Engineer Software

Glossary

What the words on this site mean — one line each, a full article for some, and a link to the people who define them.

This site explains itself in public. The credits name every piece of technology behind it, the notes argue about browser bugs, and the conformance claim cites clauses by number — so a reader who follows any of that meets words that are precise and unfamiliar at the same time.

Each one below gets a line. The name links to the people who define it, because a summary is a place to start and a specification is the thing that is true. Where the site has written a longer article about a word, the name opens the article instead, and its further reading starts at that same source.

acceptance criteria
conditions a specific change must meet to be accepted

access control
granting or refusing each request to use a resource

accessibility
a site's fitness for people with disabilities

ACME
the protocol that issues a certificate without a human

alert
a message a system sends when something needs a person

animation
a change in a page's look played out over time

Ansible
a tool that puts a server into a written-down state

API

the described way one program calls another

app

a program people use to get a task done

ArcGIS

Esri's commercial GIS platform

architecture

how a system's parts fit together and why

architecture decision record

a short record of a design choice and its reasons

ARIA

extra markup that names a control for assistive tech

authentication

proof that a request is from who it claims

AWS

Amazon's cloud platform

axe

the accessibility engine this site is audited with

Azure

Microsoft's cloud platform

backend

the half of a system the reader never loads

backup

a copy of data against loss, and the making of it

Bash

the GNU shell most scripts are written for

Bicep

Azure's own language for declaring infrastructure

BigQuery

Google's warehouse for querying very large tables

blue-green deployment

switching live traffic between two identical environments

business intelligence
turning a business's data into reports that guide decisions

button
a control a person presses to make something happen

cache
a stored copy a browser may reuse instead of asking

caching
keeping an answer so the work is not repeated

canary release
releasing a change to a small share of users first

canonical URL
the one address a page says is its own

CDN
servers near the reader that hand out copies

change data capture
reading the changes made in a database and passing them on

change lead time
elapsed time from commit to deployment in production

chaos engineering
controlled experiments that inject failure into production

CI
merging work at least daily, each merge proven by a build

CIDR
a way to write and route address blocks of any size

CLDR
Unicode's data on each locale's dates, numbers and sorting

cloud
computing rented by the hour from somebody else

code quality
how well code works, reads and can be changed

code review

another person examining a change before it is merged

codebase
all the source code of one app, kept in one repository

computer file
a named set of data stored as one unit

configuration
the settings that decide how a system behaves

connection pool
a set of open database connections kept ready for reuse

container runtime
the program that actually starts a container

Content Security Policy
a list of where a page may load things from

continuous delivery
keeping software ready to release safely on demand

contract testing
verifying interface expectations between components

contrast ratio
how far apart two colours are, as a number

cookie
a small value a site asks the browser to keep

Core Web Vitals
three measurements of how a page feels to use

CORS
how a server lets pages on other origins read its responses

crawler
a program that fetches pages to index them

cron
the Unix scheduler that runs the commands in a crontab

cross-site scripting
an attack that gets a page to run an attacker's script

CSRF
an attack that tricks a browser into an unwanted request

CSS
the language that says how a page looks

CTE
a named subquery a bigger query reads as a table

CVE
the public list giving each disclosed vulnerability one ID

daemon
a program that runs in the background, unattended

dashboard
one screen built to answer a recurring question

data analytics
processing data systematically to find patterns and trends

data lake
a store that keeps raw data in its original form

data lineage
the path data takes through sources and transformations

data mesh
domain teams serving their analytical data as products

data storage
keeping data, or the media that hold it, for later reading

data warehouse
a database that gathers a business's data for analysis

database
a store of data organised so that programs can query it

database index
a structure that finds table rows without a full scan

database normalization
arranging tables so each fact is stored once, under its key

