

# Dealing with the Second Hardest Thing in Computer Science

Thoughts on naming things for software development

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Source code for these slides can be found [on GitHub](#).

# What you'll learn today

- Why naming impacts code quality and maintainability
- How naming improves software design and architecture
- Common naming pitfalls to avoid
- Practical strategies for clear, consistent, and meaningful names\*
- Tools and techniques for better naming (AI, code review)



Transform naming from an afterthought into a deliberate practice.

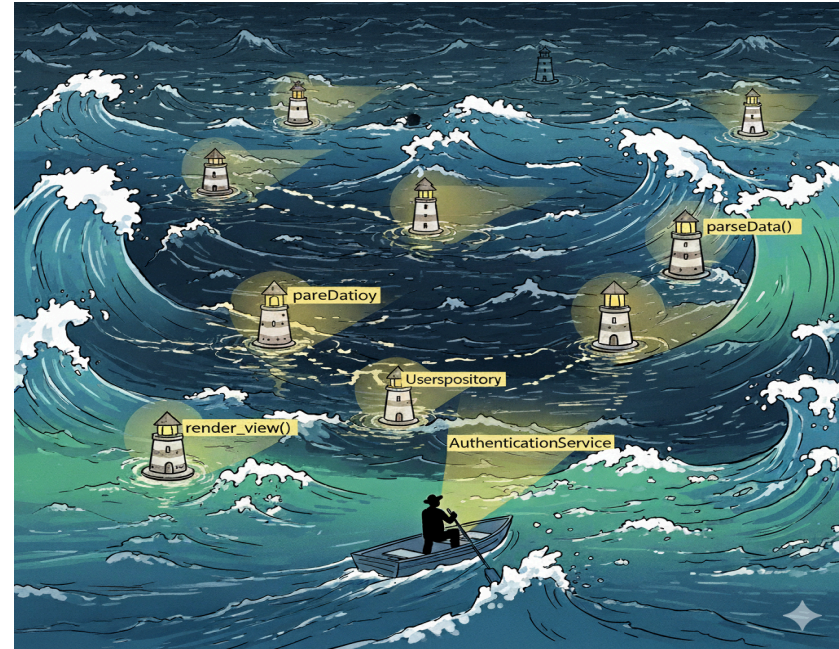
\*Despite Python examples, all the mentioned strategies are **language-agnostic**.

**“There are only two hard things in Computer Science: cache invalidation and naming things.”**

- Phil Karlton

# Why naming matters

*Navigating the codebase with good names as beacons of clarity*



# The hidden cost of poor naming

Bad names create a cascade of problems that compound over time.

## Immediate consequences:

- Longer code reviews due to unclear intent
- Debugging becomes detective work
- Extensive onboarding needed for new team members

## Long-term impact:

- Technical debt accumulation from avoidance
- Higher bug introduction rates
- Risky refactoring due to uncertainty

### The multiplication effect

Poor naming spreads confusion throughout the entire system.

# Good names pay dividends

Well-chosen names transform code from puzzles into stories.

## Development velocity:

- Code reviews focus on logic, not deciphering
- Faster component targeting during debugging
- Confident feature development

## Maintenance benefits:

- Safe and predictable refactoring
- Root cause fixes over symptom patches
- Self-documenting code



The investment mindset

Time spent on naming is not overhead—it's an investment that pays compound interest.

# Naming and good design

Illustrating benefits of thoughtful naming for software design using *function* as an example

# Following Unix philosophy

Unix philosophy specifies the golden rule for writing good a function:  
*“Do One Thing And Do It Well.”*

Finding a descriptive name for a function can inform us if we are following this rule.  
Consider a function to extract a table of regression estimates for a statistical model.  
For convenience, it also allows sorting the table by estimate.



## Naming is hard

Trying to find a name highlights that the function is doing more than one thing.

```
1 def extract_and_sort_estimates(model, sort="asc"):
2     # code to extract estimates from model
3     # code to sort table
4     pass
```



## Naming is easy

These individual functions are easier to read, understand, and test.

```
1 def extract_estimates(model):
2     # code to extract estimates from model
3     pass
4
5 def sort_estimates(table, sort="asc"):
6     # code to sort table
7     pass
```

Functions with `and` or `or` in their names are dead giveaways that they don't follow the Unix philosophy.



# Function parameter names

When it comes to writing a good function, finding a good name for a parameter can also reveal design problems.

E.g. a boolean or flag parameter name means function is doing more than one thing.

Consider a function that converts Markdown or HTML documents to PDF.



