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Free platform for foreigners in Germany

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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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