Researching German Ancestors

Class 2: Basics of German Language & Script

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(Some original material created by Genealogist Hallie Kirchner)

German Language and Alphabet

The German alphabet consists of the same 26 letters as the English alphabet, plus four additional characters: ä, ö, ü, and ß (*Eszett*, hard S).

The language has seen changes over the past several centuries and has become standardized (at least in written form). However, there have historically been and continue to be many regional dialects of German. These dialects often account for differences in spelling and pronunciation, particularly when it comes to historic documents. The regional variations are reflected in both vowel and consonant changes that differ from the standard spellings of words. There are also regionalisms for some words and phrases.

When it comes to German grammar, there are a few marked differences from English grammar:

1. Nouns are always capitalized.

2. Nouns have gender – either masculine (*der*), feminine (*die*), or neuter (*das*). Unlike some languages (such as with the masculine -o and feminine -a endings in Spanish), there is no hard and fast rule to determine the gender of a noun.

3. There are four cases in German, which can change the ending of a noun, adjective, or article.

4. Plural forms often change the spelling of the word, not just the ending.

5. Compound words are extremely common.

Even names can be affected by the rules of German grammar. Historically, many surnames received the feminine ending -*in* when applied to women. This is also true for occupations.

German Dialects

The regional dialects trace back to around 500 A.D. during the *Völkerwander-ung* (migration of nations). From north to south within the area that was once populated by German-speaking individuals, there were a number of tribes. It is from these tribes that the original languages can be traced. Even as the political boundaries changed, many of the people in the regions still harken back to their original dialects.

Die Gliederung der mitteleuropäischen Mundarten germanischer Abkunft (Stand: 1900)
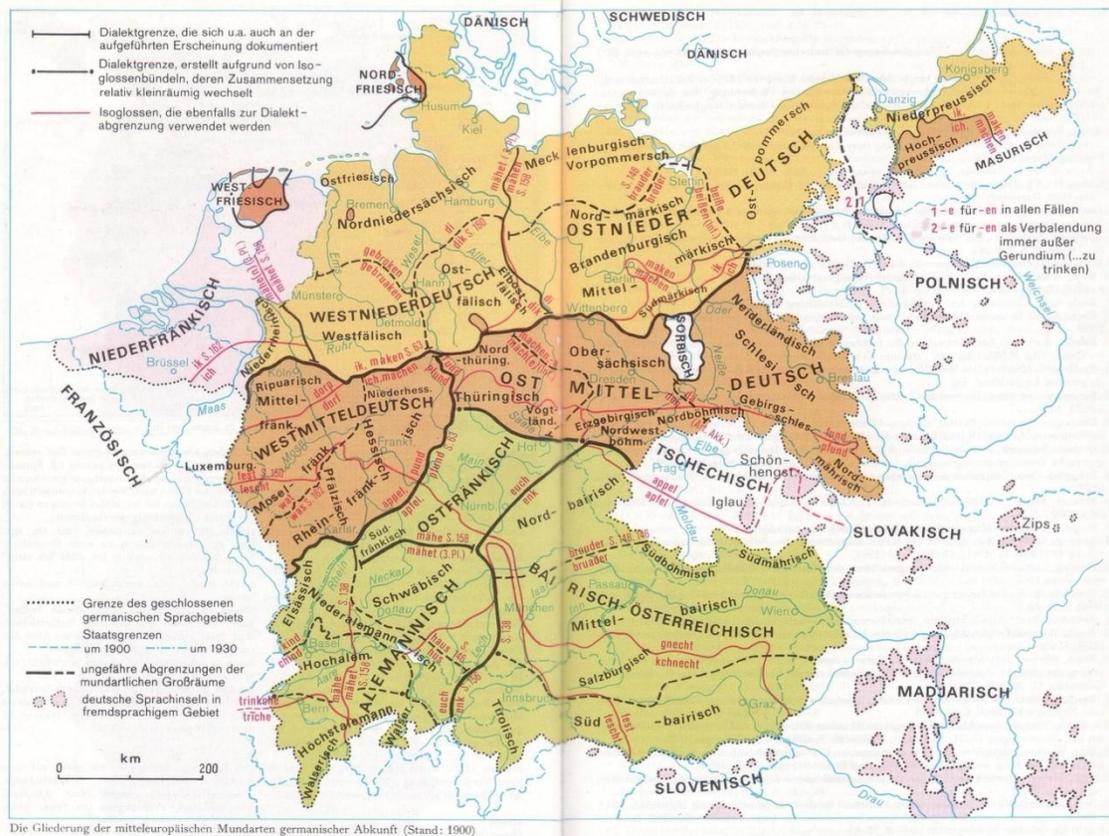
Within the German-speaking area, the region can be divided into three large dialects (represented by the yellow, orange and green sections of the above map), with each have subdialects:

