammar

The mistakes almost every learner makes, what the rule actually is, and how to stop making them.

I have taught Dutch to adults for years, and the same twenty things come back in almost every lesson. Not because my students are careless, but because these are the points where Dutch quietly works differently from English, Spanish, German or Polish.

Every page here gives you the rule in one or two lines, a sentence the way learners usually say it, the same sentence the way a Dutch person says it, and one tip that makes it stick. Read two a day and you will hear yourself improve within a month.

All examples are ones I actually hear in lessons. Nothing here is theory for its own sake.

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01 de or het · choosing the article

Roughly two thirds of Dutch nouns take **de** and one third take **het**. You cannot hear which is which, and there is no shortcut: learn every noun together with its article, from the first day.

NIET ~~Ik heb het auto gekocht.~~

WEL Ik heb de auto gekocht.

Tip. Some groups are completely reliable: every plural is *de*, every diminutive is *het*, and words ending in -ing, -heid, -tie and -ij are *de*. That already covers a large part of the language.

02 The conjugated verb comes second · main clauses

In a main clause the conjugated verb is always the second element. Any other verbs are pushed all the way to the end of the sentence.

NIET ~~Ik wil werken elke dag thuis.~~

WEL Ik wil elke dag thuis werken.

Tip. Count elements, not words. "Elke dag" is one element, so the verb still lands in second position.

03

Inversie · turning the sentence around

If a sentence starts with anything other than the subject, the subject moves to just behind the verb. Time, place and any other opener all trigger this.

NIET~~Morgen ik ga naar Utrecht.~~**WEL****Morgen ga ik naar Utrecht.**

Tip. Think of it the other way round: the verb never moves, it simply stays in second position. It is the subject that steps aside.

04

De bijzin · word order in a subordinate clause

After **dat, omdat, als, terwijl, of, hoewel, zodat** and the like, every verb moves to the very end of that clause.

NIET~~Ik weet dat hij komt morgen.~~**WEL****Ik weet dat hij morgen komt.**

Tip. Build the clause in your head without the verb first, then park the verb at the end. With two verbs, both go there: "... dat hij morgen komen kan."

05

omdat or want · both mean because

Omdat opens a subordinate clause and sends the verb to the end. **Want** links two main clauses and changes nothing at all.

NIET

~~Ik blijf thuis omdat ik ben moe.~~

WEL

Ik blijf thuis omdat ik moe ben.

WEL

Ik blijf thuis, want ik ben moe.

Tip. If you are not sure and you are speaking, use *want*. It never changes the word order, so it cannot go wrong.

06

of or als · both look like if

Of introduces an indirect yes-or-no question. **Als** introduces a condition, something that may or may not happen.

NIET

~~Ik weet niet als hij komt.~~

WEL

Ik weet niet of hij komt.

WEL

Als hij komt, bel ik je.

Tip. Ask yourself whether the hidden question could be answered with *ja* or *nee*. If it can, the word is *of*.

07

Het voltooid deelwoord · regular past participles

The recipe is **ge + stem + t or d**. Werken becomes gewerkt, horen becomes gehoord, maken becomes gemaakt.

NIET

~~Ik heb gisteren gewerkt.~~

WEL

Ik heb gisteren gewerkt.

Tip. Get the stem by taking the infinitive and removing -en: werken, werk, gewerkt. Not from the ik-form, for the reason explained in the next point.

08

't kofschip · is it t or d at the end

If the stem ends in one of the consonants in **'t kofschip** (t, k, f, s, ch, p), the participle ends in -t. In every other case it ends in -d.

NIET

~~Ik ben vorige maand verhuist.~~

WEL

Ik ben vorige maand verhuisd.

Tip. This is the trap: take the infinitive minus -en, never the ik-form. *Ik verhuis* ends in an s, but the verb is *verhuizen*, and z is not in 't kofschip. So it is verhuisd. The same goes for *leven* and *geleefd*.

09 hebben or zijn · choosing the auxiliary

Most verbs take **hebben**. Use **zijn** for a change of place or a change of state, and for *gaan*, *komen*, *worden*, *blijven* and *zijn* itself.

NIET

~~**Ik heb naar huis gefietst.**~~

WEL

Ik ben naar huis gefietst.

WEL

Ik heb een uur gefietst.

Tip. The same verb can take both. Name a destination and you need *zijn*. Talk about the activity itself and you need *hebben*.

10 Participles without ge- · be-, ver-, ont-, her-

Verbs beginning with **be-**, **ge-**, **ver-**, **ont-**, **er-** or **her-** never take an extra *ge-* in the participle.

NIET

~~**Ik heb de rekening gebetaald.**~~

WEL

Ik heb de rekening betaald.

Tip. Verbs ending in *-eren* are the opposite case and do keep the *ge-*: *studeren* gives *gestudeerd*, *proberen* gives *geprobeerd*.

11

Which past tense · perfectum or imperfectum

Everyday spoken Dutch uses the perfect: *ik heb gewerkt*. The simple past is for telling a longer story and for describing the background of one.

