

# The formal letter in German: the six-box form

## — DER FORMELLE BRIEF

A formal letter in German has six fixed boxes: Betreff, Anrede, Grund, Problem, Forderung, Gruß. Complaints, cancellations, appointment changes and objections are all written on the same skeleton.

If there is a letter you have to write in Germany and you have been putting it off for weeks, your German is not the problem. A formal letter in German is not a creative task, it is **a form with six boxes**: five are the same in every letter, and the only places you really have to think are the problem and the request. Lower-case after the greeting, no comma after the closing, **Sie** always capitalised — and in the exam, coverage earns the points.

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01 00:10

## Right now: draw the six boxes, then fill them



### SHORTCUT

Start a formal letter with a **skeleton**, not a sentence: **Betreff · Anrede · Grund · Problem · Forderung · Gruß**. Five of the six boxes are identical in every letter; the only places you really have to think are box 4 (the problem) and box 5 (the request).

If there is a letter you have to write in Germany and you have been putting it off for weeks, the problem is not your German. You stare at the blank page wondering “how do I even start” — but a formal letter in German is not an essay. **You are not writing, you are filling in a form.** Anyone who knows the boxes can do it.

| BOX           | WHAT GOES IN                                          | EXAMPLE                         |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| 1 - Betreff   | the subject , one line — no verb , no full stop       | Beschwerde über die Heizung     |
| 2 - Anrede    | the greeting + a <b>comma</b>                         | Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren , |
| 3 - Grund     | why you are writing — starts with a lower-case letter | ich schreibe Ihnen , weil ...   |
| 4 - Problem   | what happened , and when — with dates                 | Seit dem 5 . August ...         |
| 5 - Forderung | <b>what you want , and by when</b>                    | Ich bitte Sie , ... zu ...      |
| 6 - Gruß      | closing + your name — no comma                        | Mit freundlichen Grüßen         |

Five of the six boxes are **the same in every letter**. In the exam and in real life, what gets lost is usually box 5: the request is never written. A letter that does not say what you want gets read and filed away.

✗ ~~Hallo, die Heizung ist schon wieder kaputt!!!~~

Hi, the heating is broken again!!! → No greeting, no date, no request. There is feeling, but the reader does not know what to do.

✓ Ich bitte Sie, die Heizung zu **reparieren**.

I ask you to repair the heating. → Box 5: the request in a single sentence.

02 01:10

## You already do this in English: a formal letter is a form

When you write a complaint letter in English you do not invent sentences either: **“Dear Sir or Madam,”** · **“I am writing to complain about ...”** · **describe the situation** · **“I would be grateful if you could ...”** · **“Yours faithfully,”**. The template is ready, and you only swap the information in the **middle**. A German formal letter is exactly that. The only difference: you do not know the templates yet. Learning them takes one evening, using them lasts a lifetime.

| ENGLISH LETTER                       | GERMAN BOX    | THE GERMAN                        |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|-----------------------------------|
| Re : complaint about the heating     | 1 - Betreff   | Beschwerde über die Heizung       |
| Dear Sir or Madam ,                  | 2 - Anrede    | Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren ,   |
| I am writing to you because ...      | 3 - Grund     | ich wende mich an Sie , weil ...  |
| Since 5 August ...                   | 4 - Problem   | Seit dem 5 . August ...           |
| I would be grateful if you could ... | 5 - Forderung | <b>Ich bitte Sie , ... zu ...</b> |
| Yours faithfully , name , signature  | 6 - Gruß      | Mit freundlichen Grüßen           |

There is one difference: in an English letter the request is often tucked inside a polite formula — “I look forward to hearing from you” does not say what you want. A German letter states the request **as an explicit sentence**: what you want, and by when.

And you are not learning just one letter. The same skeleton does four jobs: a **complaint** to your landlord, the **cancellation** of a subscription, **postponing** an appointment, an **objection** to an invoice. Only box 4 and box 5 change. The writing part of B1 exams also usually asks for a formal or semi-formal letter or e-mail — so the job in the exam is this same skeleton.

× ~~Hochachtungsvoll~~

Roughly “Yours respectfully”: this closing sounds old-fashioned and cold today.

