



How to Be a Successful Student of German

A Handbook for Majors

Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures

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How to Use This Handbook

So you have decided to study German at Valparaiso University. Willkommen! It is wonderful that you are here.

This handbook will help you understand our program's goals, the attitudes and practices that will help you meet them, and the available resources. We strongly encourage you to read and absorb this information. And do not hesitate to talk with your professors and fellow students about it.

The sections of this handbook explain the mission and objectives of the German program as well as the habits and attitudes that will lead you to success. The appendix contains lists of resources and guidelines to help you meet the objectives. Feel free to page through the book, but be sure to read the opening sections. The appendix tells you where to go for help, but the opening sections tell you what we are trying to accomplish together and what role you can expect to play.

You will notice that this handbook focuses on German majors. It is meant as a resource for both majors and minors. Of course, minors do not have the same commitment to German study and will not make the same progress as majors, but the same principles for success apply to all advanced students of German. Everyone can make remarkable progress with German while at Valparaiso University.

We wish you great success and enjoyment in your study of German! Viel Erfolg und Vergnügen!

Many Individuals, One Program

We appreciate that every student arrives in our program with a unique background and individual needs, expectations, and goals. We look forward to getting to know you. Which of the following characteristics describe you?

Some students have been learning German for many years; others have had only a few courses. Some have travelled or even lived in Germany whereas many have never left the U.S. before. Some have strong grammar skills but are uncomfortable speaking. Some can hold a conversation in German but feel unsure about grammar. The study of literature and culture is intriguing to some but unfamiliar to others. Some know a lot about German

Which of these characteristics describe you?

popular culture, politics, music, or history; others know "classroom German" only. Some students feel like real beginners.

Students' goals also vary widely. Some wish to travel or take part in daily life in a German-speaking country. Some anticipate using German in a career in business, a technical field, public service, clergy, or law. Some may use the language as teachers. Some will use German as part of graduate study in any number of fields. Some enjoy learning about

other cultures for personal enrichment. And of course many students are still figuring out how German might be a part of their future lives; they simply like learning it.

Regardless of your background or goals, the German program at VU can be part of your path to success. The key is to view this program as part of a lifelong learning process that began before you arrived at VU and will continue for many years to come. In reality, no one masters a second language in even four years of undergraduate study (despite the empty promises of many commercial language products). But successful students in our program are extremely well positioned to master the German language eventually and to use it to enrich their lives and meet their goals. Your professors have all gone through this process themselves and are excited about helping you with it. It can change your life and open doors that you cannot imagine yet. No matter what your future holds, the VU German program will provide a foundation that can help you meet your personal goals. In fact, graduates of our program have gone on successfully to pursue all of the goals described above.

Successful students in our program learn to communicate effectively in German and are extremely well positioned to master the language eventually.

Portrait of a Graduating German Major

What skills and knowledge can students realistically expect to gain in the VU German program? Based on past experience, at graduation most successful German majors can:

- negotiate the demands of daily life in a German-speaking country.
- socialize and hold informal conversations with native German speakers.
- use German successfully in some formal and professional settings and use specialized vocabulary related to their interests.
- express their opinions and make coherent, persuasive arguments in German.
- communicate with enough grammatical accuracy that errors do not present an obstacle.
- locate resources to help perfect their spoken and written German over time.
- read German texts and use German media with good comprehension.
- interpret works of German literature and understand their relations to German culture.
- understand the basics of German cultural history and important cultural differences between German-speaking countries and the United States.
- feel prepared to use German in many professional settings.

To achieve these goals, students must play an active role in their educations and take advantage of the full range of available opportunities. The following sections, “Four Objectives for Student Learning” and “Resources for Learning,” explain this more fully.

Four Objectives for Student Learning

The German curriculum and co-curricular activities are designed to help you meet the four objectives listed in this box. These objectives are clearly interrelated. For instance,

Successful German majors strive:

- 1. to become highly proficient in the German language (in listening, speaking, reading, and writing).*
- 2. to learn to analyze and appreciate key German literary texts and to read texts critically.*
- 3. to know and appreciate German culture, both past and present.*
- 4. to identify and use reliable sources of information.*

studying a novel in German will certainly involve working on all four at once. But it is helpful to keep each objective in mind; everything we do in our program is intended to meet at least one of them. It is important for you to consider which of these are your current strengths and weaknesses and to make a plan to work on each of them,

whether in courses, co-curricular activities, or on your own time. Let's look at each objective more closely:

Objective One: German Language Proficiency

Every course in our program will help you develop German language skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Some of the courses (**204, 220, 272, 305, and 306**) focus directly on building these skills along with grammatical knowledge and accuracy. But other content courses simply use the language while focusing on different subject matter (including **271, 341, 351, 352, 353, 390, and 493**). For a self-directed student, these content courses provide an excellent opportunity to practice and develop what is learned in the language courses. A successful German student will continue to learn vocabulary and hone grammar skills in all German courses, realizing that using the language in context is by far the best way to do this.

