

Types of Schools

Volksschule: Primary School/Elementary School

Hauptschule/Mittelschule/Gymnasium: Secondary School

Berufsschule: Vocational School

HAS: Business College/Business School

HAK: Business College/Business Academy

HTL: Higher Technical Institute

Please note: All of the above terms' meaning may depend on location/jurisdiction or context.

A “primary school” in the UK is called an “elementary school” in other countries (especially the US).

Basically, every school one attends right after primary/elementary school is a secondary school.

While the term “middle school” is quite commonly used in English, its meaning differs from the German term “Mittelschule”. In German parlance (and especially so in Austria), “Mittelschule” refers colloquially to all grades of “Gymnasium” — as often as not, these terms are even used synonymously. In English, however, “middle school” only refers to grade 5 (or 6) to 8 (or 9) — what Americans tend to call “junior high school”.

“High School”, on the other hand, is what Americans call secondary education from grade 8 (or 9) to grade 12, while the German term “Hochschule” refers to tertiary education institutions (similar to “Universität”).)

A “college” is basically every preparational school for students from age 16 (when lower-level secondary education is commonly completed). American colleges, however, are a different animal altogether. These are a form of tertiary education (after graduation from high school) to earn one's first academic degree. This may lead to some confusion, now and again (and the Bologna Agreement, unfortunately, did not succeed in settling this matter once and for all).

What we call “HAS or HAK” is a “business college” or a “business school” and “business academy”, respectively, even though neither is a form of tertiary education. In America, business schools (the one at Yale would be one of the most famous, I believe) or business colleges are strictly tertiary. One has to have graduated from high school to enter these schools in order to earn their Bachelor degree.

I did read or hear the term “commercial school” the other day. This is a bit tricky, in my humble opinion. The average native English speaker will not get what that is supposed to mean.

“Commercial” as opposed to what? A non-profit school?” would be the most likely response.

A few minutes ago, I ran this term by several native speakers (“Do you know what a ‘commercial school’ is?”) to learn what they might make of it. Only one in five (she has been living in Austria for nearly 30 years and frequently communicates with teenagers in her line of work) came back with at least a notion: “I don’t know the term, but I have an idea ... is that a ‘Handelsschule’?”

Why even bother; it’s just a random term, after all? Yes, that is true. However, attending this type of school is supposed to prepare the attendee to successfully discuss business matters in English with people from all walks of life, including English native speakers. One cannot simply state, “Sorry, but it’s too difficult to explain that concept to you. Would you send for a foreign speaker (who happened to attend the same type of school I did?)” That’d be considered both rude and unprofessional — and quite rightly so.

The “Höhere Technische Lehranstalt” (HTL) is a form of higher–level secondary education in Austria (it concludes with the maturation), while a “Higher Technical Institute” provides tertiary education in most countries (the maturation is required to enter this level).

Also, a “gymnasium”, in English parlance, is a place where one “educates” their body only. Even primary schools do have a “gym”. Any reference to the Ancient Greek gymnasium to bridge this semantic gap (between German and English) is futile, in my humble opinion, because that used to be a different concept altogether.