NIET~~Gisteren werkte ik en ging ik naar bed.~~**WEL****Gisteren heb ik gewerkt en ben ik naar bed gegaan.**

Tip. One group of verbs is the exception and sounds natural in the simple past: zijn, hebben, kunnen, willen, moeten and weten. *Ik was moe, ik had geen tijd, ik kon niet komen.*

12

Scheidbare werkwoorden · separable verbs

In a main clause the prefix jumps to the end of the sentence. In a subordinate clause it goes back onto the verb.

NIET~~Ik opbel je morgen.~~**WEL****Ik bel je morgen op.****WEL****Ik hoop dat ik je morgen opbel.**

Tip. With *te* the word splits around it: *om je morgen op te bellen*. In the participle the *ge-* goes in the middle: *opgebeld*.

13

om ... te · saying what something is for

To express purpose, Dutch uses **om** plus **te** plus the infinitive, with the infinitive at the end.

NIET

~~Ik ga naar de winkel voor brood kopen.~~

WEL

Ik ga naar de winkel om brood te kopen.

Tip. Voor followed by a verb is almost always wrong, however natural it feels from English or Spanish. If you can say "in order to", you need om ... te.

14

niet or geen · two ways to say no

Use **geen** in front of an indefinite noun, one that has *een* or no article at all. Use **niet** in every other situation.

NIET

~~Ik heb niet tijd.~~

WEL

Ik heb geen tijd.

WEL

Ik ken hem niet.

Tip. Look at the word in front of the noun. If it is *de*, *het*, *mijn* or *deze*, you need *niet*. If it is *een* or nothing, you need *geen*.

15

Het woordje er · the hardest word in Dutch

"Er" does four different jobs: it fills an empty subject slot, it replaces a place, it goes together with a number, and it combines with a preposition.

NIET

~~Staat iemand voor de deur.~~

WEL

Er staat iemand voor de deur.

WEL

Ik ben er nooit geweest. Ik heb er drie.

Tip. Almost nobody learns *er* from a rule. Collect ten sentences that contain it, learn them by heart, and copy the pattern. That works far better than the theory.

16

ermee, daarover, waarmee · preposition plus thing

Dutch does not say "aan het" or "over dat" when you mean a thing. The two words merge into **ermee, daarmee, waarmee, daarover, waarover**.

NIET

~~Ik denk aan het vaak.~~

WEL

Ik denk er vaak aan.

Tip. The preposition often ends up several words away from *er*. That gap feels wrong and it is completely normal.

17

die or dat · relative pronouns

Use **die** for de-words and for every plural. Use **dat** for het-words in the singular.

NIET

~~Het huis die ik gekocht heb.~~

WEL

Het huis dat ik gekocht heb.

WEL

De man die ik gisteren zag.

Tip. Here is the payoff for point 01. Learn nouns with their article and this rule costs you nothing extra.

18

Verkleinwoorden · the diminutive

The ending depends on the sound before it: **-je** after most consonants, **-tje** after a vowel or l, n, r, w, **-etje** after a short vowel plus l, m, n, ng or r, **-pje** after m, **-kje** after -ing.

NIET

~~Er staat een manje voor de deur.~~

WEL

Er staat een mannetje voor de deur.

Tip. Every diminutive is a het-word, whatever the original was. *De man* becomes *het mannetje*, *de stoel* becomes *het stoeltje*.

19

The adjective ending · with or without -e

The adjective takes **-e** nearly always. There is exactly one exception: a singular het-word preceded by *een*, *geen*, *elk*, *ieder* or nothing at all.

NIET~~**Ze hebben een mooie huis gekocht.**~~**WEL****Ze hebben een mooi huis gekocht.****WEL****Het mooie huis. Een mooie auto.**

Tip. Only that one combination drops the -e. When you are in doubt and have to guess, adding the -e is the better bet.

20

Modale werkwoorden · kunnen, mogen, moeten, willen, zullen

The modal is conjugated and the other verb stays as an infinitive at the end. In the perfect tense the modal itself turns into an infinitive too.

NIET~~**Ik heb gisteren niet gekund komen.**~~**WEL****Ik heb gisteren niet kunnen komen.**

Tip. Two infinitives next to each other at the end of the sentence feels wrong to almost every learner, and it is exactly right. *Ik heb moeten werken. Ik had willen gaan.*

Knowing the rule is not the same as using it

You can read this list twice and still say "ik weet niet als hij komt" next Tuesday, because grammar does not move from the page into your mouth on its own. It moves there by being used, corrected, and used again a week later.

That is what lessons are for. I teach Dutch online, one to one and in small groups, and I write my own material, so a lesson covers the situations you actually end up in: a meeting, a letter from the gemeente, a conversation with your neighbour that keeps switching to English.

How lessons work

- A 30-minute trial lesson to check your level and set a goal
- One to one, or a group of no more than six at your level
- Evenings in the Dutch time zone are no problem, I teach from South America
- Lessons in Dutch, English or Spanish, whichever gets you moving fastest
- Preparation for inburgering A2 and B1 and for Staatsexamen NT2

If anything in this guide made you think "that is exactly what I keep getting wrong", send me a message. Tell me which point it was and roughly where your Dutch is, and I will tell you honestly what I would work on first.

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