

Dutch grammar for readers: the 12 rules you need to read at A2 and B1

You do not need all of Dutch grammar to read Dutch. You need twelve rules, most of them about where the verb goes, and you need to meet them in texts until you stop noticing them. Here they are, each in a few lines, with sentences from the free texts on this site.

How to use these rules

Read a rule, then read a text and find it three times. That is the whole method. A rule you have met thirty times in sentences you understood is a rule you own; a rule you studied for an hour is a rule you will look up again. The sentences below are all from texts on this site, so you can go and meet them in context.

1. The verb comes second

In a normal sentence the verb is the second element, whatever comes first. If the sentence starts with the subject, it looks like English. If it starts with a time, a place or *dan*, the verb still comes second and the subject moves behind it. This is the rule that makes Dutch look back to front, and it is the one you will see in every second sentence.

- **Vandaag is het 27 april.** Today it is 27 April. (Koningsdag)
- **Op de markt is groente goedkoper dan in de supermarkt.** At the market, vegetables are cheaper than in the supermarket. (Op de markt)
- **Dan loopt ze met Tom naar het Vondelpark.** Then she walks with Tom to the Vondelpark. (Koningsdag)

2. In a sub-clause the verb goes to the end

After *dat*, *omdat*, *als*, *toen*, *terwijl* and *of* (whether), the verb leaves its second place and goes to the end of the clause. When the sub-clause comes first, the main clause that follows starts with its verb. Four little words do not do this: *en*, *maar*, *want* and *of* (or) join two main clauses, and the verb stays second after them.

- **Als hij niet betaalt, krijgt hij straf.** If he does not pay, he is punished. (Saïdjah en de buffel)
- **Ze steekt haar hand uit als ze linksaf gaat.** She puts out her hand when she turns

left. (Een nieuwe fiets)

- **Een buffel op Java houdt van het kind dat voor hem zorgt.** A buffalo on Java loves the child that looks after it. (Saïdjah en de buffel)

- **Want zonder buffel kan hij niet ploegen.** Because without a buffalo he cannot plough. (want: the verb stays second)

3. With two verbs, the second goes to the end

Wil, kan, moet, mag, gaat and zal take the second place; the verb that carries the meaning goes to the end of the sentence. When you read, do not stop at wil: run your eye to the end of the sentence first, then read it as one piece.

- **Hij huilt en hij wil niet eten.** He cries and he does not want to eat. (Bij de huisarts)

- **Hij moet ook belasting betalen.** He also has to pay tax. (Saïdjah en de buffel)

- **Op Koningsdag mag iedereen op straat spullen verkopen.** On King's Day everyone may sell things in the street. (Koningsdag)

- **Later wil Saïdjah met Adinda trouwen.** Later Saïdjah wants to marry Adinda. (Saïdjah en de buffel)

4. The perfect tense: hebben or zijn, and a participle at the end

Dutch talks about the past mostly with the perfect tense: a form of hebben (or zijn for movement and change) in second place, and a participle at the end. The participle usually starts with ge- and ends in -t, -d or -en: gewerkt, gepraat, geweest. The same rule as rule 3, with the past built in.

- **Ik heb koffie gemaakt en ik heb met de klanten gepraat.** I made coffee and I talked with the customers. (Solliciteren)

- **De kris is van zijn vader geweest.** The kris belonged to his father. (Saïdjah en de buffel)

- **In Oekraïne heeft ze twee jaar in een café gewerkt.** In Ukraine she worked two years in a café. (Solliciteren)

5. Separable verbs split in two

Many verbs are made of a small word and a verb: aandoen, uitsteken, opbellen, meesturen. In a main clause the verb takes second place and the small word goes to the very end. When a sentence ends in aan, uit, op, af, mee or terug, that word belongs to the verb: look the two

up as one word.

- **Hij doet het licht aan.** He turns the light on. (aandoen, Een nieuwe fiets)
- **Ze steekt haar hand uit.** She puts out her hand. (uitsteken, Een nieuwe fiets)
- **Op elke boot staat muziek aan.** On every boat music is playing. (aanstaan, Koningsdag)

6. De and het, and the words that follow them

Every noun is a de-word or a het-word. About three in four are de; all plurals are de; all diminutives are het; the rest you learn with the word. The article decides four other words: die and deze go with de-words, dat and dit with het-words. Reading is the painless way to learn them, because you see the pair every time.

- **Het sterke dier luistert naar de kleine jongen.** The strong animal listens to the small boy. (Saïdjah en de buffel)
- **Met dat geld koopt hij een nieuwe buffel.** With that money he buys a new buffalo. (het geld, so dat)
- **In die tijd, rond 1850, hoort Java bij Nederland.** In that time, around 1850, Java belongs to the Netherlands. (de tijd, so die)

7. The adjective gets an -e, with one exception

An adjective before a noun ends in -e: de kleine jongen, het sterke dier, een goede fiets. The one exception: after een (or no article) before a het-word, the -e disappears: een klein dorp, een sterk dier. That exception is a gift to readers: an adjective without -e tells you the noun is a het-word.

