What Does Meta- Mean?

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Meta is a word which, like so many other things, we have the ancient Greeks to thank for. When they used it, *meta* meant "beyond," "after," or "behind." The "beyond" sense of *meta* still lingers in words like *metaphysics* or *meta-economy*. But that's still not the *meta* most of us come across today.

One of the more popular uses of *meta* today is for the meaning best described by the formula "meta-X equals X about X." So, if we take the word "data" for our X, and add the prefix *meta-* to it, we get *metadata*, or "data about data." A *meta-text* is a text about texts, *metacognition* is thinking about thinking, and a *meta-joke* is a joke about jokes. The self-reflection sense of *meta* has also given rise to the use of the word as a standalone adjective, where *meta* is used to describe something that's self-reflective or self-referencing.

The self-referencing sense of *meta* seems especially popular in art. In its simplest form, a book in which a character is writing a book or a movie in which a character is making a movie can be described as *meta*. Some works are more *meta* than others—the movie *Birdman*, for example, is a movie about an actor who played a superhero in a movie and who now tries to rekindle his career in theater, and that actor is played by an actor who really did play a superhero in a movie and is now trying to rekindle his career in a movie that looks more like a play than a movie.

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a work of fiction in which the author breaks with conventions in order to show that the work is, in fact, fiction.

In the world of gaming, *meta* is used in two ways. *Meta* can be used as an acronym for "most effective tactics available," and calling something "meta" means that it's an effective way to achieve the goal of the game, whether it's to beat other players or beat the game itself. *Meta* can also be short for *metagame*, which is using information about the game, derived from the world beyond the game or its rules, to influence the outcome of the game or gain a competitive edge.
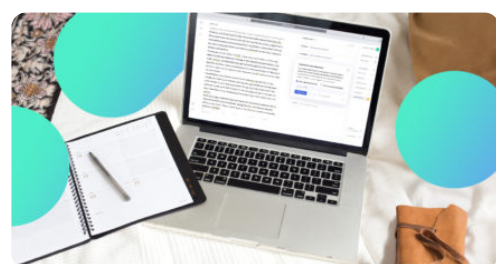
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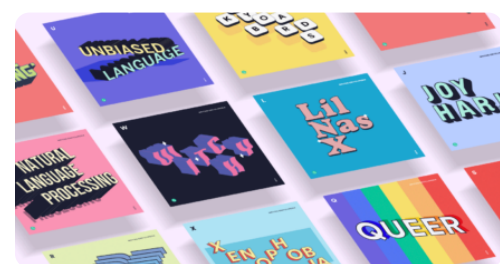
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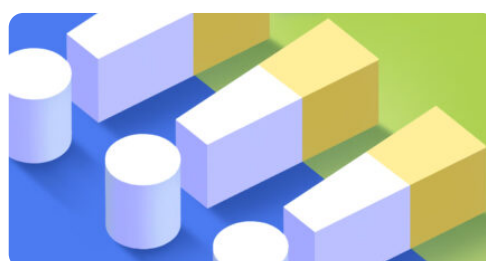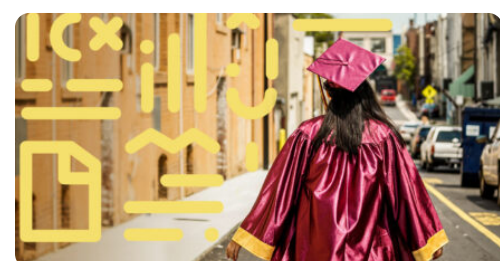

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