

An acronym (as the term is commonly used) is a term that is formed from the initial letters of some longer name and is pronounced differently than the expanded form. Examples of *acronyms* as the term is commonly used:

- FBI, which stands for *Federal Bureau of Investigation*, but is pronounced *ef-bee-I*
- NATO, which stands for *North Atlantic Treaty Organization*, but is pronounced *NAY-toe*
- IUPAC, which stands for *International Union of Pure and Applied Chemistry*, but is pronounced *I-U-pak*

An abbreviation is written differently from the expanded form but is pronounced the same. Examples:

- Mr., which stands for *mister* and is pronounced *mister*
- ft., which stands for *feet* and is pronounced *feet*
- etc., which stands for *et cetera* and is pronounced *et cetera*

Whether the form is pronounced as a “word” or as letter names or as some combination of the two is a red herring. The key difference is whether the abbreviated form is pronounced differently from the expanded form.

What Is the Difference Between an Abbreviation and an Acronym?

Abbreviations and **acronyms** are shortened forms of words or phrases. An abbreviation is typically a shortened form of words used to represent the whole (such as Dr. or Prof.) while an acronym contains a set of initial letters from a phrase that usually form another word (such as radar or scuba).

Abbreviations and acronyms are often interchanged, yet the two are quite distinct. The main point of reference is that abbreviations are merely a series of letters while acronyms form new words.

Each one allows writers to make large blocks of text easier to read. Beware that both abbreviations and acronyms are typically considered informal and should be carefully considered before including them in more formal writings.

Abbreviations or Acronyms

There's a great deal of overlap between abbreviations and acronyms. It's worth pointing out that an acronym is a type of abbreviation because acronyms are shortened forms of words and phrases.

Abbreviations

Let's take a closer look at abbreviations. As we know, an abbreviation is a shortened form of a word or phrase, such as Mr. for Mister, or hr. for hour that is still said as the full word or words.

There are millions of common abbreviations used every day. Let's take a look at some of the popular ones we see and/or use almost daily.

- When you write your address, you likely write "St." or "Ave." instead of "Street" or "Avenue".
- When you record the date, you likely abbreviate both the days of the week (Mon., Tues., Wed., Thurs., Fri., Sat., and Sun.) and the months of the year (Jan., Feb., Aug., Sept., Oct., Nov., Dec.).
- Often, we use the abbreviation "Ex." for the word "example".
- Measurements are commonly reduced to abbreviations such as "cm" for "centimeters" or "in." for "inch".
- How about "vs."? That's another popular abbreviation, shortened from the word "versus".

Tightening "December" to "Dec." is an abbreviation because "Dec." is simply a written shorthand for the full word. It's not an acronym since "Dec." isn't said as a word.

You may have wondered why some abbreviations, like those for ounce (oz) and pound (lb) use letters that aren't part of the original word. In these cases the abbreviations are based on older forms of the word.

Acronyms

An acronym, technically, must spell out another word. This is a good point of reference to help you distinguish between abbreviations and acronyms. Another good way to differentiate them is that acronyms don't just shorten words, they often simplify a long organization name, scientific term or idea.

Some acronyms create new words that are so commonly used, we forget they're actually a series of letters from a longer word or phrase. For example, when we go scuba diving, we rarely consider the fact that scuba is an acronym of self-contained underwater breathing apparatus.

Then there are **initialisms** which cause some confusion. Would you consider "VIP" to be an acronym? Technically, it's an initialism. Initialisms are a series of initial letters of words or a phrase that form an abbreviation but aren't pronounced as a word. We enunciate each letter.

NBA is another **initialism**. How about when you text "rofl"? That's another initialism, as is "BLT". Many consider initialisms to be a subset of acronyms—therefore whether you pronounce ASAP as a word or enunciate each letter, it's still an acronym—but be aware that others say it is another form of abbreviation.

Like abbreviations, acronyms and initialisms are used daily and most people can interpret the meaning of common acronyms without much thought.

Let's test our knowledge with a few more examples:

Acronyms (form new words)	Initialisms (pronounce each letter)
radar (radio detection and ranging)	ATM (automated teller machine)
scuba (self-contained underwater breathing apparatus)	NFL (National Football League)
NASA (National Aeronautics and Space Administration)	FAQ (frequently asked questions)
laser (light amplification by stimulated emission of radiation)	brb (be right back)
POTUS (President of the United States)	idk (I don't know)
gif (graphics interchange format)	a/c (air conditioning)
SIM card (subscriber identification module)	aka (also known as)
ZIP code (zone improvement plan)	fyi (for your information)
AIDS (acquired immune deficiency syndrome)	lcd (liquid crystal display)
taser (Thomas A. Swift's Electric Rifle)	ufo (unidentified flying object)

Keep it Short

Abbreviations and acronyms are shortened versions of words and phrases that help speed up our communication. Initialisms act in the same way. Before you use any type of abbreviation consider your audience; are you writing something formal or informal? Will everyone understand the meaning of your abbreviated word or letters? If so, feel free to shorten up those lengthier words with recognizable abbreviations, acronyms, and even initialisms. If you need to explain the abbreviation, write out the word or phrase in full first followed by the abbreviation in parentheses.