

Last Sunday, we talked about the different ways to tell time in German. There are at least three systems, and they are all used. One is the official system, and the other two are more colloquial, but they are quicker when used in every-day life. For example, the time on the clock below can be told as "sechzehn Uhr siebenundfünfzig" (System 1) or as "drei vor fünf" (System 2). But let's go step by step...

System 1 - official 24-hour clock

- hours and minutes are counted up continuously in a 24-hour format (military or European time)
- first, one names the hour, then says "Uhr", the German word for clock, then the minutes
- the afternoon hours are just added to the first twelve hours, i.e., 1PM is thirteen o'clock
- this system is used in all official communication (for example, in school or business, at the airport, etc.), and by everybody when any ambiguity should be avoided
- using this way of telling time, you can never go wrong, but sometimes it may take you a little longer
- because of the 24-hour format, there is NO NEED to indicate if the time is before or after noon

Format: Stunde Uhr Minute
vier Uhr siebenundfünfzig
OR(!!!)
sechzehn Uhr siebenundfünfzig

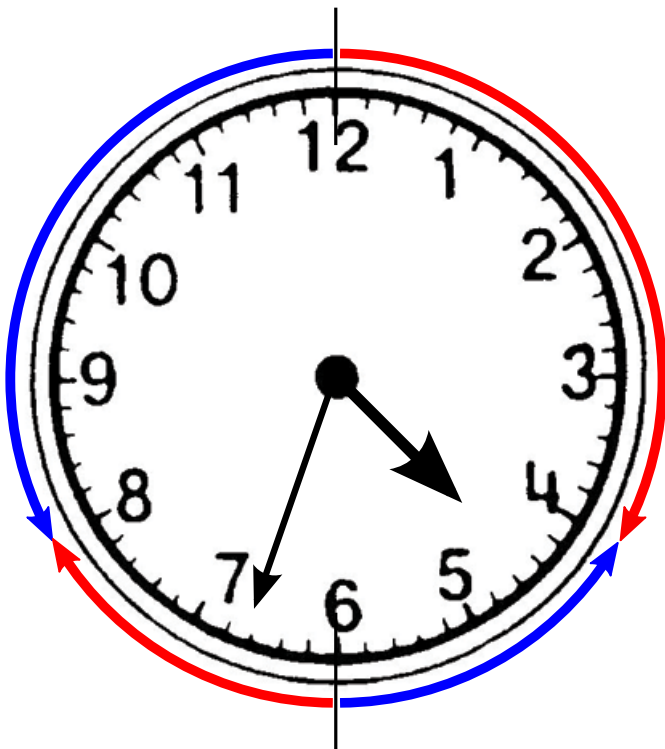
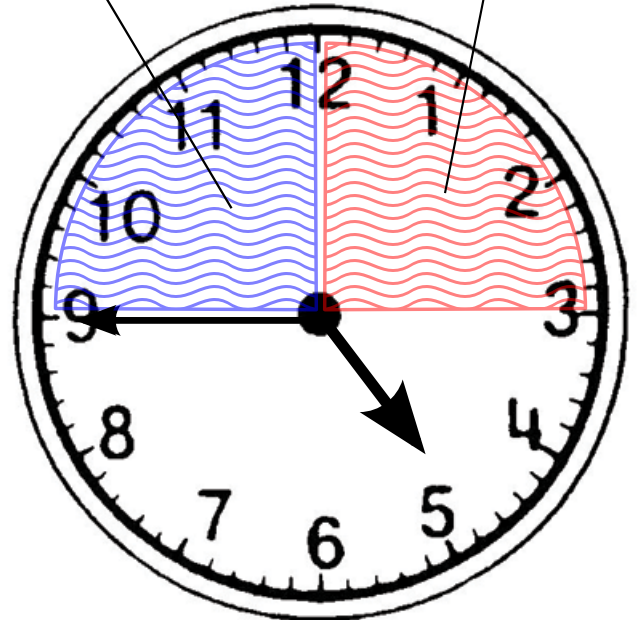


System 2 - vor und nach (before and after)

- similar to the English and American system
- minutes and Viertelstunden (quarter hours) are given relative to **vor** (before) or **nach** (after) a full or (more rarely) half hour
- HOWEVER, one cannot(!) count half hours in this way, so "halb nach neun" is wrong!!! - see System 3 for why that is
- the point of this system is to be fast & convenient, so in the example to the right, one would NOT be as accurate as possible by going through a mouthful of "eine Viertelstunde **vor** fünf", but would shorten this to "**Viertel vor fünf**"
- note that in this system, minutes and quarter hours are context-dependent: anything higher than one is understood to be minutes
- furthermore, in order to be quick, the hours are given in a 12-hour format rather than a 24-hour format because all numbers until 12 are one-syllable words: one would not save much time by saying "Viertel vor zweiundzwanzig", so people say "abends, Viertel vor zehn"

Viertel **vor**
spelling: capital, because
in this context, Viertel is a
noun, referring to a Viertelstunde