dataset

a collection of data published as one unit

defect

a flaw that keeps a product from meeting its requirements

definition of done

shared quality conditions for completed product work

deployment

moving a change to where people actually use it

deployment rollback

restoring an earlier deployment to replace a failing one

DevOps

practices that join software development and operations

DHCP

a protocol that leases IP addresses and settings to devices

disaster recovery

getting service back after a major loss, by a tested plan

Django

a Python framework for building web applications

DNS

the directory turning a name into an address

Docker

a way to ship a program with everything it needs

DOM

the live tree of objects a browser builds from a page

downtime

the stretch where a service answers nobody

email

mail sent between mailboxes across the internet

encryption

making data unreadable without the key

end-to-end test

a test that drives the whole system the way a user does

engineering best practices
proven ways to work in a particular context

engineering outcomes
observable effects of engineering work

error budget
the share of failures a reliability target still allows

ESLint
a rule-driven linter for JavaScript

ETL
moving data between systems, reshaping it on the way

event sourcing
keeping state as the ordered log of events that changed it

exponential backoff
a retry pause that multiplies after every failure

favicon
the small picture a browser shows beside a page

feature flag
a switch turning code on or off without rebuilding the app

feed
a page's updates, in a format you subscribe to

file system
the structure that turns a disk into named files and folders

firewall
the rule set that decides which traffic passes

font
a typeface in a file the page downloads

forge
a shared host for code repositories and collaboration

frontend
the part of a system handling presentation and interaction

full-text search

searching documents by their words, ranked by relevance

GDAL
a library for reading and converting geospatial data

Gemini
a lightweight internet protocol for serving hypertext

gemtext
a text format with one link per line

GeoJSON
geography written as JSON

geospatial
data whose meaning depends on where it is

GIS
systems for data that has a place on a map

git
the version control this site's history lives in

git hook
a script git runs when something happens

GitHub
Microsoft's hosting for git repositories

GitLab
a git platform you can also run yourself

GitOps
running infrastructure from a desired state kept in Git

Go
a compiled, strongly typed, garbage-collected language

Google Cloud
Google's cloud platform

Gopher
a menu-based protocol for retrieving internet documents

Grafana
a dashboard tool for metrics and logs

GraphQL
a query language in which the client picks the fields

gRPC
a framework for calling remote procedures over HTTP/2

hardening
removing what an attacker could use

hardware
the physical parts of a computer

health check
an automated test of whether a service is working

high availability
the ability of a service to keep running when a part fails

host
a computer attached to a network

hreflang
the attribute pairing a page with its translations

HSTS
a browser's promise to use HTTPS next time

HTML
the language a page's structure is written in

HTTP
the request and answer the web is built on

HTTPS
the same requests, over an encrypted connection

idempotent
safe to run twice, because the second time changes nothing

immutable infrastructure
replacing servers instead of changing them in place

incident
an event that puts a system's data or service at risk

incident response

coordinating decisions and action during an incident

information security
protecting data and systems from misuse and harm

infrastructure as code
managing infrastructure from versioned definition files

internationalization
designing software so that it can easily be localized

IP address
a number that tells the network where to deliver a packet

IPv6
the version of the Internet Protocol with 128-bit addresses

JavaScript
the language browsers run

JSON
the text format most data travels in

JSON Schema
a language for describing the shape of JSON data

JWT
a compact, URL-safe token that carries claims as JSON

kernel
the core of an operating system

Kubernetes
a system that keeps a fleet of containers running

landmark
a region of a page a screen reader can jump to

large language model
a neural network trained on text to predict the next token

latency
the wait between asking and the first of the answer

lazy loading
loading something only when it is first needed

Leaflet
a small library for maps in a browser

library
code packaged for other programs to call

Lighthouse
Chrome's own audit of speed, markup and good practice

linter
a tool that flags likely bugs in code without running it

Linux
the kernel most servers run on

load balancer
a server that spreads requests across several others

load test
a test that measures a system under simulated traffic

localization
adapting software to one market's language and conventions

logging
writing down what happens, as it happens

machine learning
building software that learns a task from examples in data

macOS
Apple's desktop operating system

Mapbox
a commercial source of map tiles and styles

Markdown
plain text with a few marks that mean formatting

materialized view
a view that stores the result of its query like a table

metadata
the data describing other data, so it can be found

metrics

numbers a system reports about itself

microservices
an architecture of small services, each deployed on its own

migration
a planned move to a new version or platform

monitoring
watching a running system so it tells you first

multi-factor authentication
sign-in that needs two or more different kinds of proof

