

German in a job interview

— DAS VORSTELLUNGSGESPRÄCH

A Vorstellungsgespräch is the face-to-face interview that follows a written application; the questions always come in the same order: tell us about yourself, strengths and weaknesses, salary expectations, and your own questions.

A German job interview always runs in the same order: greeting → tell us about yourself → strengths and weaknesses → why us and salary → your questions. **Memorise the order, not the phrases**, and you will always know what the next question is.

CONTENTS

- 01 Right now: you're at the door, and the questions always come in the same order
- 02 The whole conversation: five scenes
- 03 English hides it, German shows it: in the interview you say "Sie"
- 04 Tell us about yourself: a three-sentence work story
- 05 Strengths and weaknesses: praise yourself, don't bury yourself
- 06 Why us and salary: you have to name a number 07 Your turn: don't leave without asking a question
- 08 The part nobody tells you: the interview starts at the door and ends on the phone
- 09 Table: the whole interview in one frame 10 Test yourself

01 00:10

Right now: you're at the door, and the questions always come in the same order

SHORTCUT ⚡ Memorise the **order**, not the phrases: greeting → tell us about yourself → strengths and weaknesses → why us and salary → your questions. If you know the order, you know what the next question will be.

When people freeze in an interview, the cause is usually not German but **surprise**. A German interview is remarkably formulaic: HR (**Personalabteilung**) asks the same questions in the same order, because they want to compare candidates with each other. If the questions are fixed, the answers can be prepared in advance.

✓ **Ich habe drei Jahre als Elektriker gearbeitet.**

I worked as an electrician for three years. → sentences like this are the backbone of the interview: what you did, and for how long.

02 00:50

The whole conversation: five scenes

The interview below uses the same sentences as the post. HR's lines are plain; **yours are marked**. Read it aloud: in the interview, what comes out is not the sentence your eyes have read but the one your mouth is used to.

Scene 1 • At the door. The first thirty seconds.

Herzlich willkommen!

HR: "Welcome!"

Haben Sie gut hergefunden?

HR: "Did you find us easily?"

✓ **Ja, danke. Es war kein Problem.**

You: "Yes, thank you. It was no problem."

Nehmen Sie bitte Platz.

HR: "Please take a seat."

✓ **Danke schön.**

You: "Thank you."

Scene 2 • Tell us about yourself. The single most dreaded question.

Erzählen Sie etwas über sich.

HR: "Tell us a little about yourself."

✓ **Gerne. Ich lebe seit 2023 in Köln.**

You: "Gladly. I have been living in Cologne since 2023."

- ✓ **Ich habe drei Jahre als Elektriker gearbeitet.**

You: "I worked as an electrician for three years."

Und was suchen Sie jetzt?

HR: "And what are you looking for now?"

Scene 3 • Strengths and weaknesses. The trap is in the second question.

Was sind Ihre Stärken?

HR: "What are your strengths?"

- ✓ **Ich arbeite sorgfältig und bin pünktlich.**

You: "I work carefully and I'm punctual."

Und Ihre Schwächen?

HR: "And your weaknesses?"

- ✓ **Mein Deutsch ist noch nicht perfekt — ich lerne täglich.**

You: "My German isn't perfect yet — I study every day."

Scene 4 • Why us, and salary. You have to name a number.

Warum möchten Sie bei uns arbeiten?

HR: "Why would you like to work for us?"

- ✓ **Ihre Firma ist bekannt für gute Ausbildung.**

You: "Your company is known for good training."

Was sind Ihre Gehaltsvorstellungen?

HR: "What are your salary expectations?"

- ✓ **Zwischen 2.800 und 3.000 Euro brutto.**

You: "Between 2,800 and 3,000 euros gross."

Scene 5 • Your turn. Bring two questions with you.

Haben Sie noch Fragen?

HR: "Do you have any more questions?"

- ✓ **Ja. Wie sieht ein normaler Arbeitstag aus?**

You: "Yes. What does a normal working day look like?"

- ✓ **Wann kann ich mit einer Rückmeldung rechnen?**

You: "When can I expect to hear back?"

Wir melden uns bis Freitag.

HR: "We'll get back to you by Friday."

- ✓ **Vielen Dank für das Gespräch.**

You: "Thank you very much for the conversation."