✓ **Mit freundlichen Grüßen • Freundliche Grüße**

Kind regards. → The two safe closings today; they work in every formal letter.

The general rule: do not carry ornate formulas over from English (“I remain, Sir, your obedient servant”, “Please do not hesitate to contact me”) into German. German formal writing is **short and plain**; politeness comes not from decoration but from **the mood of the verb** (below, in box 5).

03 02:20

**Table: boxes 1, 2 and 3 never change**

The first three boxes are the same in every letter. Do not think here — memorise them and move on.

| WHERE                              | READY-MADE SENTENCE                           | IN ENGLISH                         |
|------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Betreff                            | Beschwerde über den Lärm                      | Complaint about the noise          |
| Anrede · you don't know the name   | <b>Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren ,</b>        | Dear Sir or Madam ,                |
| Anrede · man , you know the name   | Sehr geehrter Herr Müller ,                   | Dear Mr Müller ,                   |
| Anrede · woman , you know the name | Sehr geehrte Frau Schmidt ,                   | Dear Ms Schmidt ,                  |
| Grund · neutral                    | Ich schreibe Ihnen , weil ...                 | I am writing to you because ...    |
| Grund · complaint                  | hiermit möchte ich mich über ... beschweren , | I would like to complain about ... |
| Grund · enquiry                    | Ich wende mich an Sie , weil ...              | I am contacting you because ...    |

In the **Betreff** there is **no verb and no full stop** — it is written like a headline. For a woman it is **Sehr geehrte Frau**, for a man **Sehr geehrter Herr**: the adjective ending changes with the person you address.

The layout of a paper letter is fixed too (DIN 5008): sender at the top left, the recipient’s address below it, the date on the right — often together with the place (**Köln, 20.08.2026**) — then the subject line in **bold**. You no longer need to write the word “**Betreff:**” in front of the subject line; the bold type is enough. If you write it, it is not counted as an error, but it is old-fashioned. In an e-mail the subject simply goes into its own field.

× ~~Ich möchte mich über den Lärm beschweren.~~

As a subject line: it has a verb and a full stop — it is not a headline, it has become the first sentence of the letter.

✓ **Beschwerde über den Lärm in der Nachbarwohnung**

Complaint about the noise in the flat next door → a noun phrase, no verb, no full stop.

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### Box 4: give dates, give evidence, give no feelings

In box 4 you describe the problem — but in a form that an official can **act on**. Three things help them: **since when**, **whether you have already told them**, **what the result was**.

| SITUATION                 | READY-MADE SENTENCE                                            | IN ENGLISH                                                |
|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|
| since when                | <b>Seit dem 5. August funktioniert die Heizung nicht.</b>      | The heating has not been working since 5 August.          |
| I told you before         | Ich habe Sie bereits am 10. August informiert.                 | I already informed you on 10 August.                      |
| but nothing improved      | Leider hat sich bisher nichts geändert.                        | Unfortunately nothing has changed so far.                 |
| I have said it many times | Trotz mehrfacher Aufforderung wurde das Problem nicht behoben. | Despite repeated requests the problem has not been fixed. |
| this is a problem for me  | Dadurch entstehen mir erhebliche Unannehmlichkeiten.           | This is causing me considerable inconvenience.            |

In a formal letter **date = power**. Not “for a long time” but **seit dem 5. August**. In the exam and in real life a sentence with a date is taken seriously; an angry one is not.

Grammar note: **seit** takes the Dativ, and the date is read as an ordinal number — **seit dem 5. August** is spoken **seit dem fünften August**. Likewise **am 10. August** = **am zehnten August**. The dot after the numeral means “-th” in German; if you forget it, the date turns into an ordinary number.

✗ ~~Die Heizung ist seit langer Zeit kaputt und ich bin sehr wütend!~~

The heating has been broken for a long time and I am very angry! → No date, no evidence; anger instead. An official cannot act on anger.

✓ **Seit dem 5. August funktioniert die Heizung nicht. Ich habe Sie bereits am 10. August informiert.**

The heating has not been working since 5 August. I already informed you on 10 August. → Two dates: the day the problem began and the day you reported it.