Research into how people learn languages shows that our brains are practically “wired” to learn languages. Without even trying, young children automatically learn the languages spoken by people around them, including some very complicated grammar! Teenagers and adults retain some of this ability but must also be more intentional about learning languages. To succeed, they have to become “active” learners, taking responsibility for their learning. These tips will help you to be an “active” language learner:

University students must become “active” learners to master a language. Use these tips to help you succeed.

- Learn vocabulary actively. Do it regularly. Keep a small vocabulary notebook that you bring to your courses, co-curricular activities, homework time, and wherever

you encounter German. When you notice unfamiliar words, write them down and look them up. Alternatively, you may prefer to use an application to list vocabulary on your cell phone or another device. Review the words in your list frequently. No one will force you to learn lists of vocabulary in most of your courses. Successful German students do this actively all the time, realizing that building vocabulary will help them to do well in all of their courses and, more importantly, to learn the language. And be assured: the more you do this, the easier it gets.

- Keep your grammar notes and texts from language courses. Refer to them and other grammar books when you write in German. Use them to try to make sense of what you read. Ask your professors or other students for help with what is not clear. Realize that the number of grammar rules in German is actually limited. If you think about them and practice them, you will master them, first in your writing and eventually in your speaking. But since you are no longer a child who can simply absorb these rules, you must pay attention to them for this to happen.
- Commit a certain amount of time every day to using German and actually thinking in the language. The reality is: people learn languages when they use them regularly, and they forget what they don't use. Language learners must train their skills, much like athletes or musicians. Successful German students commit several hours each day to "living" in German. During the semester, much of this time will be spent in German courses and doing homework. But some of it will have to happen in other ways. For further ideas about getting this necessary practice, see the section below titled "Resources for Learning."

Objective Two: Analyzing German Literature

Traditionally, this was the point of a German major. Just as English majors focus on literature from different eras written in English, German majors have always done the same with German literature. Learning a language at a university was once considered a means to read literature and little else. Today, the field of German studies has expanded to encompass much more, including the study of language for everyday communication and examining the past and present cultures of German-speaking countries.

But literary studies remain a central component of German studies. (Most professors of German have advanced degrees in German literary studies.) This continued emphasis on literature makes good sense for several reasons:

- Reading a wide range of literary texts and discussing them has proven to be an excellent way to develop language skills.
- The study of literature provides a window onto the lifestyles, ideas, and cultures of people at various moments in German history. Understanding this history gives a real edge to anyone trying to understand and interact with German speakers today.
- Studying literary texts and writing about them can help to develop analytical skills that have broad applications and are essential in a liberal arts education.

For several good reasons, literature is a central part of studying German.

Many German courses at VU involve the study of literature (including **220, 351, 352, 353, 390, and 493**). To succeed in these courses, students need good German reading habits. Allow enough time to complete your reading homework. Try not to look up every word as you read. Instead, use context and cognates (words that resemble English words) to help you. Realize also that the more you read German, the easier and faster it will become. Your courses will help you learn to read and analyze literary texts. Be prepared to take good notes while you read. Develop the habit of writing directly in the texts themselves. For tips about how to take effective reading notes, see the appendix titled “How to Read a Text.” In your courses, you will also learn about different periods in the history of German literature. We encourage you to read more deeply in the periods that interest you. Consider reading German books during the summer. After all, practice makes perfect! For a list of reading suggestions, see the appendix titled “Reading List.”

