

Wohin gehst du?


(Where are you going?)

In English, you can express any direction with the preposition “to”: I am going to Germany, to Berlin, to Poland, to the US, to the Baltic Sea, to my friend etc.

In German, on the other hand, we have *zu*, *in* and *nach*. That might seem confusing, but it’s actually very simple, as long as you distinguish the following two concepts of direction:



1) “Roger that, I’m going in!” (→ *in* and *nach*)

The first concept  is a direction **into** a place. That means: Once you are there, you are surrounded by it **in all three dimensions**. In German, we use the preposition *in* in these cases, followed by a noun with an article **in accusative**.

If you are a beginner, you might already have learned *ins* as a chunk: *ins* Kino, *ins* Schwimmbad, *ins* Restaurant etc. (*ins* being short for *in das*)

Now it is time to give you the full picture: *in* comes with accusative, and *ins* being the short form of *in das* can, obviously, only be used for neutral nouns with the article *das*. Here’s the full table:

accusative

masculine:	der → den	der Park → Wir gehen in den Park.
feminine:	die → die	die Bar → Wir gehen in die Bar.
neutrum:	das → das	das Kino → Wir gehen ins (or: in das) Kino.
plural:	die → die	die Berge → Wir gehen in die Berge. (mountains)

Once again: The concept “into” and, correspondingly, *in den*, *in die*, *ins* = *in das*, *in die*, are only used for three-dimensional places. Places that are considered as flat or, in nerd language, two-dimensional, are treated differently: markets, squares, fields, surfaces like the floor, the ceiling, etc.

Exception: For geographical names **without article** (that is, most countries, continents, as well as all cities/towns/villages etc.) the concept “into” also applies, but we use the preposition *nach*:
Ich fahre nach Deutschland, nach Berlin, nach Dresden, nach Europa, etc.

Countries that do have an article, e.g. die Schweiz, die USA (plural!), die Ukraine, die Türkei, die Niederlande (plural!), etc. get the usual *in* for direction: Ich fliege *in* die USA, *in* die Schweiz, *in* die Ukraine etc.

2) “I’ll stay outside. Or not.” (→ *zu*)

The second concept → means a **general direction towards a place**.

“General” in this context means: Once you are there, you can be at the place, near the place, close to the place or whatever, you can even be on the place (e.g. a street market), but you **CANNOT BE IN IT**. Because that would be *in* + accusative (or *nach* for countries without article and cities).

The preposition for the concept “general direction” is *zu* and comes with dative (which you might not have learned yet):

dative

masculine:	der → dem	der Alexanderplatz → Ich fahre zum (= zu dem) Alexanderplatz.
feminine:	die → der	die Eastside Gallery → Ich fahre zur (= zu der) Eastside Gallery.
neutrum:	das → dem	das Brandenburger Tor → Ich fahre zum (= zu dem) Brandenburger Tor.
plural:	die → den	die Kumpels → Ich gehe zu den Kumpels. (buddies)

Since “zu” means “to, but not into”, it is also used for persons: Ich gehe zum Doktor, zur Direktorin, zu Johnathan, zu Sarah etc.

Wrap-up:

So, we use *in* + accusative for the concept “into” → , *nach* is the “into”-version for geographical stuff without article, and *zu* + dative expresses a general direction → .

Obviously, in many situations, you can use *zu* or *in*, depending on what you want to say:

Ich gehe **zum** Restaurant. Dort treffe ich meine Freunde. (i.e. I am going to the restaurant, but I won’t go inside, but wait outside to meet my friends.)

Ich gehe **ins** Restaurant. (i.e. inside)

Also, in German, we love to keep things simple by using “zu” a lot, even if we mean “eventually going inside” (since that is usually clear from the context):

“Ich fahre **zum** Hauptbahnhof und nehme den Zug nach Dresden.”

“Sarah geht **zum** Edeka und kauft drei Liter Milch.”

“Ich fahre zur Uni, denn ich habe einen Deutschkurs um 12.30.”

The only limitation to that usage of *zu* are, again, geographical places without article (→ always *nach*) and countries with article (→ always *in*)

3) A few last remarks:

1) We just learned that *zu* means a general direction, but it has some other meanings, too. An important exception is the idiomatic expression “zu Hause” which means “at home” (i.e. not a direction, but a place)

2) *nach* is also used for basic directions: nach rechts (right), nach links (left), nach Norden (north), nach Süden (south), nach Westen (west), nach Osten (east), nach oben (up), nach unten (down), nach vorne (forward), nach hinten (back) and, last but not least, nach Hause (home)

3) In many textbooks or online materials for German, you will find rules about other prepositions, e.g.:

an + accusative for bodies of water or shores (oceans, rivers, lakes, beaches etc.)

“Ich gehe an den Strand” (beach), “Ich fahre an den Atlantik”, etc.

(The concept of *an* is: Once you are there, you have vertical contact with the place)

Technically, you can say that, but, again, feel free to make your life easy by using *zu* (i.e. *zum*, *zur*, *zu den*) instead: “Ich gehe zum Strand.”