- **In de winkel kost een goede fiets 500 euro of meer.** In the shop a good bike costs 500 euro or more. (de fiets)
- **Op zijn verjaardag heeft heel Nederland een vrije dag.** On his birthday the whole of the Netherlands has a day off. (de dag)
- **Zurich is hier geen stad in Zwitserland, maar een klein dorp.** Zurich here is not a city in Switzerland but a small village. (het dorp, so no -e; De Afsluitdijk)

8. Plurals end in -en or -s

Most nouns take -en: de fiets, de fietsen; de boot, de boten. Words that end in an unstressed

syllable and many foreign words take -s: de tram, de trams; de foto, de foto's. Watch the spelling: a long vowel loses a letter (boot, boten) and a short vowel doubles the consonant after it (man, mannen).

- **Er zijn meer fietsen dan mensen.** There are more bikes than people. (Een nieuwe fiets)

- **Op het water zijn honderden boten.** On the water there are hundreds of boats. (Koningsdag)

- **Op de grond liggen kleden met spullen.** On the ground lie blankets with things. (Koningsdag)

9. Diminutives: -je, -tje, -pje, always het

Dutch makes a small version of almost any noun: het huis, het huisje; de brief, het briefje; de lamp, het lampje; het biertje. It means small, or nice, or sometimes nothing at all, and it is always a het-word. You will meet a diminutive in nearly every conversation and in every children's book, which is one reason children's books are harder than they look.

- **Ze kijkt met een lampje in het oor van Sami.** She looks with a small light in Sami's ear. (Bij de huisarts)

- **Olena maakt een foto van het briefje.** Olena takes a photo of the note. (Solliciteren)

10. Er: there, it, of them

Er is the word that English speakers never feel at home with. At the start of a sentence it means there is, there are, and the real subject comes after the verb. In the middle of a sentence it can mean there (a place), it (with a preposition: erop, ervan) or of them (ik heb er drie). You do not have to produce it to read it: when you see er, expect the subject later in the sentence.

- **Er zijn meer dan 100 kramen.** There are more than 100 stalls. (Op de markt)

- **Er zitten nog drie mensen.** There are three more people sitting there. (Bij de huisarts)

- **Er zit zilver op.** There is silver on it. (Saïdjah en de buffel)

- **Het ruikt er naar brood.** It smells of bread there. (Solliciteren)

11. Niet and geen

Geen denies a noun that has no article or een: geen eten, geen vergunning, geen oranje

kleren. Niet denies everything else: a verb, an adjective, a whole sentence. Niet likes the end of the sentence, or the place just before the word it denies or before the verb at the end.

- **Yuki heeft geen oranje kleren.** Yuki has no orange clothes. (Koningsdag)
- **Dan heeft de familie geen eten.** Then the family has no food. (Saïdjah en de buffel)
- **Je kunt niet zonder afspraak naar binnen.** You cannot go in without an appointment. (Bij de huisarts)
- **Dat is niet vreemd.** That is not strange. (Saïdjah en de buffel)

12. Ze, je, we: the short pronouns, and u

Dutch has two forms of most pronouns: zij and ze, jij and je, wij and we. The short form is the normal one in speech and in texts; the long form adds stress. Ze means she or they, and the verb tells you which: ze fietst is she, ze fietsen is they. U is the polite you, used to strangers, officials and people older than you, until they say zeg maar je.

- **Dan fietst ze naar haar werk.** Then she cycles to her work. (ze with -t: she)
- **Mensen dansen en zingen.** People dance and sing. (plural verb, no -t)
- **Komt u vandaag maar langs.** Do come by today. (u, the receptionist to a parent; Bij de huisarts)
- **Dag Olena, ik ben Peter de Groot. Zeg maar Peter.** Hello Olena, I am Peter de Groot. Just say Peter. (Solliciteren)

The one thing that comes next: the past tense

At A2 you read the present and the perfect tense. At B1 stories switch to the simple past: regular verbs add -te or -de (werkte, fietste, woonde), and the common verbs change their vowel (ging, kwam, was, had, zei). You will meet it in every novel and most newspaper stories. Do not learn the list; read a B1 text and notice that the verbs look different, then let the list come to you.

Where to meet the rules

Every sentence above comes from a free text at A2 on this site. Rules 1 to 3 have their own page with thirty examples and ten exercises: Dutch word order explained. Read the short stories with the audio and find the rules as you go; the levels page says what grammar belongs to which level, and how to learn Dutch puts the reading into a weekly plan.

Is Dutch grammar hard?

Compared with German, no: no cases, two articles, one adjective ending. Compared with English, the word order takes getting used to, and *de* and *het* have to be learned word by word. Everything a reader needs at A2 and B1 fits on this page.

Do I need to learn grammar to read Dutch?

You need to recognise the twelve patterns on this page, especially where the verb goes. You do not need to produce them correctly to understand a text, and recognising them comes from reading, not from exercises. Study the rule once, then read until you stop seeing it.

What is the most important rule in Dutch grammar?

Verb second in a main clause, verb at the end in a sub-clause, and the second verb at the end when there are two. Those three rules are most of what makes a Dutch sentence look different from an English one.

Why are children's books hard for learners?

Diminutives, the simple past tense and idiom. A book for Dutch five-year-olds assumes the grammar of this page is already automatic. A text written for learners at A2 uses the present tense, few diminutives and the words you know.