Objective Three: Knowing German Culture

The word “culture” can mean different things. Sometimes it refers to “high culture,” such as great artworks, literature, philosophy, architecture, cuisine, classical music, opera, and so on. At other times, “culture” evokes quaint holiday festivals, folk music, traditional dress, or home cookery. But people also use the word as an anthropologist might, to refer to the dynamic system of unwritten rules, values, assumptions, and practices governing everyday life. When we study German culture, we mean all of these. A common saying in our field is “language is culture.” This means that we cannot fully understand other

German “culture” means more than artistic masterpieces or folk traditions. It also involves the hidden assumptions governing everyday life. Successful students seek ways to learn about all of these both in and outside of the classroom.

people—not the traditions or artworks they value, nor how they view the world—until we experience life in their language. Translation can provide insights, but it is nothing like experiencing the real thing.

Most courses in our program examine aspects of German culture (including **220, 271, 305, 306, 341, 351, 352, 353, 390, and 493**). But successful students also learn a great deal about German culture outside of the

classroom. Learning about culture involves the whole person. Much of it must simply be experienced. This is why spending time in Germany is such an important part of studying German. In fact, students should take full advantage of opportunities to immerse themselves in German culture. The classroom can only be part of this. The following section, “Resources for Learning,” provides an overview of the ways VU students can experience German culture.

Objective Four: Information Fluency

Learning to be a successful communicator is central to a liberal arts education. For students of German, becoming proficient in the German language is a first step. But *what* we communicate matters as much as *how* we do it. Having access to good information

and knowing how to work with it and communicate the results with authority are essential. Successful students care about locating and interpreting reliable information as the basis for effective communication.

It is often said that we live in an “information age,” and the flood of available knowledge can be overwhelming. Sometimes the temptation to “Google” something and be done with it is great, even though the results may be of dubious quality.

Fortunately, you are not on your own in trying to make sense of information. Studying an academic discipline like German studies involves becoming part of a community of learners with a long collective history of gathering, prioritizing, interpreting, debating, and presenting information and ideas.

Gain access to informational networks created by the international community of German studies scholars, and learn to communicate about German culture with authority.

Like all communities, German studies scholars have developed sets of best practices that help with these processes, and they have created useful networks of information. Think of this part of your German major as an apprenticeship in which you are learning how to participate in the international community of German studies scholars.

In some courses (including **220, 341, 351, 352, 353, 390, and 493**), you will focus at times on finding, evaluating, engaging, and citing sources of information in accordance with established practices in the field of German studies. As you learn these skills and gain familiarity with valued sources of information, you can grow in confidence about what you have to say concerning German culture. And you can be confident about how you express it. In your academic work and beyond, you will learn to speak with authority.

Resources for Learning

Successful German students learn through their courses *and* in other ways. They seek out opportunities to use their German. The most important resources for learning include:

1. Popular culture and media
2. Study abroad
3. Curricular offerings
4. Co-curricular opportunities

Popular Culture and Media:

More than ever before, students today can connect to contemporary German culture through the Internet, DVDs, books, and music. Successful German students take advantage of this opportunity in ways that they enjoy. If there are things that you like hearing, reading, or viewing in English, try to experience those things in German. This will help you improve your language skills and learn about culture while having fun. Build connections to students with similar interests, and share what you find with one another. Also, use this time to add to your vocabulary notebook. (You may be surprised

to find that what you learn while having fun helps you in another setting, like a German course or studying in Germany.) The following list is by no means exhaustive, but it should give you some ideas about how to start taking advantage of German popular culture and media:

- Look for German-language music on Spotify, Pandora, or other online music streaming services. Look for videos on YouTube and related websites.
- Read online versions of German newspapers and magazines (including *Der Spiegel*, *Stern*, *Focus*, *Frankfurter Allgemeine*, *Die Zeit*, *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, and many others). A quick Google search can help you locate these. There are paper copies of some of these in the Kade-Duesenberg German House and Cultural Center (GCC) as well as in the Language Resource Center (LRC) in the ASB.
- Buy books of personal interest or German translations of books you like, just for fun. A good place for browsing is www.amazon.de. You can order books there or through the International Book Import Service (www.ibiservice.com).
- Amazon.de and iTunes also sell German music downloads.
- Borrow a contemporary German book from the library in the GCC or from the Christopher Center. (Look for books in the PT section on the top floor of the CCLIR.)
- Many German radio stations offer streaming on their websites. A Google search for “German radio” or “deutsches Radio” can help you locate these so that you can listen to German radio.
- Watch German television in the LRC or elsewhere on campus (Deutsche Welle on channel 85, ProSieben on 84).
- Some German television is available through podcasts or free video downloads. This includes the top daily German news show (*Die Tagesschau*). A slow version of the German news is available on the website of Deutsche Welle. A Google search will help you find these and the websites of many German television networks (including ARD, ZDF, RTL, SAT1, 3SAT, and ProSieben).
- Also watch German television on youtv.de.
- A collection of classic and recent German films is in the LRC. Make a film date with some fellow students and borrow one of these.
- Try meeting German speakers through social networking websites like Facebook. If you use Facebook or other social media sites, consider changing your settings to German.

