

Case

What is case?

Does English have case?

How does the case system work in Czech?

What do you need to learn about the cases in order to speak and understand Czech?

How are the cases best learned?

Nouns in English do not change their form much at all. When we want to indicate that there is more than one of something, we generally add *-s* to the word to make the plural, and so a word like *student* becomes *students*. **Czech nouns change their form all the time** in both singular and plural, and different forms of the noun indicate the different **cases** that the noun can occur in.

For example, **let's take the Czech nouns *student* (male student) and *studentka* (female student)**, and let's note how many different forms of each word, in singular and plural, there can be in Czech. The changes to the word, like adding an *-s* to make plural in English, are underlined.

Sg: student, studenta, studentovi, studentem

Pl: studenti, studenty, studentům, studentů, studentech

Sg: studentka, studentka, studentke, studentky, studentkou

Pl: studentky, studentkám, studentkek, studentkách, studentkami

This prolific changing of form in Czech nouns begs the question: **just what is case?** Probably one of the clearest ways of **explaining what grammatical case** comes from *The Case Book for Czech* by Laura Janda and Steven Clancy (Slavica Publishers, 2006: 3): “The meaning of a sentence is a product of two interdependent forces: the words it contains, and the relationships they have to each other. In English these relationships are usually expressed by means of word order and prepositions, but in Czech this job is done by case.”

Janda and Clancy go on to liken the relationship between words in a sentence to **the concept of a *sandwich***

... which indicates a set of relationships between bread, spreads, and fillings. By itself, *sandwich* is abstract, and if somebody asked you to ‘make a sandwich’, you would probably ask for more information. If instead the request sounded something like ‘give me an open-faced turkey sandwich on rye with lettuce, tomato, and mustard, hold the mayo’, you would find that more satisfactory, because you would know both the relationship (*sandwich*) and the specific items in that relationship (one slice of rye, mustard [not mayonnaise] for spread, filling of turkey, lettuce, and tomato). (Janda and Clancy 2006: 3-4)

We can take a concrete example to illustrate the sandwich analogy. In the English sentence “David is writing an explanation of the Czech cases to his future students of Czech”, the words themselves (*David, is writing, an explanation, of the Czech cases...*) are the items that make up the case sandwich; the relational structure of those sandwich items is, in English, communicated by **word order**, so we couldn't say “An explanation

is writing David” without completely changing the meaning of the sentence—in the same way that putting the mustard on top of the bread would change the whole look and feel of the sandwich! **Prepositions** (“of...”, “to...”) also play a role in establishing a relationship between the words.

The Czech version of this same sentence, however, conveys the relationship between the words by the use of cases and case endings on words (which are underlined):

David	<u>piše</u>	<u>vysvětlení</u>	<u>českých</u>	<u>pádů</u>	<u>budoucím</u>	<u>studentům</u>	<u>češtiny</u> .
David	is-writing	explanation	Czech	cases	future	students	Czech
Nominative		Accusative		Genitive		Dative	Genitive

We could shift around the words in the Czech sentence without altering the basic meaning of the sentence (“Vysvětlení českých pádů píše David budoucím studentům češtiny“) because the **cases are the primary way in Czech of communicating the relationships between words**. In other words, the endings on words are the main clues to tell us how words relate to each other. This, in a nutshell (or in a *sandwich*), is the concept of grammatical case.

Yet another way that Janda and Clancy describe what cases do is by reference to **the structure of a game**. When we watch a baseball or (American) football game, it makes sense to us because we already know the rules, and the rules are essentially about how the players on the field interact with the ball and with each other – the relationship between the elements of the game. But someone who doesn’t know how baseball or football is played (an “outsider” to American sports) would need to question someone who does in order to make sense of what was going on, at least until they understood the rules themselves. Janda and Clancy write (4):

The situation of a student learning Czech is very similar to the culture-shock of these outsiders. **Until you get acculturated to the games Czechs play with their cases**, it is impossible for you to interpret and manipulate Czech sentences the way that Czechs do.

Students of Czech must therefore learn to become “effective players of the case game” – they must learn the rules of case if they want to speak and understand Czech.

There are seven players in the Czech case game, and these players or cases are called: the Nominative (**Nom**), the Vocative (**Voc**), the Accusative (**Acc**), the Dative (**Dat**), the Genitive (**Gen**), Locative (**Loc**), and the Instrumental (**Instr**). In their primary meaning or use, some of these cases correspond directly to common notions in English grammar with which you are probably at least somewhat familiar. For example:

Nom = subject of a sentence	“ David gave an explanation to his students”
Acc = direct object of a sentence	“David gave an explanation to his students”
Dat = indirect object of a sentence	“David gave an explanation to his students ”
Voc = addressee of an utterance	“ David , could you give us an explanation?”