NAT
the rewriting of IP addresses as packets pass a router

network server
a computer or program that serves others over a network

Next.js
a React framework for building web apps

nginx
a web server and reverse proxy

OAuth
a way to give an app limited access without a password

observability
understanding a system from the outside, from what it emits

onion service
an address that works only through Tor

OpenAPI
a machine-readable description of an HTTP API

OpenID Connect
an identity layer on top of OAuth for signing users in

OpenTelemetry
one vendor-free way to send telemetry

operating system
the software that manages hardware for every other program

operational secret
a credential a program needs, like a key or a password

ORM
a library that maps database tables to objects in code

package
code bundled with a description, ready to install

partitioning
splitting one table into physical pieces

password
a secret string that proves who is signing in

penetration test
an authorised attack that shows which flaws can be exploited

PHP
the language most of the old web runs on

pipeline
a run of steps carrying data from source to use

Playwright
the tool that drives a browser in tests

Podman
a container engine that needs no daemon

port
the number that picks a service on a host

PostGIS
the extension that gives PostgreSQL geometry

PostgreSQL
the database most of this work was built on

postmortem
a written review of an incident, made to stop it recurring

privilege
a right a system grants to a person or process

progressive enhancement

building pages that work in plain HTML, then adding more

progressive web app
a website that can be installed and run like an app

Prometheus
a database that scrapes and stores metrics

protocol
the agreed rules two programs follow to talk

proxy
a server that forwards a request on your behalf

Python
the language most of this site's tooling is in

QGIS
the free desktop GIS

quality gate
a set of checks code must pass before it moves on

query
a written question a database answers

queue
work left in order for something else to pick up

RAID
several disks run as one, usually so one can fail safely

rate limiting
a cap on how many requests a client may send per interval

RBAC
permissions granted to a role, not a person

recovery point objective
the maximum time span of data that may be lost

recovery time objective
the target time to resume a service after disruption

Redis
an in-memory store for things that live briefly

refactoring
changing code's structure without changing what it does

regression testing
checking that a change preserves existing behavior

regular expression
a pattern that describes which strings count as a match

replication
keeping copies of a database in step on other servers

repository
a store that keeps saved versions of a set of files

responsive design
a layout that adapts to whatever screen it is read on

REST
the web's architectural style, built around resources

retrieval-augmented generation
generating answers from documents retrieved per question

reverse proxy
a server that receives requests for an origin server

robots.txt
the file telling crawlers where not to go

RSS
the older of the two XML formats a feed is written in

Ruff
a fast linter and formatter for Python

runbook
a tested set of steps for a repeatable operating task

Rust
a compiled language that checks memory for you

S.M.A.R.T.
a disk's built-in self-check that warns of coming failure

scalability

whether more load needs more than more machines

schema
a named group of tables inside one database

screen reader
software that reads a page aloud, or into braille

semantic versioning
a version-number scheme that signals breaking changes

SEO
making a page findable without paying for it

server-sent events
a one-way stream of events from a server over HTTP

server-side rendering
producing a page's HTML on the server for each request

serverless
running code without managing the servers it runs on

service level objective
a measurable reliability target that a service must meet

service worker
a script that answers requests when the network cannot

single-page application
a web app that loads one page and changes it with JavaScript

sitemap
a list of a site's pages, written for machines

software
the programs and data a computer runs

SQL
the language relational databases answer

SQL injection
an attack that turns input into part of a database query

SQL Server
Microsoft's relational database

SQLite
a whole database in a single file

SSH
an encrypted shell on another machine

SSRF
an attack that makes a server fetch a URL the attacker chose

star schema
a layout with one fact table and dimension tables around it

static site generator
a program that writes every page out in advance

structured data
facts about a page, written for machines

stylesheet
the file that holds a page's CSS

Subresource Integrity
a hash a browser checks a file against

SVG
an XML language for drawing graphics that scale

systemd
the thing that starts everything else on Linux

technical debt
the extra cost later of a quick, expedient choice made now

technical leadership
setting direction and sharing technical decisions

Terraform
HashiCorp's tool that plans and applies infrastructure code

test-driven development
writing the test before the code, one small test at a time

TLS
protocol for authenticated, encrypted connections

Tor

a network that routes traffic through volunteer relays

transaction
a group of database changes that succeed or fail as one

TypeScript
JavaScript with types checked before it runs

Ubuntu
a Linux distribution common on servers

UI
the part of a program a person sees and works with

Unicode
the standard that gives every character a number of its own

unit test
an automated check of one small piece of code in isolation

URL
the address that says where a thing is

user
a person, or a process acting for one, allowed into a system

UTF-8
Unicode encoding with one to four bytes per scalar value

validation
checking input against the rules before trusting it

vector search
finding stored items whose vectors lie closest to a query

viewport
the part of a page a window actually shows

virtual machine
a whole computer run in software on a physical host

VPN
a logically separate network over shared infrastructure

WCAG 2.2
the web accessibility standard this site targets

web app manifest
a JSON file describing a site as an installable application

web browser
the program a person uses to open web pages

web components
browser features for defining new, reusable HTML elements

WebAssembly
a portable binary code format that runs in a sandbox

webhook
an HTTP request a service sends when an event happens

WebP
a raster image format with lossy and lossless compression

website
related web pages published together for a common purpose

WebSocket
a protocol for a two-way connection that stays open

WordPress
an open-source content management system for websites

YAML
a format for settings a person can still read

zero trust
a model that grants no trust on network location alone

Build a shared vocabulary

A shared vocabulary makes technical choices easier to discuss.

Explore our services Get in touch →

Follow the word to its evidence

Follow a term to its explanation, primary sources and relevant work before choosing a tool.

Cases Get in touch →

Clarify the choice behind the terminology

Bring the words in a proposal that affect a decision you need to make.

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