

Phone calls in German

— TELEFONIEREN AUF DEUTSCH

The core German phone phrases are “Hier ist ...” to introduce yourself, “Ich rufe wegen ... an” to give your reason, and buchstabieren to spell a name letter by letter.

“Hallo, hier ist Ali.” — a correct opening, but an incomplete one. In English, “Hello?” is enough and the name can wait; in Germany the person who answers tells you who they are straight away, and you are expected to do the same.

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01 00:10

Right now: the first three seconds



SHORTCUT

The German who picks up **says their surname**, not “Hello”. As the caller, **say your name first**, then your reason: Hier ist ... Ich rufe wegen ... an.

In English we pick up with “Hello?” and the name comes later, if at all. German flips it: the moment the other side answers, they give their surname, and you answer with your own name. Starting to talk without giving a name is not **rude** in Germany, but it sounds **odd** — the other person is left wondering “who is this?”

✓ **Müller.**

This is how the other side answers — just the surname. Don't be thrown.

✓ **Guten Tag, hier ist Yıldız. Ich rufe wegen des Termins an.**

Good day, this is Yıldız. I'm calling about the appointment.

02 01:10

The five parts of a call

Every phone call goes through the same five steps. Know this skeleton and you stop **thinking about what to say and simply remember the next step** — freezing mid-call is mostly about not knowing what comes next.

STEP	WHAT YOU DO	PHRASE
1 - Opening	say your name	Guten Tag , hier ist ...
2 - Reason	say why you are calling	Ich rufe wegen ... an . • Es geht um ...
3 - Details	ask / answer	Ich hätte eine Frage . • Könnten Sie ...?
4 - Check	repeat what you understood	Also , am Dienstag um zehn Uhr — richtig?
5 - Closing	say thanks , hang up	Vielen Dank . Auf Wiederhören .

Step four is the one people skip most and the one that helps most: **repeat what you heard in your own sentence**. If you misunderstood, it shows up there — not after the call is over.

- ① **wegen** takes the Genitiv in writing (**wegen des Termins**), but in speech you will also hear the Dativ (**wegen dem Termin**). Details on the [Genitiv page](#). **anrufen** is a separable verb, so **an** goes to the end: **Ich rufe wegen des Termins an**. In speech you will also hear **Ich rufe an wegen ...**; in writing and in exams, the first order is the safe one. If you want to dodge the issue, **Es geht um den Termin** works too — Akkusativ, no trouble.

03 02:20

When you don't understand — the real issue

The phone is hard not because you lack vocabulary but because **you can't ask for a repeat** the way you would face to face. Memorise the six sentences below; they are the lifelines of a conversation, and using them is **not embarrassing, it's normal**.

SITUATION	SENTENCE	IN ENGLISH
They speak fast	Könnten Sie bitte etwas langsamer sprechen?	Could you please speak a little more slowly?
You missed it	Könnten Sie das bitte wiederholen?	Could you repeat that , please?
You got half of it	Ich habe nur «Termin» verstanden .	I only understood the word "appointment" .
You don't know a word	Was bedeutet das?	What does that mean?
A name / address came up	Könnten Sie das bitte buchstabieren?	Could you spell that , please?
Buy time	Einen Moment bitte .	One moment , please .

You don't need to say these **apologetically**. Opening with **Entschuldigung, mein Deutsch ist schlecht...** makes the call longer and makes the other person tense too. Just ask.



TRAP 1

“Wie bitte?” and “Was?” are not the same thing

In English, a blunt “What?” between friends is fine. In German, **Was?** on the phone sounds **harsh**. The polite version is two words: **Wie bitte?**

✗ ~~Was?~~

Comes across as “What are you on about?”

✓ **Wie bitte?**

Pardon? / Sorry?

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04 03:30

Spelling your name letter by letter

Your name will probably be asked for letter by letter on the phone **almost every time**, especially if it is not a common German name. Germans don’t just recite bare letters; they **give each letter a name: A wie Anton**. Think “A as in Alpha”, but with German first names.

LETTER	WHAT GERMANS SAY	LETTER	WHAT GERMANS SAY
A	A wie Anton	K	K wie Kaufmann
B	B wie Berta	L	L wie Ludwig
C	C wie Cäsar	M	M wie Martha
D	D wie Dora	N	N wie Nordpol
E	E wie Emil	S	S wie Samuel
LETTER	WHAT GERMANS SAY	LETTER	WHAT GERMANS SAY
F	F wie Friedrich	T	T wie Theodor
G	G wie Gustav	U	U wie Ulrich
H	H wie Heinrich	Y	Ypsilon
I	I wie Ida	Z	Z wie Zeppelin

You don’t have to memorise the table — just learn **the letters in your own name**. For “Yıldız”: **Ypsilon – I wie Ida – L wie Ludwig – D wie Dora – I wie Ida – Z wie Zeppelin**. Write it out once and keep it in your pocket.

The letters **ä, ö, ü** and **ß** have no English equivalent, and they are the ones that trip English speakers up. Don't try to pronounce them on the phone; say **Ä wie Ärger, Ö wie Ökonom, Ü wie Übermut** and **ß wie Eszett** and move on — the other side is only asking so they can write it down.

- ✓ **Wie schreibt man das?**
How do you write that? — the question you will be asked.
- ✓ **Ich buchstabiere: Y - I - L - D - I - Z.**
I'll spell it: ...