English hides it, German shows it: in the interview you say “Sie”

In English the same word, “you”, goes to your boss, your best friend and a stranger; the formality lives in your tone and word choice (“Could you possibly...”). German puts it into the grammar: **Sie** is the formal “you”, **du** the friendly one. In an interview the default is **always Sie**.

And **Sie** is not one word but a **package**. The verb, the possessive and the “to you” form all change with it. You have to switch all three automatically:

ENGLISH	DU (INFORMAL)	SIE (FORMAL) — USE THIS ONE
Do you have any more questions?	Hast du noch Fragen?	Haben Sie noch Fragen?
your company	deine Firma	Ihre Firma
Thank you. (“I thank you.”)	Ich danke dir.	Ich danke Ihnen.
Could you repeat that, please?	Kannst du das wiederholen?	Können Sie das bitte wiederholen?

Sie, Ihr, Ihnen start with a **capital letter** in writing. A lowercase **sie** means “she” or “they”; in a thank-you email the difference jumps out at once.

✓ Können Sie das bitte wiederholen?

Could you repeat that, please? → if you didn’t understand the question, asking this is not weakness, it shows you are paying attention.



TRAP 1

Switching to du on your own

Some companies, especially small teams and start-ups, offer **du** at the start of the interview. Switching to **du** before the offer comes reads as disrespect. If the offer does come, you are free to accept.

✗ Wie lange ~~arbeitest du~~ schon hier?

Saying “du” before you are offered it sounds rude in an interview.

✓ Wie lange **arbeiten Sie** schon hier?

How long have you been working here? → this is the safe one.

✓ Bei uns duzen sich alle. Ist das okay für Sie?

HR’s offer: “Here everybody uses du. Is that okay with you?” Your answer: **Ja, gerne.**

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Tell us about yourself: a three-sentence work story

Erzählen Sie etwas über sich. is asking for your **work story**, not your life story. Three sentences are enough: where you live · what you did · what you want now. Your hometown, your family and your hobbies only come up if someone asks.

Each of these three sentences uses a different tense, and this is exactly where English speakers trip. English says “I *have lived* here since 2023” — a past-flavoured tense for something that is still going on. German uses the plain present with **seit**. And because you are talking about your past, the reflex is to grab the Perfekt for everything.

ENGLISH	GERMAN	WHY THIS TENSE
I have been living in Cologne since 2023 .	Ich lebe seit 2023 in Köln .	You still live there → seit + present tense
I worked as an electrician for three years .	Ich habe drei Jahre als Elektriker gearbeitet .	Finished → Perfekt
I have been working as an electrician for three years .	Ich arbeite seit drei Jahren als Elektriker .	You still work there → seit + present tense
Now I'm looking for a permanent job .	Jetzt suche ich eine feste Stelle .	Now → present tense , verb in second position

seit takes the Dativ after it: **seit drei Jahren**, **seit einem Monat**. If you only name a year, **seit 2023** is enough. The full rule is on [the seit page](#).

The third sentence answers **Und was suchen Sie jetzt?** The post didn't include an answer; here are two safe patterns:

✓ Ich suche eine feste Stelle als Elektriker.

I'm looking for a permanent job as an electrician. → says clearly what you want.

✓ Ich möchte mich weiterentwickeln.

I'd like to develop further. → can be added to the first sentence; on its own it stays too general.



TRAP 2

Building a “since” sentence in the past tense

When the situation is still going on, German uses **seit** with the **present tense**. English speakers reach for a “have lived” tense, and the German Perfekt version sounds wrong.

✗ Ich ~~habe~~ seit 2023 in Köln ~~gelebt~~.

If you still live in Cologne, this sentence is wrong.

✓ Ich **lebe** seit 2023 in Köln.

I have been living in Cologne since 2023.



TRAP 3

Putting ein before a job title

When you state your profession, German uses no article: **Ich bin Elektriker.** · **als Elektriker.** English says “as an electrician”, so an **ein** slips in on its own.

✗ **Ich habe drei Jahre als ~~ein~~ Elektriker gearbeitet.**

No **ein** before a job title.

✓ **Ich habe drei Jahre als Elektriker gearbeitet.**

Correct: no article.

05 04:40

Strengths and weaknesses: praise yourself, don't bury yourself

HR doesn't ask these two questions for the content of the answer but for **how** you answer: do you know yourself, and what do you do about your gaps? They aren't looking for a flawless candidate; they are looking for one who describes himself or herself accurately.

