

The first thing to understand is that there's a huge difference between gaining **citizenship** and gaining **residency** in any country. I'll cover both, starting with citizenship, because if you have a claim anywhere in the EU, that's the easiest way to go.

There are other ways to gain citizenship or residency than the ones I will describe here, but these are the most applicable ones to many US citizens.

I am not a lawyer in Germany, the US, or anywhere else. Any of this could be wrong. Laws change over time. Imagine a million asterisks on everything. Please do your own research and only use this as a starting point.

CITIZENSHIP

The unrestricted right to live, work, and vote in a country.

1. German citizenship by descent. If you have at least one German **parent**, you can generally claim German citizenship. They need to have been German citizens at the time of your birth. Having German *grandparents* is only helpful if you can prove that they passed German citizenship to your *parents*, and that this was not lost before your birth.

Germany and most European countries do not have *jus soli* citizenship. Being born on German soil does not give you citizenship by itself. Being born on a US military base in Germany is generally not sufficient, unless one of your parents was already a German citizen.

2. German citizenship through Grundgesetz Artikel 116. A caveat about grandparents: the German Basic Law has a special clause that says that anyone who was stripped of their German citizenship due to "political, racial, or religious" persecution between 1933 and 1945 can claim it back. So can their descendents. If you have parents, grandparents, or great-grandparents who fled Germany because of this, do further research.

3. Citizenship of an EU member state. Citizens of one EU member state can take up residence (but not full voting rights) in any other EU member state.

If you have a parent from any of the EU member states, look up how to claim your rights in that country.

Italy, Ireland, and Poland allow citizenship by descent through more than one generation. This means that some people can inherit citizenship through a grandparent. Italy even accepts great-grandparents in many cases.

There are many, many resources about **Italian citizenship by descent** online. Check [Tapatalk](#) and [this Facebook group](#). Many professional genealogists also specialize in helping applicants through the process.

Hungary has a simplified naturalization process if you have Hungarian ancestry (any generation) and you show that you can speak the language.

Spain has simplified naturalization rules if you have citizenship in a part of its former empire (**Latin America, including US citizens born in Puerto Rico**). People of Sephardic Jewish descent can apply under a newer legal avenue that does not require citizenship in a Latin American country.

Other countries may have simplified rules too, but these are the only ones I know about.

RESIDENCE

Defined here as the right to live (and usually work) in a country, but not vote. This is generally restricted to a certain time period, and it can be taken away if certain conditions are no longer met (lost a job that gave you a work visa, graduated while holding a student visa, etc.). When there are no such restrictions, I refer to PERMANENT RESIDENCE (PR).

The law that governs most forms of residence in Germany is the Aufenthaltsgesetz (AufenthG). [The English translation for this is “Residence Act,” and yes, you can find an official English version.](#)

I use the word “visa,” but technically they’re Aufenthaltstitel (residence permits). The difference is not important for the purposes of this document.

In non-pandemic times, US citizens can show up in Germany first, and *then* go to the Ausländerbehörde or Landesamt für Einwanderung to apply in person for a visa. If you are not a US citizen, you may need to obtain a visa from a German embassy or consulate *before* you get on the plane.

Most visas do not have a language requirement for the first time they are issued, but some do, and others have language requirements for *renewals*. [Get a free account on Duolingo anyway](#) and start learning.

1. **Schengen Allowance.** US citizens can stay in the Schengen zone (most of the EU including Germany but not UK/Ireland) for 90 days with no visa at all. You cannot legally work this way. You do not have access to “free” health care. Legally, you are a tourist.

2. [Language Learning Visa.](#) You can get a visa to stay in Germany for 3 to 12 months to take language classes at a language school (minimum 18 hours/week). Some language schools will walk you through the entire process for an extra fee. You do not have the right to work. You must provide your own health insurance. Because you have no recourse to welfare, you must have a bank account with roughly 8000€ in it, or a guarantor’s note.

3. **Student Visa.** This applies if you are studying at a German university. Requirements for getting into a degree program vary, but generally require that you have sufficient knowledge of the German language (English-only programs do exist, though, especially at the masters/doctoral level).

You can work, but only part-time. You will pay for your own health insurance (about 90€/mo for public insurance with providers such as TK or AOK).

As with the Language Learning visa: Because you have no recourse to welfare and can’t work full-time, you must have a bank account with roughly 8000€ or a guarantor’s note.

After graduation, you can stay and look for work for a few months. Not sure how many. The time was recently extended and I haven’t looked into.

4. **Freelance Visa.** I have personal experience with this one, so message me if you have questions. Common forms of qualifying freelance work are teaching English at language schools and writing/journalism or other art forms.

You must have work contracts (and/or a portfolio if you are an artist) to apply for this visa. Some remote work is OK (one of my best clients is a web-based American company),

but try to get at least one German contract too. I also submitted a simple business plan explaining how I expected to make money in my first three years.

You must purchase your own health insurance. Some trades (e.g. teaching) will require you to pay into German's equivalent of Social Security (Rentenversicherung) at roughly 19% of your net income; most other trades do not have this requirement.

5. **Work Visa.** Find a job with a German company. Prove that you're a better candidate for the job than an EU citizen. Employer will pay half of your health insurance and social security, similar to the US.

No, I don't know anyone who's hiring. Indeed.de and BerlinStartupJobs.com can be good places to start. Avoid Craigslist at all costs.

6. **The Blue Card.** This is a specific type of work visa with special perks such as a fast-track to permanent residency. Most of the people I know who have Blue Cards work in STEM fields because there is a fairly high income requirement. [The relevant part of the AufenthG \(Section 19a\)](#) is a bit more convoluted than the others so [this unofficial site may give a more understandable rundown](#).

7. **Family unification.** Most common form is marriage to a German citizen. I had this visa for a while too. There's a separate visa class for marriage to a non-German EU citizen, but it generally works in the same way. If your spouse has citizenship in Ireland/France/Poland/wherever, you generally have the right to take up residence in Germany with them.

Requirements include a valid marriage certificate (foreign or German; foreign ones need to be officially translated and notarized with an apostille) and enough savings and/or income to provide for your family without recourse to welfare. Minimal knowledge of German (A1 level) is generally required, though this has been challenged in court.

There is generally no right of family unification for your non-German parents, cousins, aunts/uncles, etc. Also no common law/cohabiting partners. Spouses and dependent children are typically the only way to go. Same-sex civil unions are recognized and so are foreign same-sex marriages (although Germany itself only has civil unions).

Other EU countries have other policies. It is important to remember that what's valid in Germany is not necessarily valid elsewhere. That said, here are some other paths to residency in some other EU member states.

1. Ireland: [youth working holiday program](#)
2. Spain: [auxiliares](#) (language teaching)
3. Netherlands: [Dutch American Friendship Treaty](#) (entrepreneurs and freelancers in any industry, similar to German freelance visa above, BUT requires 4500€ startup money)
4. All-over/general: au pair childcare (don't know good sites for this, sorry), [WWOOF](#) (agriculture, can be great or sketchy depending on the farm)