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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

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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

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