If you have evidence, name it: photos, the date of an earlier e-mail, the number of the invoice. In an e-mail one sentence is enough: **Die Fotos finden Sie im Anhang**. — “You will find the photos attached.” A short sentence, but it changes the weight of the letter.

### Box 5: if you don't write what you want, the letter is empty

This is the heart of the letter. If you describe the problem perfectly but leave out the request, the reader says “thanks for the information” and closes the file. A request says two things: **what** you want and **by when** you want it.

| TONE                  | READY-MADE SENTENCE                             | IN ENGLISH                             |
|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------|
| neutral               | Ich bitte Sie , die Heizung zu reparieren .     | I ask you to repair the heating .      |
| polite — the safest   | Ich wäre Ihnen dankbar , wenn Sie ... könnten . | I would be grateful if you could ...   |
| with a deadline       | Bitte erledigen Sie das bis zum 30 . August .   | Please deal with this by 30 August .   |
| ask for a reply       | Bitte teilen Sie mir Ihre Entscheidung mit .    | Please let me know your decision .     |
| firm — the last stage | Ich fordere Sie auf , den Schaden zu beheben .  | I call upon you to repair the damage . |

The order matters: **bitten** first, and **auffordern** only if that does not work. Using **Ich fordere Sie auf** in a first letter sounds rude in Germany — and often slows things down.

Two grammar tools carry this box. The first is the zu-infinitive: in the pattern **Ich bitte Sie, ... zu ...** the verb goes to the end and takes **zu** in front of it. With a separable verb, **zu** slips into the middle: **zurückzahlen** → **Ich bitte Sie, mir die Kautions zurückzuzahlen**. The second is Konjunktiv II: **Ich wäre Ihnen dankbar, wenn Sie ... könnten**. — both verbs are pulled back, and the request is softened.

And one line that everybody skips: **give a deadline**. A request without a date goes unanswered. **bis zum 30. August** — in real life the one phrase that gets things moving, and in the exam the one that settles the question “is the request clear?”.

#### ✗ ~~Ich will eine Antwort.~~

I want an answer. → The grammar is right, the tone is harsh: **wollen** reads like an order in a formal letter.

#### ✓ Ich **wäre** Ihnen dankbar, wenn Sie mir bis zum 30. August antworten **könnten**.

I would be grateful if you could reply by 30 August.

06 05:20

## Box 6 and the three mistakes a German reader sees first

The closing is a single line: **Mit freundlichen Grüßen**, and your name underneath (on paper, sometimes a handwritten signature in between). That is the easy part. The hard part is three spelling mistakes that English speakers make all the time — and all three sit exactly where a German reader looks **at first glance**.



## TRAP 1

### A capital letter after the greeting

In English the line after “Dear Sir or Madam,” starts with a capital letter. In German it does not. After the greeting comes a **comma**, not a full stop. The sentence counts as still going, so the next line starts with a **lower-case letter**. It is the first thing Germans notice, and it costs points in the exam.

- ✗ **Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren, Ich** schreibe Ihnen, weil ...

A capital after the comma: you started a new sentence while the old one had not ended.

- ✓ **Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren, ich** schreibe Ihnen, weil ...

Lower-case after the comma — this is the correct version.

Fine print: the lower-case rule only applies to words that are lower-case anyway. If the line begins with a **noun** or with **Sie / Ihr**, it stays capitalised: **Sehr geehrte Frau Schmidt, Ihre Rechnung vom 12. Juli ist leider nicht korrekt.**



## TRAP 2

### A comma after the closing

After **Grüßen** there is **no comma** and no full stop; your name goes on the next line. The English habit of “Kind regards,” makes you put a comma there.

- ✗ **Mit freundlichen Grüßen,**

One comma too many: in German the closing line takes no punctuation.

- ✓ **Mit freundlichen Grüßen**

No comma; first and last name on the line below.

The same rule holds for the short forms: **Freundliche Grüße, Viele Grüße, Beste Grüße** — none of them takes a comma. Use **Viele Grüße** when you write to someone you know; in your first formal letter, stay with **Mit freundlichen Grüßen**.