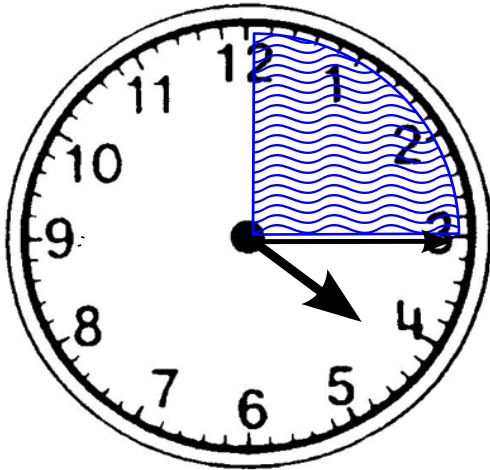
Viertel **nach**



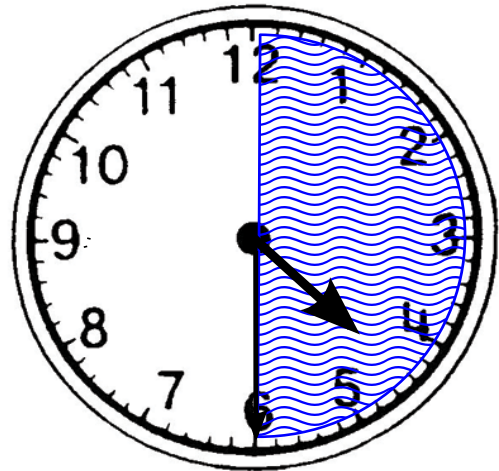
- vor und nach can be given relative to full and half hours
- half hours are given as halves of the next full hour (see System 3)
- in the example to the left, it is "drei **nach** halb fünf"
- I have drawn the arrows relative to the full hour over 20 minutes and the ones relative to the half hours over 10 minutes to reflect that I would say "zwanzig **nach** neun" rather than "zehn **vor** halb zehn", but this is a matter of personal taste, other Germans may have drawn it differently
- when using this system, **NEVER, NEVER, NEVER forget your preposition (vor, nach)**, because "Viertel **nach** zehn" (10:15) differs from "viertel zehn" (9:15) --> see System 3 to understand why

System 3 - viertel, halb, dreiviertel

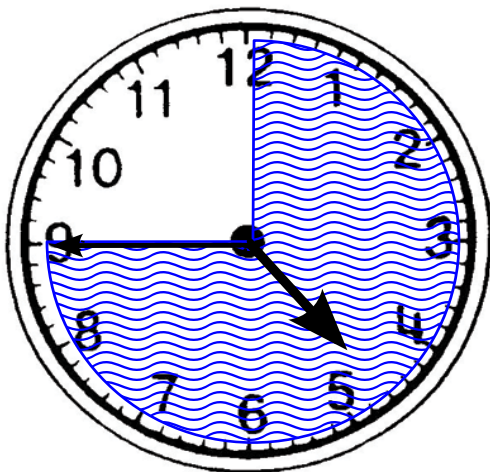
- this system counts only "viertel" and "half" (quarter and half) of **the next upcoming hour**, that is, **how much of the ongoing hour has been completed** so far; it does not count minutes
- it is also used for speed and convenience
- it is debated among Germans themselves: people in Berlin and Bavaria understand and agree on "dreiviertel sieben" (one of the few areas Bavarians and Prussians can agree on:), people in Düsseldorf say "viertel vor sieben" instead
- **keep in mind the lower-case spelling of "viertel" and "halb"**: they are not nouns here, but attributes!



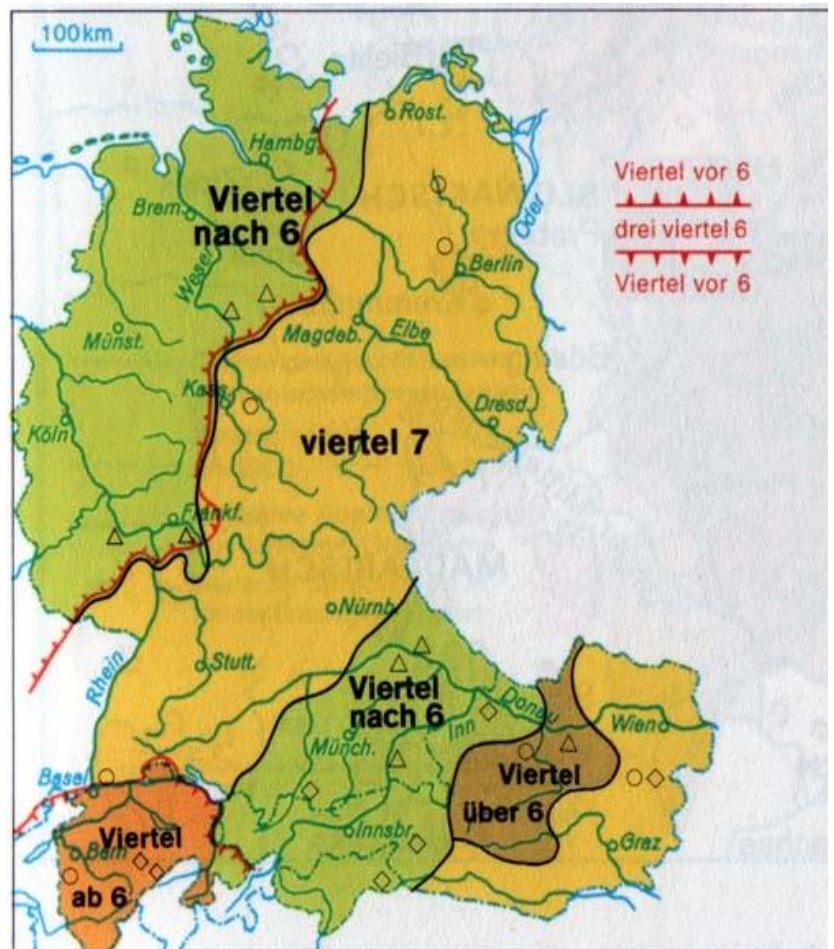
viertel fünf
(regional)



halb fünf
(ALL Germans use this)



dreiviertel fünf
(regional)



Die Bezeichnungen für 6¹⁵ und 5⁴⁵ in den deutschen Umgangssprachen

regional distribution of "viertel sieben" instead of "Viertel nach sechs" across Germany