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Arbeitszeugnis — Secret Codes, Grades and Your Rights

How to get a good Arbeitszeugnis, decode the secret codes, and exercise your right to correction.

Deutsche Begriffe: Arbeitszeugnis | Qualifiziertes Zeugnis | Einfaches Zeugnis | Geheimcode | Zeugnissprache | Zeugnisberichtigung

What is an Arbeitszeugnis?

The **Arbeitszeugnis** is in Germany an **extremely important document** — it's your "business card" in the job market. Every employee has a legal right under § 630 BGB and § 109 GewO to receive a written Arbeitszeugnis upon termination of employment.

A good Arbeitszeugnis can open doors, a bad one can close them — and the **secret language** of these certificates makes it difficult for outsiders to understand what is really meant.

Types of Arbeitszeugnisse

Einfaches Zeugnis

Contains only:

- **Personal data** (name, date of birth)
- **Type of work** (job title, duties)
- **Duration** of employment (from-to)
- **No assessment** of performance or conduct

Qualifiziertes Zeugnis

Also contains:

- **Performance assessment** — work quality, quantity, expertise, commitment
- **Conduct assessment** — behavior toward supervisors, colleagues, clients
- **Closing formula** — thanks, regret about departure, future wishes

Recommendation: Always demand a **Qualifiziertes Zeugnis** — it's more meaningful and expected by employers.

Zwischenzeugnis

A certificate **during** ongoing employment:

- Upon **supervisor change**
- Upon **transfer** or change of duties
- Upon **planned resignation** (for job search)
- **No automatic right** — but in practice it's usually granted

Secret Codes — Decrypting Arbeitszeugnis Language

Arbeitszeugnisse must be **favorably** worded — but this led to the development of a **secret language**. What sounds positive can actually be devastating.

Grade Scale in Arbeitszeugnis

| Grade | Performance Wording | Conduct Wording |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| 1 (very good) | "always to the fullest satisfaction" | "was always exemplary and was highly valued by all" |
| 2 (good) | "always to our full satisfaction" | "was always impeccable and was valued by all" |
| 3 (satisfactory) | "to the full satisfaction" | "was impeccable " |
| 4 (adequate) | "to our satisfaction" | "was correct " / "gave no cause for complaint" |
| 5 (poor) | " largely to our satisfaction" | "was on the whole satisfactory" |
| 6 (very poor) | " endeavored " / " attempted " | "endeavored to meet requirements" |

Hidden Warning Signals

| Wording | Sounds Like | Really Means |
|---|---------------------|---|
| "He was always eager to fulfill tasks" | Hardworking | Couldn't manage |
| "She completed tasks to our satisfaction " | Well | Adequate (grade 4) |
| "He showed understanding for his work" | Competent | Accomplished nothing |
| "She was popular with colleagues" | Team player | Accomplished nothing , just talked |
| "He was sociable and contributed to company climate" | Sympathetic | Alcohol problem |
| "She delegated tasks well " | Leadership strength | Let others do the work |
| "He completed all work properly " | Correct | Only by-the-book work |
| "She was punctual and reliable " | Positive | Nothing else positive to say |

Closing Formula — Crucial!

| Wording | Meaning |
|--|---|
| "We greatly regret his departure and thank him for the outstanding collaboration. We wish him all the best and continued success. " | Very good (grade 1) |
| "We regret his departure and thank him for the good collaboration. We wish him all the best and success for the future." | Good (grade 2) |
| "We thank him for the collaboration and wish him all the best for the future." | Satisfactory (grade 3) |
| "We wish him all the best for the future." | Adequate (grade 4) |
| No closing formula | Poor (grade 5) — absence is deliberate omission! |

Structure of a Good Arbeitszeugnis

Sample Layout

1. Heading — "Arbeitszeugnis" or "Qualifiziertes Arbeitszeugnis"

- 2. Introduction** — Name, date of birth, position, employment duration
- 3. Company description** — brief overview of the employer
- 4. Job description** — tasks and areas of responsibility (detailed!)
- 5. Performance assessment** — expertise, work methods, commitment, results
- 6. Management assessment** — only for supervisors
- 7. Conduct assessment** — toward supervisors, colleagues, clients
- 8. Closing formula** — reason for departure, thanks, future wishes
- 9. Date and signature** — always use your **last working day** as date

Order of Conduct Assessment

Correct: "...toward supervisors, colleagues and clients was always impeccable."

Warning: If "supervisors" are **not listed first**, it means: "Had problems with supervisors."

Your Right to a Good Certificate

Right to Arbeitszeugnis

- **When?** Upon termination of employment (also after your resignation)
- **Deadline:** No statutory deadline, but claim may become invalid after **10-12 months**
- **Form:** Written, on company letterhead, with original signature

Minimum Standards

An Arbeitszeugnis must:

- Be **favorably** worded — must not hinder job search
- Be **truthful** — no false claims
- Be **complete** — all relevant activities and periods
- Be **clear and understandable** — no secret codes (theoretically!)
- Be **on company letterhead** — with supervisor's original signature
- **Have no creases** — cannot be folded (creases can be interpreted as hidden messages)

Request Zeugnisberichtigung

If your certificate is **too negative** or **contains errors**:

- 1. Request correction in writing** (name specific desired changes)
- 2. Set a deadline** — e.g., 2 weeks
- 3. Labor court** — if employer doesn't respond, you can sue
- 4. Burden of proof:** For grade 3 or better, **employer** must prove you were worse. For grade 4 or worse, **you** must prove you were better.

Digital Certificate

Since 2025, employers can also issue a **digital Arbeitszeugnis** — with qualified electronic signature. Paper certificates remain the standard.

Tips for Foreigners

- 1. Always demand Qualifiziertes Zeugnis** — even after short employment
- 2. Have certificate reviewed** — migration counseling, union, or employment lawyer
- 3. Know the secret codes** — "to our satisfaction" is not a good grade!
- 4. Don't wait too long** — request certificate soon after last working day
- 5. Have certificate translated** — if you want to work abroad (certified translation)
- 6. Request Zwischenzeugnis** — upon supervisor change or planned resignation