### TRAP 3

#### Small sie: not “you”, but “they”

English has one “you” and never capitalises it. In a formal letter **Sie** · **Ihnen** · **Ihr** are **always capitalised** — that is “you”. A small **sie** means “they” or “she” (a woman or a feminine noun); the sentence then goes to somebody else.

✗ **Ich bitte sie um eine schnelle Antwort.**

“I ask them for a quick answer.” → The reader wonders who you are talking about.

✓ **Ich bitte Sie, sie bis zum 30. August zu reparieren.**

I ask you to repair it (the heating) by 30 August. → The same word: capitalised it is “you”, in lower case it is “it”.

The same distinction holds for the possessive: **Ihre Rechnung** = your invoice · **ihre Rechnung** = the invoice of a woman or of several people. And in a formal letter **du** never appears.

All three mistakes show up on a single line — and are fixed on a single line:

✓ **Sehr geehrte Frau Schmidt, ich bitte Sie um eine kurze Rückmeldung.**

Dear Ms Schmidt, I ask you for a short reply. → Comma, lower-case, capital Sie.

07 06:30

### One skeleton, four jobs: only boxes 4 and 5 change

Once you have built the skeleton, almost every formal letter in Germany comes out of the same mould. In the four jobs below, boxes 1, 2, 3 and 6 are the same; only the two boxes in the middle change.

| JOB                      | BOX 4 · PROBLEM                                              | BOX 5 · REQUEST                                     |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------|
| Complaint (landlord)     | Seit dem 5. August ist die Heizung kaputt.                   | Ich bitte Sie, die Heizung zu reparieren.           |
| Cancellation (Kündigung) | Hiermit kündige ich meinen Vertrag.                          | Bitte bestätigen Sie mir die Kündigung schriftlich. |
| Appointment (postponing) | Leider kann ich den Termin am 3. September nicht wahrnehmen. | Wäre ein neuer Termin nächste Woche möglich?        |
| Objection (invoice)      | Die Rechnung vom 12. Juli ist nicht korrekt.                 | Ich bitte Sie um eine Korrektur.                    |

The cancellation letter has rules of its own: the end date (**zum nächstmöglichen Zeitpunkt**), the request for written confirmation and **proving that the letter reached** the other side. Those are on the contract cancellation page; the row here only shows where the skeleton fits.

✗ **Die Rechnung vom 12. Juli ist nicht korrekt. Mit freundlichen Grüßen**

Jumping straight from box 4 to box 6: the problem is written, the request is not. The company says “thanks for the information” and collects the invoice as it stands.

- ✓ Die Rechnung vom 12. Juli ist nicht korrekt. Ich bitte Sie um eine Korrektur bis zum 31. Juli.

The invoice of 12 July is not correct. I ask you to correct it by 31 July. → Problem, request, deadline.

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08 07:30

### The part nobody tells you: in the exam, coverage earns the points

In the exam, **beautiful German** does not earn the points. In the writing task, what you must write is given as bullet points (**Inhaltspunkte** or **Leitpunkte**), and the first criterion of the marking is this: **was every point answered?** In a task with four points, someone who writes three perfectly and skips one loses marks; someone who writes all four in simple sentences passes.

| WHAT THE TASK SAYS                                       | WHAT IT WANTS                                    | YOUR SENTENCE                                         |
|----------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------|
| Entschuldigen Sie sich höflich .                         | apologise politely                               | Es tut mir sehr leid , dass ich nicht kommen kann .   |
| Berichten Sie , warum ...                                | explain the reason                               | Ich muss an diesem Tag leider arbeiten .              |
| Machen Sie einen Vorschlag .                             | make a suggestion                                | Könnten wir den Termin auf Freitag verschieben?       |
| Vergessen Sie nicht die Anrede und den Gruß am Schluss . | <b>don't forget the greeting and the closing</b> | Sehr geehrte Frau Weber , ... Mit freundlichen Grüßen |

Before you start writing, **number the points** and reserve **at least one sentence** for each. When you finish, check: is there a sentence next to every number? This thirty-second check catches the most expensive mistake.