QUESTION	MEANING	YOUR ANSWER
Was sind Ihre Stärken?	What are your strengths?	Ich arbeite sorgfältig und bin pünktlich .
Können Sie ein Beispiel nennen?	Can you give an example?	In drei Jahren bin ich nie zu spät gekommen .
Und Ihre Schwächen?	And your weaknesses?	Mein Deutsch ist noch nicht perfekt — ich lerne täglich .
Was machen Sie dagegen?	What are you doing about it?	Ich mache gerade einen B2-Kurs .
Wo sehen Sie sich in fünf Jahren?	Where do you see yourself in five years?	Ich möchte mehr Verantwortung übernehmen , zum Beispiel als Vorarbeiter .

The pattern is fixed: **the gap + what you do about it.** ... ist noch nicht perfekt, aber ich ... That second half is exactly what HR wants to hear.

✓ **In drei Jahren bin ich nie zu spät gekommen.**

In three years I have never once been late. → proof for the sentence “I’m punctual”.



TRAP 4

Burying yourself on “Stärken und Schwächen”

Both extremes lose: saying you have no weaknesses looks arrogant, listing a gap and going quiet looks helpless. The right answer names the gap and adds **right after it** what you are doing about it.

✗ ~~Ich habe keine Schwächen.~~

Nobody believes it; you look like you don't know yourself.

✗ ~~Mein Deutsch ist schlecht, Entschuldigung.~~

Apologising puts you on the reject pile. Name the gap, but don't bury yourself.

✓ **Mein Deutsch ist noch nicht perfekt, aber ich lerne täglich.**

The gap + what you do about it. → exactly what HR wants to hear.

- ① The job application page tells you not to write **Leider ist mein Deutsch noch nicht so gut.** in the cover letter. There is no contradiction: on paper nobody hears your German, so you don't put the gap up front. In the interview they do hear it; it is better that you name it and add your solution than that they notice it themselves.

06 05:50

Why us and salary: you have to name a number

Warum möchten Sie bei uns arbeiten? tests whether you researched the company. Your answer should contain **one concrete thing** about the firm: its training, its projects, the way it works. “I need money” may be true, but it is not an answer.

- Ihre Firma ist bekannt für gute Ausbildung. — the answer from the post: something the company is known for.
- Mir gefällt, dass Sie viel Wert auf Weiterbildung legen. — link the company to your own development.
- Ich möchte in einem großen Team arbeiten. — turn the company's size into something that suits you.

✓ **Mir gefällt, dass Sie viel Wert auf Weiterbildung legen.**

I like that you place a lot of value on further training. → the second safe answer to “why us”.

Next comes the question that makes everyone sweat: **Was sind Ihre Gehaltsvorstellungen?** In Germany this question is answered **with a number**. A candidate who says “whatever you think is fair” walks away from the negotiating table on their own.

WORD	MEANING	WHEN
brutto	Gross: before tax and contributions are taken off	In the interview you always talk gross
netto	Net: what lands in your account	Not mentioned in the interview; you see it on the payslip
im Monat	Per month	Common for trades, warehouse, production and care jobs
im Jahr	Per year	Usually this for office jobs and large companies
der Stundenlohn	Hourly wage	For part-time and shift work

To avoid misunderstandings, put the unit next to the number: **Zwischen 2.800 und 3.000 Euro brutto im Monat.** You can see how gross turns into net on the [payslip](#) page.



TRAP 5

Answering the salary question with “egal”

In many cultures “whatever you think is fair” counts as polite. In a German interview the same answer reads as **not valuing yourself** and often ends in the lowest offer. Give a range, and make the lower end your real expectation.

✗ ~~Das ist mir egal.~~

It doesn't matter to me. → looks weak, closes the negotiation.

✗ Ich möchte ~~2.000 Euro netto.~~

A net figure doesn't fit HR's calculation; talk gross.

✓ Zwischen 2.800 und 3.000 Euro **brutto.**

Between 2,800 and 3,000 euros gross. → you gave a range and left the door open.

07 06:50

Your turn: don't leave without asking a question

Haben Sie noch Fragen? is not a courtesy question, it is the last exam of the interview. A candidate who says **Nein** has said “I'm not really interested in this job”. Take two questions in your pocket; one of them must be about the **Rückmeldung** (getting back to you).