- *Niederdeutsch* (*Plattdeutsch*, Low German):
    - *Friesisch* (Frisian)
    - *Niederfränkisch* (Low Franconian)
    - *Niedersächsisch* (Low Saxon)
- *Mitteldeutsch* (Middle German):
    - *Fränkisch* (Franconian):
        - *Mittelfränkisch* (Middle Franconian)
        - *Ripuarisch* (Ripuarian)
        - *Moselfränkisch* (Moselle-Franconian0
        - *Rheinfränkisch* {Rhine Franconian)
    - *Thüringisch* (Thüringian)
    - *Obersächsisch* (Upper Saxon)
    - *Schlesisch* (Silesian)
- *Oberdeutsch* (Upper German)

- o *Ober-Fränkisch* [Upper Franconian]
- o *Süd-Fränkisch* [South Franconian]
- o *Ostfräkisch* (East Franconian)
- *Alemannisch* (Alemannic]
  - o *Schwäbisch* (Swabian)
  - o *Niederalemannisch* (Low Alemannic)
  - o *Oberalemannisch* (Upper Alemannic)
  - o *Bayerisch* (Bavarian)
    - ▪ *Nord-Bayerisch* (North Bavarian)
    - ▪ *Mittel-Bayerisch* (Middle Bavarian)
    - ▪ *Süd-Bayerisch* (South Bavarian)

Those three larger main dialects were the result of what is known as the *Zweite oder Althochdeutshe Lautverschieb-ung* (Sencond or Old High German Soundshift) which occurred in the 900s. This primarily affected the consonants *p*, *t*, and *k* and how they were used in the larger dialects.

- Upper German:
  - o p became pf, ff
  - o t became s, ss, z, tz
  - o k became ch
- Middle German
  - o Not affected as much
  - o The line separating Upper and Middle German is referred to as the Appel/Apfel line.
- Low German – not affected by the soundshift

Understanding High, Middle and Low German as terms refers not to where they are from north to south, but instead derives from the altitude of the people.

Key Words for Genealogists

Below is a short list of key terms relating to family relationships, life events, and time that appear frequently in German records. For an extended list, consult the items listed under "German Language Resources."

Relationships

English	German
Mother	die Mutter
Father	der Vater

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Male/Female	männlich/weiblich
Parents	die Eltern
Legitimate/Illegitimate	ehelich/unehelich
Daughter	die Tochter/das Töchterlein
Son	der Sohn/Sohnlein
Child	das Kind
Wife	die Frau, die Ehefrau, die Gattin, die Ehegattin, die Weib
Husband	der Mann, der Ehemann, der Gatte, die Ehegatte
Boy	der Jung, der Knabe, der Bube
Girl	das Mädchen, das Mädl
Widow/Widower	die Wittwe, die Wittib/der Wittwer, der Wittiber
Godparent	der Pate, der Taufpate

Life Events

English	German
Born	geboren
Birth (n.)	die Geburt
Baptized	getauft
Baptise (v.)	taufen
Baptism (n.)	die Taufe
Confirmation	die Konfirmation, die Firmung
Married	getraut, verheiratet, copuliert
Marry (v.)	trauen, heiraten, ehelichen

English	German
Died	gestorben
Die (v.)	sterben
Death	der Tod
Buried	begraben
Bury (n.)	die Beerdigung, die Bestattung, das Begräbnis

Time

English	German
Day	der Tag
Month	das Monat
Year	die Jahr
Age	das Alter
Years old	Jahre Alt
Morning	die Morgen, der Vormittag
Afternoon	der Nachmittag
Night	die Nacht
O'clock	Uhr

Months of the Year

English	German
January	Januar, Jänner, Hartung, Jenner
February	Februar, Hornung

March	März, Frühlingsmonat
April	April, Ostermonat, Osteren
May	Mai, Wonnemonat, Blütemonat
June	Juni, Brachmonat
July	Juli, Heuert, Heumonat, Heuet
August	August, Erntemonat, Hitzmonat
September	September, Fruchtmonat, Herbstmonat, Herpsten, 7ber, 7bris
October	Oktober, Weinmonat, 8ber, 8bris
November	November, Wintermonat, 9ber, 9bris
December	Dezember, Christmonat, 10ber, 10bris, Xber, Xbris

Tip: Dates are usually spelled out, including the year.

German Handwriting and Typefaces

Old German-language documents from the medieval period up until the mid-20th century were rarely written in the Latin script familiar to English speakers. Early documents were written in calligraphic script now referred to as "blackletter," which evolved into the German gothic typefaces like *Fraktur*. This typeface was common in other German-speaking areas and throughout northern Europe through the 19th century.