The second thing nobody says: politeness is not a word, it is **a mood**. You can write the same request at three different temperatures: **Bitte antworten Sie mir.** (plain, acceptable) · **Könnten Sie mir bitte antworten?** (polite) · **Ich wäre Ihnen dankbar, wenn Sie mir antworten könnten.** (most polite). English does politeness with extra words — “would you mind...?”; German does it by **pulling the verb back** into Konjunktiv II. In the exam the last one is the safest.

- ✗ ~~Antworten Sie mir schnell!!~~

Answer me quickly! → An order, and it hurries them: in a formal letter it closes the door.

- ✓ Ich wäre Ihnen dankbar, wenn Sie mir bald antworten könnten.

I would be grateful if you could reply to me soon.

- ① **Honest note:** this skeleton is for formal letters. When you write to a friend or to an official you know, **Hallo Herr Müller, + Viele Grüße** is enough — then Konjunktiv II is not required.

09 08:30

## The finished version: six boxes, one letter

This is what a finished letter looks like. On paper it is laid out in DIN 5008; in an e-mail the first three lines (sender, recipient, date) drop out and the subject line goes into the e-mail's subject field. The left column is only the name of the box — it is not written in the letter itself.

| BOX           | LETTER                                                                                                                                 |
|---------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| sender        | Ayşe Yılmaz · Lindenstraße 12 · 50674 Köln                                                                                             |
| recipient     | Hausverwaltung Muster GmbH · Ringstraße 4 · 50667 Köln                                                                                 |
| place , date  | Köln , 20 . 08 . 2026                                                                                                                  |
| 1 - Betreff   | Beschwerde über die Heizung                                                                                                            |
| 2 - Anrede    | Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren ,                                                                                                        |
| 3 - Grund     | Ich schreibe Ihnen , weil die Heizung in meiner Wohnung nicht funktioniert .                                                           |
| 4 - Problem   | Seit dem 5 . August ist die Heizung kaputt . Ich habe Sie bereits am 10 . August informiert , leider hat sich bisher nichts geändert . |
| 5 - Forderung | Ich wäre Ihnen dankbar , wenn Sie das Problem bis zum 30 . August beheben könnten .                                                    |
| 6 - Gruß      | Für eine schnelle Rückmeldung danke ich Ihnen im Voraus .<br><br>Mit freundlichen Grüßen<br>Ayşe Yılmaz                                |

Five sentences, three fixed lines (subject, greeting, closing). All of it was taken from the tables above — not a single sentence was invented. You will write the same way. On paper, put your handwritten signature between **Mit freundlichen Grüßen** and your name.

### ✓ Für eine schnelle Rückmeldung danke ich Ihnen **im Voraus**.

Thank you in advance for a quick reply. → The optional first line of box 6; it politely reminds them of the request once more.

For your own letter you change three lines: the reason in box 3, the two dates in box 4 and the request in box 5. Everything else stays as it is.

10 09:30

## What to do this week

This topic sticks not by reading but by **writing one letter**. Set aside an evening:

- Open one page in your notebook: six boxes, two ready-made sentences under each. Almost every formal letter you will write in Germany comes from that page.
- If there is a letter you have been putting off (landlord, insurance, **Amt**, subscription), draw its boxes today: first two dates in box 4, then one request and one deadline in box 5.
- Three checks before you send: lower-case after the greeting? No comma after **Grüßen**? Is every **Sie** capitalised?
- If you are preparing for the exam, find an old writing task, number the points and write one sentence for each number. Time yourself.

✓ Sehr geehrte Damen und Herren, **ich** wende mich an Sie, weil ...

This week's first line: comma, lower-case, reason.

- ① The templates are for the exam, but they do their real work in life: landlord, insurance, **Amt**, subscription. Build it once, fill it in for the rest of your life.

## 11 BUILD

### Build the sentence yourself

Tap the words and put them in order. This is the hardest part of German — and there are no options to pick from, **you** build it.

TAP THE WORDS

TAP THE WORDS

11 10:20

### Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+4

Take the full test

10 questions · timed · rule breakdown at the end



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GENAU — NOT RULES, THE MOMENT IT CLICKS.

