



hamboorg.city

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

Editorial hamboorg.city · As of: April 2026 · Carefully prepared, regularly updated.
Content is informational and does not replace legal advice.