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Finanzamt — Steuer-ID, Tax Return and ELSTER

Steuer-ID vs. Steuernummer, mandatory tax assessment, ELSTER registration, and average refund of €1,095.

Deutsche Begriffe: Finanzamt | Steuer-ID | Steuernummer | ELSTER | Einkommensteuererklärung | Steuerklasse | Erstattung

Steuer-ID vs. Steuernummer

In Germany, there are two different tax numbers — which often causes confusion:

• **Steueridentifikationsnummer (Steuer-ID):** An 11-digit number that you **keep for life**. It is automatically sent to you by mail after registering with your local registration office (processing time: 2–4 weeks). Every person in Germany has exactly one.

• **Steuernummer:** Assigned by your local Finanzamt when you file a tax return or register a business. Format: XXX/XXX/XXXXX. Changes if you move to a different Finanzamt district.

For employment your employer needs your **Steuer-ID** — not your Steuernummer. Without a Steuer-ID, your salary will be taxed at Steuerklasse 6 (highest deduction).

When is a tax return mandatory?

You **must** file an income tax return if:

• You and your spouse have **Steuerklasse 3/5**

• You received **replacement income** above €410 (sick pay, short-time work allowance, parental benefit, unemployment benefit I)

• You had **additional income** above €410

• You worked for **multiple employers** simultaneously

• The Finanzamt **requests** you to file

Even without a requirement, filing voluntarily is worthwhile: the average refund is **€1,095**.

ELSTER — the online tax office

ELSTER (Elektronische Steuererklärung) is the free online portal of the tax administration:

• **Website:** elster.de

• **Registration:** Takes approximately 2 weeks (activation code sent by mail)

• **Features:** File tax returns, retrieve tax notices, manage deadlines

Tip: Register with ELSTER immediately after receiving your Steuer-ID — then everything will be ready when you file your return.

Deadlines

Situation	Deadline
Mandatory assessment (with tax advisor)	June 30 of the second following year
Mandatory assessment (without advisor)	**July 31** of the following year
Voluntary filing	Up to 4 years retroactively

Example: For tax year 2025, the deadline without an advisor is **July 31, 2026**.

Tax classes for foreigners

After registering and starting work, you will be assigned to a **Steuerklasse**:

• **Class 1:** Single, divorced, widowed — standard

• **Class 3/5:** Married, one partner earns significantly more (3) than the other (5)

• **Class 4/4:** Married, both earn similarly

• **Class 6:** Second job

Change: You request a Steuerklasse change at the Finanzamt — multiple changes per year have been possible since 2020.

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