YOUR QUESTION	MEANING	WHAT IT EARNS YOU
Wie sieht ein normaler Arbeitstag aus?	What does a normal working day look like?	Shows you are really curious about the job
Wie läuft die Einarbeitung ab?	How does the onboarding work?	You find out what awaits you in the first weeks
Wie groß ist das Team?	How big is the team?	Shows who you will work with
Gibt es Weiterbildungsmöglichkeiten?	Are there opportunities for further training?	Shows you are thinking long-term
Wann kann ich mit einer Rückmeldung rechnen?	When can I expect to hear back?	Always ask — it sets the limit of the waiting

Don't **bring up** holidays and salary in the first interview; answer if HR asks. If your very first question is "how many days off do I get", it reads as if you care more about time off than about the job.

✓ **Vielen Dank für das Gespräch. Ich freue mich auf Ihre Rückmeldung.**

Thank you very much for the conversation. I look forward to hearing from you. → the whole closing.



TRAP 6

Answering "Haben Sie noch Fragen?" with "Nein"

✗ ~~Nein, alles klar.~~

You think the interview is over; HR reads a lack of interest.

✓ **Ja, ich hätte zwei Fragen. Wie sieht ein normaler Arbeitstag aus?**

Yes, I have two questions. What does a normal working day look like?

If the questions you prepared were already answered during the interview, say so and still ask one: **Die meisten Fragen haben Sie schon beantwortet. Eine Frage hätte ich aber noch: ...**

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08 07:40

The part nobody tells you: the interview starts at the door and ends on the phone

Your interview score is written before the questions and after them. Nobody puts this in the invitation email:

- Don't sit down before **Nehmen Sie bitte Platz**. First a handshake and eye contact, then you wait for the invitation. What is being measured is not your German, it is that wait.

- **Punctuality** is not up for debate: be there ten minutes early. If you will be late, call ahead: **Es tut mir leid, ich verspäte mich um etwa zehn Minuten.**
- In trades, hospitality and care jobs, a trial day often follows the interview: **Können Sie zum Probearbeiten kommen?** That is good news.
- Questions about pregnancy, religion or party membership are in most cases **not allowed** (unzulässige Fragen). If they are asked, you don't have to answer.
- HR said **Wir melden uns bis Freitag.** and Friday has passed? A short email or phone call on Monday is normal and does not count as pushing.

✓ Ich wollte kurz nachfragen, ob es schon eine Entscheidung gibt.

I just wanted to ask briefly whether there is a decision yet. → by phone or email once the promised day has passed.

09 08:30

Table: the whole interview in one frame

Look at this table the evening before the interview. The moment you hear the question on the left, the answer on the right should be ready: not word for word, but the skeleton.

HR ASKS	MEANING	YOUR ANSWER
Haben Sie gut hergefunden?	Did you find us easily?	Ja, danke. Es war kein Problem.
Erzählen Sie etwas über sich.	Tell us about yourself.	Ich lebe seit ... in ... Ich habe ... Jahre als ... gearbeitet.
Was sind Ihre Stärken?	What are your strengths?	Ich arbeite sorgfältig und bin pünktlich.
Und Ihre Schwächen?	And your weaknesses?	... ist noch nicht perfekt, aber ich ...
Warum möchten Sie bei uns arbeiten?	Why do you want to work for us?	Ihre Firma ist bekannt für ...
Was sind Ihre Gehaltsvorstellungen?	What are your salary expectations?	Zwischen ... und ... Euro brutto.
Wann können Sie anfangen?	When can you start?	Ab sofort. - Ich habe eine Kündigungsfrist von vier Wochen.
Haben Sie noch Fragen?	Do you have any more questions?	Ja. Wann kann ich mit einer Rückmeldung rechnen?

✓ Ich kann ab dem 1. November anfangen.

I can start from 1 November. → a full answer to **Wann können Sie anfangen?**

This topic doesn't stick by reading, it sticks by **rehearsing aloud**. In the week before the interview:

- Write your three-sentence work story with your own details: **Ich lebe seit ... • Ich habe ... als ... gearbeitet • Jetzt suche ich ...** Say it aloud and time it: it should not run past one minute.
- Cut your weakness down to one sentence with the **gap + what you do about it** pattern.
- Research the salary range for your job and write the figure gross, with its unit: **... Euro brutto im Monat** or **im Jahr**.
- Write down the two questions you will ask the company; one of them should be the **Rückmeldung** question.
- Act out the dialogue with a friend: they are HR, you are the candidate. Then swap roles.

10 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

TAP THE WORDS

10 09 : 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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