

How to Tell Time in German

Deutsch Üben · free practice, no account needed

Telling the time in German trips up a lot of learners — not because it is complicated, but because Germans use two completely different systems depending on context. Once you understand both, everything clicks.

This guide covers the formal 24-hour system, the casual colloquial system with its quirky "halb" logic, and the regional variations you will hear in everyday conversation.

The Two Systems

German has a **formal system** used in official contexts — train timetables, news broadcasts, appointments — and a **casual system** used in everyday conversation. Both are correct. You just need to know which fits the situation.

Formal German Time 24-HOUR

The formal system is the simpler of the two. It follows a straightforward pattern: say the hour, say "Uhr" (o'clock), then say the minutes.

TIME	GERMAN	NOTES
13:00	<i>dreizehn Uhr</i>	Simply "thirteen o'clock"
08:30	<i>acht Uhr dreißig</i>	Hour + Uhr + minutes
17:45	<i>siebzehn Uhr fünfundvierzig</i>	Full 24-hour format
09:00	<i>neun Uhr</i>	Drop the minutes when zero

Rule: [Hour] Uhr [Minutes]. If the minutes are zero, you can leave them out entirely.

Casual German Time 12-HOUR

The casual system is where German gets interesting — and where most learners make mistakes. Instead of always counting forward from the hour, Germans count *toward* the next hour. The entire system revolves around the half-hour mark.

Understanding "Halb" — The Most Important Concept

The single most important thing to understand about casual German time is that **"halb" refers to half the way TO the next hour**, not half past the current one.

"Halb vier" literally means "halfway to four" — which is 3:30, not 4:30. This confuses English speakers because in English "half four" often means 4:30. In German it is the opposite.

TIME	GERMAN	MEANING
3:30	<i>halb vier</i>	Halfway to four
7:30	<i>halb acht</i>	Halfway to eight
12:30	<i>halb eins</i>	Halfway to one

Memory trick: Think of "halb vier" as a countdown. You are halfway through the journey to four o'clock. The next hour is the destination, not the current one.

Viertel — Quarter Hours

Quarter past and quarter to follow a similar logic, but the quarter-to form uses the *next* hour, not the current one:

TIME	GERMAN	LITERAL MEANING
3:15	<i>viertel nach drei</i>	Quarter after three
3:45	<i>dreiviertel vier</i>	Three-quarters to four
3:45	<i>viertel vor vier</i>	Quarter before four (also common)

Note that 3:45 has two valid expressions. "Dreiviertel vier" is more common in southern Germany and Austria, while "viertel vor vier" is used throughout all German-speaking regions. Both are correct.

Around the Half Hour

One of the most distinctly German features is counting minutes relative to the half-hour mark. These expressions are used throughout Germany and are essential for understanding native speakers.

TIME	GERMAN	LOGIC
3:20	<i>zehn vor halb vier</i>	Ten minutes before halb vier (3:30)
3:25	<i>fünf vor halb vier</i>	Five minutes before halb vier (3:30)
3:35	<i>fünf nach halb vier</i>	Five minutes after halb vier (3:30)
3:40	<i>zehn nach halb vier</i>	Ten minutes after halb vier (3:30)

How to think about it: Once you know "halb vier" = 3:30, you can navigate the surrounding minutes by counting before (vor) and after (nach) that midpoint. It is like using a landmark.

Simple Nach and Vor — Minutes Past and To

For times that do not fall near the half-hour, Germans use straightforward nach (past) and vor (to) expressions:

TIME	GERMAN
3:05	<i>fünf nach drei</i>
3:10	<i>zehn nach drei</i>
3:50	<i>zehn vor vier</i>
3:55	<i>fünf vor vier</i>

Regional Differences

Germany, Austria, and Switzerland all use slightly different expressions for the same times. Northern Germany tends to prefer "viertel vor vier" for 3:45, while Bavaria and Austria use "dreiviertel vier". Both are correct — understanding both will help you sound natural across all German-speaking countries.

Complete Quick Reference

TIME	CASUAL GERMAN
3:00	<i>drei Uhr</i>
3:05	<i>fünf nach drei</i>
3:10	<i>zehn nach drei</i>
3:15	<i>viertel nach drei</i>
3:20	<i>zehn vor halb vier</i>
3:25	<i>fünf vor halb vier</i>
3:30	<i>halb vier</i>
3:35	<i>fünf nach halb vier</i>
3:40	<i>zehn nach halb vier</i>
3:45	<i>dreiviertel vier</i>
3:50	<i>zehn vor vier</i>
3:55	<i>fünf vor vier</i>

Why This Matters for Real Conversations

If you are learning German for travel, work, or daily life, understanding casual time expressions is essential. German trains, buses, and shops run on precise schedules, and locals will almost always use the casual system when speaking — not the 24-hour format you see on signs and timetables.

Imagine asking someone on the street in Berlin what time it is. They will not say "vierzehn Uhr dreißig." They will say "halb drei" — and if you have not practised the casual system, you might mishear it as half past three (3:30) when they actually mean 2:30 in the afternoon.

The gap between reading about German time and being able to use it fluently under pressure is where most learners struggle. Repeated practice across all 60 minutes, in both directions, is the only reliable way to close that gap.

Ready to Practice?

Zeit Master offers two quiz modes covering every minute from 0 to 59, with weak-spot tracking that automatically serves you more of the patterns you find difficult. Free, no sign-up required.

Deutsch Üben · deutschueben.org/zeit/guide.html

Deutsch Üben · deutschueben.org