05 04:30

Saying numbers and dates

In German, phone numbers are often read out **in pairs**, and the pairs follow German's reversed number logic — **42** is not “forty-two” but **“two and forty”**. That is why listening to a number is harder than writing it down.

NUMBER	HOW IT'S READ	NOTE
0176 42 31 05	null - eins - sieben - sechs / zweiundvierzig / einunddreißig / null fünf	first group digit by digit , then in pairs
0176 42 31 05	null - eins - sieben - sechs - vier - zwei - drei - eins - null - fünf	say it like this — digit by digit , no mistakes

You can say your own number **digit by digit**; nobody will mind. But the other side will read in pairs — so when you hear **zweiundvierzig**, you must know to write “4-2”. All the numbers are on the [numbers page](#).

- ① If you are not sure about a number, confirm it by **reading it back: Also: null - eins - sieben - sechs ... richtig?** It looks like an extra step, but it is cheaper than calling again because of a wrong number.

06 05:20

The part nobody tells you: leaving a message vs. passing one on

German has **two separate verbs** for messages, and they belong to **different people**. Mixing them up is the trap everyone falls into who goes by the dictionary — because the dictionary translates both as “to leave a message”.

VERB	WHO SAYS IT	MEANING
hinterlassen	THE CALLER — you	Kann ich eine Nachricht hinterlassen? — Can I leave a message?
ausrichten	THE ONE WHO ANSWERS — the other side	Kann ich etwas ausrichten? — Shall I pass something on?

So **ausrichten** means “to pass on”: it is the verb of the person who takes the message and **carries it to someone else**. If you say it as the caller, you are effectively asking “shall I pass your message on?” — the sentence isn't broken, **the role is wrong**.

- ✗ **Kann ich eine Nachricht ausrichten?**
A caller wouldn't say this — the roles are mixed up.

✓ **Kann ich eine Nachricht hinterlassen?**

Can I leave a message?

✓ **Kann ich ihm etwas ausrichten?**

Can I pass something on to him? — the sentence of the person who ANSWERS the phone.

The second unspoken thing is **the goodbye**: on the phone you don't say **Auf Wiedersehen**. *Sehen* means “to see”, and nobody sees anybody on the phone. The right one is **Auf Wiederhören** — roughly “until we hear each other again”. A small detail, but the person who hangs up correctly **doesn't sound like a learner**.

✗ **Vielen Dank. Auf Wiedersehen.**

Right face to face, not on the phone.

✓ **Vielen Dank. Auf Wiederhören.**

Thank you very much. Goodbye. — the phone's way of closing.

07 06:10

What to do this week

The phone is learned **by writing**, not by talking — at least at first. Five minutes a day:

- Write your own name and address **letter by letter: Ypsilon - I wie Ida - ...** Put it on paper and keep it next to your phone.
- Write your phone number in German **digit by digit** and read it out loud.
- Put the five steps on a sheet of paper: opening · reason · details · check · closing. Build the call you are going to make **in writing** first.
- Memorise the six lifeline sentences — especially **Wie bitte?** and **Könnten Sie das bitte buchstabieren?**
- Make your first real call to **an easy place**: ask a shop whether it's open. The result doesn't matter; the rehearsal does.

① Phrases specific to booking appointments are on the [appointment page](#); talking at the doctor's is on the [German at the doctor's page](#).

08 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

TIPS

Know this before the test

The core of the topic in three lines, then the mistakes people make most often.

01

Germans answer with their name

When the phone is picked up, people don't say **Hallo?** but their surname: «**Müller.**» You introduce yourself right away: **Hier ist ... / Mein Name ist ...**

Müller. — Guten Tag, hier ist Arda Yilmaz.

02

Closing: Auf Wiederhören

Face to face it's **Auf Wiedersehen**; on the phone it's **Auf Wiederhören** — you aren't seeing, you're hearing.

Auf Wiederhören!

03

Requests get softened with the Konjunktiv

Könnte ich bitte ... sprechen? · **Könnten Sie das wiederholen?** · **Könnten Sie langsamer sprechen?** — all the phone requests use the same pattern.

Könnte ich bitte Frau Yilmaz sprechen?

04

Say your number digit by digit

Say the number digit by digit and confirm it with **Ich wiederhole**. Leaving a message: **Kann ich eine Nachricht hinterlassen?**

null · eins · sieben · ...

✗ ~~Auf Wiedersehen!~~ (on the phone)

✓ **Auf Wiederhören!**

On the phone you don't see each other, you hear each other — the goodbye follows that.

✗ ~~Wo ist Frau Yilmaz?~~

✓ **Könnte ich bitte Frau Yilmaz sprechen?**

Asking for someone on the phone is not a question about where they are; the pattern is built with **sprechen**.

✗ ~~Was?~~

✓ **Könnten Sie das bitte wiederholen?**

Was? is harsh on the phone; there is a ready-made polite pattern for asking to repeat.

✗ ~~Hearing “zweiundvierzig” and writing 2-4~~

✓ **Writing 4-2**

In two-digit chunks German says the units first, then the tens. The first digit you hear goes in second place.

08 06 : 30

Test yourself

Tap an answer — we will look at why together.

+7

Finish the topic: take the full test

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GENAU — NOT RULES, THE MOMENT IT CLICKS.