*Use the Internet
and media to learn
German in ways
you truly enjoy!*

Study Abroad

This is *the* key experience for students of German. VU offers several ways to spend a semester or year in Germany. (See the appendix entry titled “Study Abroad Programs” for an overview.) For students who take German culture and language seriously, study abroad is essential. Spending an academic year in Tübingen will help with your studies more than anything else. It is affordable and can fit into most students’ schedules with a bit of early planning. Talk to your German professors and the International Studies office to learn more.

Of course, students can complete a German major without this experience. But this situation is far from ideal. Studying abroad makes the culture come alive; an extended stay in a German-speaking environment makes speaking the language feel much more comfortable and natural. At graduation, many German majors reflect that studying abroad helped them grow as individuals and become independent like nothing ever before.

*More than anything else,
study abroad will help you
succeed in mastering
German. It is essential.*

Here are tips for making the most of your study abroad experience and using it to achieve your goals as a German major:

- View the experience as a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to immerse yourself in another culture. Commit to speaking the German language whenever possible. Seek out friends who do the same, and make an effort to get to know Germans. This way, you can learn simply by living and socializing. The experience just might change your life.
- German university students have less daily homework than Americans. Use the down time to read and study in German what interests you. Remember to practice the principles of “active” learning described above in the section “Four Objectives for Student Learning.” Also, use your time to explore the world and people around you (in German, of course!).
- Keep your email, Skype, Facebook, and other contacts with people at home to a minimum. Don’t let your time abroad become just a virtual version of your life at home. Take full advantage of where you are.
- If you choose to travel, spend some significant time exploring the German-speaking countries.
- Welcome the opportunity to challenge yourself and grow while exploring another language, culture, and way of life. Recognize that you will have moments of homesickness and “culture shock.” These are normal and part of adjusting to a new culture. You will have wonderfully exhilarating moments too, especially if you make your best effort to explore and live in German.

Curricular Offerings

Of course, the courses you take at VU are essential for your study of German. But as an “active” language learner, you are responsible for making the connections between what you learn in class and your other experiences with German culture and language. When one complements the other, students make real and lasting progress in German!

Because you have access to German media and popular culture, the chance to live and study in Germany, and many opportunities to use German on campus, the German curriculum emphasizes what is more difficult to learn and master on one’s own. This includes the study of German cultural history, the interpretation of literature, the history of the language, advanced grammar, formal writing, and technical vocabulary. Be prepared to work in these areas and maybe even to discover that you enjoy them. In other words, do not come to class expecting to listen to popular music, watch movies for

entertainment, or to chat in German (though these may happen from time to time). To be successful, you should plan to do those things alongside your coursework. In fact, they will help you immensely with your courses, but they are not the focus of the curriculum.

The appendix entry titled “Approaching Your Courses” discusses success in your courses as well as expectations and good habits for the classroom.

Co-curricular Opportunities

Students of German at VU have many opportunities to use the German language outside of the classroom. These opportunities were created with you and your needs as an “active” learner in mind.

Take full advantage of them. They will give you necessary practice in speaking and listening to the language as well as chances to learn something new about German life and culture. They will help you interact with students who

German courses and co-curricular activities help develop different kinds of skills and knowledge. They are complementary. Successful students take full advantage of both.

share your goals so that you can learn together. The practice you get in your courses is not the same, and you really need both kinds of practice.

At the start of each academic year, your professors create a handout with a list of German-related events on campus. Ask for a copy and use it. The opportunities vary from year to year. You can expect to practice the language and deepen your knowledge of German culture through co-curricular opportunities like these:

- Live in the Kade-Duesenberg German House and Cultural Center (GCC), where students speak German in the common areas and at evening meals.
- Attend the weekly *Kaffeestunde* in the GCC to practice your spoken German.
- Attend guest lectures and musical performances related to German on campus.
- Attend off-campus events such as the annual trip to Chicago to see a German opera.
- Seek out international students from German-speaking countries and befriend them.
- Watch German films shown through the GCC or the International Film Festival.
- Become active in the German Club.