The Quick Guide to Norwegian grammar

Speakers of English and German can acquire a knowledge of written Norwegian surprisingly quickly.

There are two official Norwegian languages: Bokmål and Nynorsk. The language briefly described below is Bokmål and is spoken by 85% of Norwegians. With a little extra study, Bokmål-speakers can also understand Swedish and Danish.

Pronunciation (link)

Grammar

Norwegian word order is generally more like English than German. However, if an element is fronted (moved to the first position in the sentence) it displaces the subject, which moves after the verb.

Jeg må visst gå hjem nå. 'I'd better go home now.'

Here nå 'now' is fronted: Nå må jeg visst hjem. 'now I'd better go home.'

Here det 'that' is fronted: Det tenkte jeg ikke på. 'I didn't think of that.' Det vet jeg ikke. 'I don't know.' Cf. German: Das weiß ich nicht.

Conjunctions (except og 'and', eller 'or', men 'but' and for 'for') also displace the subject, as above, when they start a sentence:

Fordi han aldri har lest en bok, er han uvitende. 'Because he has never read a book, he is ignorant.'

They do not affect word order if the subordinate clause comes after the main clause.

Notice that when 'og' and 'men' bind together two main clauses they are preceded by a comma:

Han er veldig tykk, og han liker å spise. 'He is very fat and he likes to eat.'

Han er tykk, men han liker ikke å spise. 'He is fat but he doesn't like to eat.'

The verb is also fronted when preceded by an element of time or place:

Jeg drikker kaffe om morgenen. 'I drink coffee in the morning.'

Om morgenen drikker jeg kaffe. 'In the morning I drink coffee.'

Det er kaldt på Grønland. 'It's cold in Greenland.'

På Grønland er det kaldt, 'In Greenland it is cold.'

Nouns

The major difference with both English and German is that 'the' comes after the noun. There are three genders masculine, feminine and neuter as in German and Russian; distinct forms in e.g. en mann 'a man' -> mannen 'the man'; ei fru 'a woman' -> frua 'the woman' and neuter, e.g. et hus 'a house' -> huset 'the house' (the t is not pronounced). In some styles, especially of written Norwegian, feminine nouns may be treated as maculine. For example Klokka er to or Klokken er to 'It's two o'clock'.

You may find gender is different from what you expect from German. For example, universitet is neuter, not feminine.

Further information on nouns

Plurals

The plural ending is -er for common and polysyllabic neuter nouns, e.g. katter 'cats'. Monosyllabic neuter nouns e.g. hus have no ending in the plural, i.e. hus. The neuter noun sted 'place', strangely, takes the -er plural: steder 'places'.

Note that <the (pl)> triggers another ending. The (pl.) is -ene, e.g. kattene 'the cats', husene 'the houses'. (Neuter nouns have an alternate plural ending -a, e.g. husa, and this must be used with barna 'children' and beina 'legs'.)

Pronouns

Jeg 'I', du 'you sg.', han 'he', hun 'she', vi 'we' dere 'you pl.'

De (always with a capital letter) is formal 'you' and may refer to one or more people. Strangely, de and De are pronounced as if they were spelled di.

Verbs

The bare infinitive adds -r to form all persons of the present tense. 'To' before the bare infinitive is 'å', e.g. å bruke 'to use'.

Conjugation 1

The plain past of verbs whose infinitive ends in two consonants followed by -e is -et; the past participle also ends in -et.
There are some exceptions: Norwegian Verbs Conjugation 1

Conjugation 2

The plain past of verbs whose infinitive ends in one consonants followed by -e e.g. å reise 'to travel' is -te e.g. reiste; the past participle ends in -t e.g. reist.

There are some exceptions: Norwegian Verbs Conjugation 2

Conjugation 3

The plain past of verbs whose infinitive ends in, g, v or a dipthong followed by -e e.g. å leve 'to live' is -de e.g. levde; the past participle ends in -d e.g. levd.

Conjugation 4

If the infinitive ends in a vowel, e.g. å bo 'to live', the past tense is in -dde e.g. bodde and the past participle is -dd e.g. bodd.

Strong verbs

As in English and German, one needs to learn the plain past and past participles of strong (vowel change) verbs.

Example

komme -> kom -> kommet

Note there is no equivalent of German ge- before the past participle.

Norwegian Strong Verbs

Modals

kan 'can', må 'must', vil 'want', skal 'shall'

The future is formed with skal or vil and the bare infinitive. Jeg skal (gå) hjem. 'I'll go home.' Note that one can omit verbs of motion after a modal, as in German.

Adjectives

Adjectives add -e: before a plural noun
Adjectives add -t: after et 'a' and before a neuter noun

Comparative adjectives end in -ere; superlatives in -est. Mer is 'more'; mest 'most'.
Possessive adjectives usually follow the noun, and the noun is put in the definite form (i.e. with the after it).

Adverbs

Usually come after the verb:
Han liker ikke suppe. 'He doesn't like soup.'

However in a subordinate clause (e.g. followed by at 'that' or fordi 'because'), they come before the subordinate verb:
Jeg vet at han ikke liker suppe. 'I know that he doesn't like soup.'

Fordi han aldri har lest en bok, er han uvitende. 'Because he has never read a book, he is ignorant.'

Common words difficult to guess from English and German

få 'get'; 'few'; gå 'go', må 'must', nå 'now', på 'on'

ikke 'not', aldri 'never', alt 'everything' (gammel is 'old'), pen 'beautiful', sen 'late'

av 'of'; by', bli 'become', bo 'live' (neighbours are people who live near!), det er 'there is/are', som 'who, which', være 'be'

Common expressions

Hei! 'Hello!'

Takk 'Thank you'

Ha det 'Goodbye'