After the medieval period, as record-keeping became more common, German handwriting began to evolve into a "running" or cursive style. This style was known by the mid-1700s as *Kurrentschrift*. Through the 19th and early 20th century, several calligraphers attempted to introduce one standardized alphabet and writing style, a cause that took on new importance with the unification of Germany in 1871. Probably the most well-known of these proponents of handwriting reform was Ludwig Sütterlin, whose alphabet was taught in schools throughout Germany from 1915-1941. The term *Sütterlin* or *Suetterlin* is often applied to all types of this German script, though it technically was only in existence for a few decades.

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Tips for Deciphering German Handwriting

1. Familiarize yourself with the letters by studying known words and phrases such as given names, town names, and words that commonly appear in records.

2. Cross-reference surnames that appear in records to the index (if available).

3. Study examples to understand where certain words should appear in different record types.

4. Keep copies of the alphabet and of German "genealogy word lists" on hand.

5. You do not have to read or translate the entire document. Often extracting names, dates, and occupations can provide plenty of detail for the genealogist.

6. Remember that handwriting is unique to the individual—though you may have trouble deciphering the writing of one clerk, you may be able to read that of another.

7. Practice, practice, practice!

Kurrentschrift – The Alphabet

a	*a* *A*	j	*j* *J*	s	*s* *S*
b	*b* *B*	k	*k* *K*	t	*t* *T*
c	*c* *C*	l	*l* *L*	u	*u* *U*
d	*d* *D*	m	*m* *M*	v	*v* *V*
e	*e* *E*	n	*n* *N*	w	*w* *W*
f	*f* *F*	o	*o* *O*	x	*x* *X*
g	*g* *G*	p	*p* *P*	y	*y* *Y*
h	*h* *H*	q	*q* *Q*	z	*z* *Z*
i	*i* *I*	r	*r* *R*	tz	*tz*

ä *Ae* ö *Oe* ü *Ue*

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Fraktur – The Alphabet

𝕬 a,	𝕭 b,	𝕮 c,	𝕯 d,	𝕰 e,
A a,	B b,	C c,	D d,	E e,

𝕱 f,	𝕲 g,	𝕳 h,	𝕵 i j,	𝕶 k,
F f,	G g,	H h,	I J i j,	K k,

𝕷 l,	𝕸 m,	𝕹 n,	𝕺 o,	𝕻 p,
L l,	M m,	N n,	O o,	P p,

𝕼 q,	𝕽 r,	𝕾 ſ s,	𝕿 t,	𝖀 u,
Q q,	R r,	S s,	T t,	U u,

𝖁 v,	𝖂 w,	𝖃 x,	𝖄 y,	𝖅 z.
V v,	W w,	X x,	Y y,	Z z.

ch	ck	ſſ	ß	ſch	ſp	ſt	th	tz
ch	ck	ss	sz	sch	sp	st	th	tz

German Language Resources

Dict.cc [online dictionary], https://www.dict.cc/

Genealogische Symbole und Zeichen [Genealogical Symbols and Signs], http://wiki-de.genealogy.net/Genealogische_Symbole_und_Zeichen

German Genealogical Word List, https://www.familysearch.org/en/wiki/German_Genealogical_Word_List

German Words with English Translations: Diseases, Occupations, Military Terms, https://pommerscher.org/cpage.php?pt=176

Old German Professions, https://sites.rootsweb.com/~romban/misc/germanjobs.html

Wörterbuchnetz.de [German-German dictionary by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm], https://woerterbuchnetz.de/?sigle=DWB#0

Guides to Understanding German Handwriting

Edna M. Bentz, *If I can, you can decipher Germanic records*, (San Diego: E. Bentz, 1982)

Roger P. Minert, *Deciphering Handwriting in German Documents*, 2nd ed., (GRT Publications, 2013)

Brigham Young University, *Script Tutorial: German*, https://script.byu.edu/german-handwriting/introduction

Charlotte Noelle Champenois, *German Paleography Seminar*, https://www.familysearch.org/help/helpcenter/lessons/german-paleography-seminar-introduction

Margaret Mücke, *A Guide to Writing the old German "Kurrent" Script*, http://www.kurrent-lernen-muecke.de/pdf/Schreiblehrgang%20Kurrentschrift%20%202016-english.pdf

SuetterlinSchrift.de, *Here You Can Learn Suetterlin*, http://www.suetterlinschrift.de/Englisch/Sutterlin.htm

Guides to Understanding Printed German Gothic (Fraktur)

Family History Library, *Handwriting Guide: German Gothic*, https://feefhs.org/sites/default/files/guide/german-gothic.pdf

German Script/Fraktur Generators

Michael Nülken, *Schrift-Generator*, https://www.deutsche-handschrift.de/adsschreiben.php#schriftfeld

Archivführer, *Kurrent-Schreibmaschine*, https://archivfuehrer-kolonialzeit.de/font-tool