

Grammatical gender and grammatical stems

How many grammatical genders exist in Czech?

How can we tell the grammatical gender of a noun?

What is a grammatical stem and how do we determine it?

Why is knowing the grammatical stem important?

How does the ending of a noun help us to know whether it is a hard- or soft-stem noun?

Like other European languages (German, French, Spanish) but unlike English, **Czech nouns are marked for grammatical gender**. Czech has **three grammatical genders: Masculine (M), Feminine (F), and Neuter (N)**. M and F partly overlap with the natural gender of human beings, so we have *učitel* for a male teacher and *učitelka* for a female teacher, *sportovec* for a male athlete and *sportovkyně* for a female athlete... But **grammatical gender is a feature of all nouns (names of inanimate things, places, abstractions...)**, and it plays an important role in how Czech grammar works.

To determine the grammatical gender of a noun (*Maskulinum, femininum nebo neutrum?*), we **look at the ending—the last consonant or vowel—of the word** in the Nominative singular (the basic or dictionary form of the word).

1. The great majority of **nouns that end in a consonant are Masculine**: *profesor* (professor), *hrad* (castle), *stůl* (table), *pes* (dog), *autobus* (bus), *počítač* (computer), *čaj* (tea), *sešit* (workbook), *mobil* (cell-phone)... Masculine nouns can be further divided into **animate nouns (people and animals)** and **inanimate nouns (things, places, abstractions)**.

2. The great majority of **nouns that end in -a are Feminine**: *profesorka* (professor), *lampa* (lamp), *kočka* (cat), *kniha* (book), *ryba* (fish), *foto* (photo), *třída* (classroom), *podlaha* (floor), *budova* (building)...

3. **Nouns that end in -o are Neuter**: *okno* (window), *pivo* (beer), *tričko* (t-shirt), *pero* (pen), *město* (city), *auto* (car)...

4. **Nouns that end in -e are mostly Feminine**: *učebnice* (textbook), *židle* (chair), *tabule* (blackboard), *košile* (shirt), *sklenice* (drinking glass), *restaurace* (restaurant), *brokolice* (broccoli)... **Some nouns that end in -e are, however, Neuter**: for example, *moře* (sea, ocean) and a variety of common words with the locational suffix **-iště**—*parkoviště* (parking-lot), *sídlíště* (housing development), *pracoviště* (work-place)... When you learn a noun ending in -e, **make sure you note and memorize whether it is F or N**.

There are also **some nouns in Czech that do not follow these rules**, and these will have to be learned and considered as special cases. For instance, there are some nouns ending in a consonant that are Feminine: *věc* (thing), *radost* (joy), *zeď* (wall)...

Once you have looked at the ending of a noun to determine its grammatical gender, **it is a relatively easy matter to also determine the grammatical stem** of the noun. Czech is a language with cases, which means that we add different endings to nouns to provide clues about the noun's meaning in the sentence (is it singular or plural? is it a subject or object?...). We do this in English in a limited way: to make a word plural, we generally add the ending *-s* (*dog-s*, *cat-s*, *table-s*, *chair-s*...). Czech adds many more endings to indicate many more meanings than just plural, so **knowing the grammatical stem of the noun—the starting point for adding an ending—is crucial**.

1. The **grammatical stem of nouns that end in a consonant is the full word**. This includes **most M nouns**, which then can be considered rather equivalent in their stem/ending behavior to the English plural since an ending (like English -s) is added directly to the stem. Note the Czech singulars and plurals of the following M nouns (the symbol | is used to indicate the division between stem and ending):

<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
hrad (castle)	hrad y > hrady (castles)
autobus (bus)	autobus y > autobusy (buses)
počítač (computer)	počítač e > počítače (computers)

2. The **grammatical stem of nouns that end in a vowel is the word minus the vowel** at the end. This includes **most F and N nouns**. Another way of putting this is that for nouns ending in -a, -o, and -e, just drop the vowel to get the grammatical stem. Note how this works with the Czech singulars and plurals of the following F and N nouns:

<u>Singular</u>	<u>Stem</u>	<u>Plural</u>
lampa (lamp)	lamp-	lamp y > lampy (lamps)
kočka (cat)	kočk-	kočk y > kočky (cats)
učebnice (textbook)	učebnic-	učebnic e > učebnice (textbooks)
židle (chair)	židl-	židl e > židle (chairs)
okno (window)	okn-	okn a > okna (windows)
tričko (t-shirt)	tričk-	tričk a > trička (t-shirts)
parkoviště (parking-lot)	parkovišť-	parkovišť e > parkoviště (parking-lots)

To give you an idea of **how many endings can be added to a grammatical stem**, here is a list of singular and plural forms of the word *auto* (car) with one possible meaning of each form.

<u>Stem + ending</u>	<u>Meaning/usage</u>
aut o > auto	<i>car</i> : “This is a <u>car</u> ”
aut a > auta	<i>cars</i> : “Those <u>cars</u> are small”
aut em > autem	<i>car</i> after the preposition <i>před</i> (in front of): “They are in front of the <u>car</u> ”
aut ě > autě	<i>car</i> after the preposition <i>v</i> (in): “We are in the <u>car</u> ”
aut -- > aut	<i>cars</i> quantified: “There are many <u>cars</u> ”
aut ům > autům	<i>cars</i> after the preposition <i>kvůli</i> (because of): “I couldn’t cross because of the <u>cars</u> ”
aut ech > autech	<i>cars</i> after the preposition <i>o</i> (about): “We talked about <u>cars</u> ”
aut y > auty	<i>cars</i> after the preposition <i>před</i> (in front of): “We are in front of the <u>cars</u> ”

A big part of learning Czech will be **learning the endings that attach to nouns and when to use them**.

There is **one more important piece of information** that the grammatical stem of a noun can indicate, and that is **whether the stem is grammatically hard or soft**. In Czech, as we will see, **endings on nouns come in “hard” and “soft” varieties**.

1. **F nouns ending in -a** and **N nouns ending in -o** are **hard-stem** nouns.

2. **F** and **N nouns** ending in **-e** are **soft-stem** nouns.

3. **M nouns** can be **either hard- or soft-stem** depending on the consonant that they end in, although the great majority have hard stems. More information on hard-stem and soft-stem nouns can be found in the pdf devoted to that topic.