The other cases are also used to express ideas familiar to us from English:

Gen = relationship of possession	“This is David’s explanation”
Loc = location of an entity	“David is writing his explanation in this document ”
Instr = instrument of doing something	“David is not writing it with a pencil ”

It might help to know that English (like German, to which it is closely related) used to have cases and that we see some **case remnants or leftovers in contemporary English**. This is especially obvious in English pronouns where we have **Nom** forms (*I, he, she, we, they*) that differ from corresponding **Acc** or **Dat** forms (*me, him, her, us, them*). We also see a case remnant of the **Gen of possession** in the English apostrophe *s* (*David’s explanation*). A remnant of the **Acc or direct object** case exists in the (now optional) question word *Whom?* as opposed to the **Nom or subject** form *Who?*.

As you will see, much of the effort that goes into learning Czech (and other languages like it) involves **learning when to use which case and memorizing the appropriate grammatical endings** for each case. (For a preview of what this will entail, see the example sentences illustrating case meanings and forms at the bottom of this document.) You will learn the primary meanings or uses of each case and that some cases are more conceptually complex than others: for example, the **Nom** isn’t so difficult to learn since it represents the basic form of the word or what we might call the dictionary form. You will also learn that Czech prepositions (like *in, on, next to, out of, from...*) require certain cases and that verbs can also require certain cases for the words that follow them (the verb *bát se* or *to be afraid of* requires the **Gen** case).

There is a lot to learn with regard to the Czech cases, but we will take it step by step and **it is not an impossible task**. In the big picture, you will find that the actual case endings are the easy part, which is not to say that they don’t require a lot of memorization and practice to assimilate. The harder part is knowing automatically when to use which case, and case fluency is a skill that comes with time, effort, and experience with lots and lots of Czech. **There is no substitute for seeing the cases in action**, and there is every reason to pay very close attention to how they behave in action.

Practical advice for learning how to play the Czech case game

As you learn each case in Czech, keep a **list of the meanings of the cases** (the contexts in which that case is used) and **illustrate those meanings with some example sentences** that you encounter. Leave room to expand your list for each case since we will be learning prepositions and verbs that require the use of certain cases.

Case meanings and endings can be put on flashcards or in a grammatical notebook or in a computer document — whatever works best for you. There will hopefully come a miraculous day when you have all the case meanings and forms **in your head** and use them automatically like a Czech does and then you can pass on your case flashcards or notebook to someone else, but until that day **you will need to be systematic and methodical in how you approach case**: small, consistent applications of effort will pay off considerably in the long run.

A preview of cases and their forms

To illustrate how the cases work, I will use two common Czech names, Petr and Hana, and put those names in a variety of sentences that will require them to be in different cases and change form. **Petr and Hana are the Nom or subject forms**, but we will see that both of these names change their endings in all of the other cases, although not all of the cases have a unique form. Thus we have: *Petr, Petře, Petra, Petrovi, Petra, Petrovi, Petrem*, and *Hana, Hano, Hanu, Haně, Hany, Haně, Hanou*. **What you will be learning is when to use which case and how the endings of words change in each case.** The changes in case endings for *Petr* and *Hana* are underlined in the examples below.

Nom:	Petr je tady. Petr is here	Hana je tam. there	<i>Nom is the subject case.</i>
Voc:	Ahoj, Pet <u>ře</u> ! Hi Petr	Ahoj, Han <u>o</u> !	<i>Voc is used when directly addressing someone.</i>
Acc:	Známe Pet <u>ra</u> . We-know Petr	Známe Han <u>u</u> .	<i>Acc indicates the direct object.</i>
Dat:	Dám Pet <u>rovi</u> pivo. I-will-give Petr beer	Dám Han <u>ě</u> pivo.	<i>Dat indicates the indirect object.</i>
Gen:	Bojím se Pet <u>ra</u> . I-am-afraid-of Petr	Bojím se Han <u>y</u> .	<i>Gen is used with bát se (to be afraid of).</i>
Loc:	Píšu o Pet <u>rovi</u> . I-write about Petr	Píšu o Han <u>ě</u> .	<i>Loc is used with the preposition o (about).</i>
Instr:	Jdu s Pet <u>rem</u> . I-go with Petr	Jdu s Han <u>ou</u> .	<i>Instr is used with the preposition s (with).</i>

Cases are often referred to in Czech by the forms of the question words for *Who?* and *What?*:

	<i>Who?</i>	<i>What?</i>
Nom:	Kdo?	Co?
Acc:	Koho?	Co?
Dat:	Komu?	Čemu?
Gen:	Koho?	Čeho?
Loc:	O kom?	O čem?
Instr:	Kým?	Čím?