## Boolean parameter necessary

Doing more than one thing.

```
1 def convert_to_pdf(file, is_markdown=False):
2     if is_markdown:
3         # code to convert Markdown to PDF
4         pass
5
6     if not is_markdown:
7         # code to convert HTML to PDF
8         pass
```



## Boolean parameter unnecessary

Doing one thing.

```
1 def convert_md_to_pdf(file):
2     # code to convert Markdown to PDF
3     pass
4
5 def convert_html_to_pdf(file):
6     # code to convert HTML to PDF
7     pass
```

# Naming: The Do's and Don'ts

*“The beginning of wisdom is to call things by their proper name.” - Confucius*

# The Don'ts

You won't have to remember any of these rules if you follow the following principle:

**Names must be readable for the *reader*, not *author*, of code.**

# Confusion & Similarity

- **Avoid imprecise opposites**, since they can be **confusing**. E.g. parameter combination `begin/last` is worse than either `begin/end` or `first/last`.
- **Don't use hard-to-distinguish character pairs in names** (e.g., `l` and `I`, `o` and `0`, etc.). With certain fonts, `count0` and `counto` look identical.
- **Don't use similar names for entities with different meanings**. E.g. `PatientRecs` and `PatientReps` are easily confused because they are so similar. There should be at least two-letter difference: `PatientRecords` and `PatientReports`.
- **Avoid naming separate entities with homonyms**. Discussing entities named `waste` and `waist` is inevitably going to lead to confusion.
- **Don't use easily confused names**. Names that are too similar make great candidates for mistaken identity. E.g. `nn` and `nnn` are easily confused; use `n_square` and `n_cube` instead.

# Consistency & Standards

- **Don't use inconsistent abbreviations.** E.g. instead of using `numColumns` (*number of columns*) in one function and `noRows` (*number of rows*) in another, choose one abbreviation as a prefix and use it consistently.
- **Don't allow multiple English standards.** E.g. using both American and British English standards would have you constantly guessing if the variable is named (e.g.) `centre` or `center`. Adopt one standard and stick to it.
- **Don't use misleading abbreviations.** E.g., in Python, `str` conventionally refers to string type. Using `str` to mean “structure” in a function parameter will be misleading to other developers.
- **Don't let names become outdated.** Update names when functionality changes to avoid misleading future developers. E.g. if `get_means()` changes from returning precomputed values to computing on-the-fly, rename it to `compute_means()`.

# Clarity & Communication Issues

- **Don't use pop-culture references in names.** Not everyone knows them. E.g. `female_birdsong_recording` is a better variable name than `thats_what_she_said`.
- **Don't use slang.** You can't assume current or future developers to be familiar with them. E.g. `exit()` is better than `hit_the_road()`.
- **Avoid unintended meanings.** Do your due diligence to check dictionaries (especially [Urban dictionary](#)!) if the word has unintended meaning. E.g. `export_data()` is a better function name than `dump()`.
- **Don't use uncommon English words.** Stick to common parlance that most developers understand. E.g. `start_process()` is better than `commence_process()`.
- **Don't use unpronounceable names.** While this is the weakest requirement, pronounceable names enable easier verbal communication. E.g. `generate_timestamp()` is better than `genymdhms()`.

# Technical & Maintainability Issues

- **Don't misspell to save a few characters.** Remembering spelling is difficult, and remembering *correct misspelling* even more so. E.g. don't use `hilite` instead of `highlight`. The benefit is not worth the cost here.
- **Don't use commonly misspelled words in English.** Using such names for variables can, at minimum, slow you down, or, at worst, increase the possibility of making an error. E.g. is it `accumulate`, `accummulate`, `acumulate`, or `acummulate`?!
- **Don't use numeric suffixes in names to specify levels.** E.g. variable names `level1`, `level2`, `level3` are not as informative as `beginner`, `intermediate`, `advanced`.
- **Don't use unsearchable names.** Single letters and very generic terms are hard to find and replace in a codebase. E.g. parameters `a` and `f` should be `arr` and `fun`.
- **Don't prioritize grammar over clarity.** Breaking grammatical rules can improve code readability. E.g. use `fishes`, `peoples`, `feedbacks` when the plural form aids comprehension.

# The Do's

You won't have to remember any of these rules if you follow the following principle:

**Good names reveal intention and eliminate guesswork.**



# Names should be self-documenting

How good a name is can be assessed by how detailed the accompanying comment needs to be.

Poor names require more comments:      Good names are self-documenting:

```
1 # function to convert temperature
2 # from Fahrenheit to Celsius scale
3 # temp is the temperature in Fahrenheit
4 def unit_converter(temp: float):
5     pass
```

```
1 def fahrenheit_to_celsius(temp_fahrenheit: float):
2     pass
```



Tip

Good names rarely require readers to read the documentation to understand what they represent.

# Names should be specific

Generic names are widely used and acceptable for short-lived contexts. However, as scope and complexity increase, specific names become essential for clarity.

For longer loops, use meaningful names instead of `i`, `j`, `k`:

```
1 # abstruse
2 inventory[i][j]
```

```
1 # crystal clear
2 inventory[warehouse][product]
```

All variables are temporary in some sense. Calling one `tmp` is inviting carelessness.

```
1 # generic name
2 tmp = a + b
3 result = tmp * 2
```

```
1 # more descriptive
2 sum_values = a + b
3 result = sum_values * 2
```



Tip

Even when you *think* you need generic names, you are better off using more descriptive names.

## Test function names should act as a comment

Unlike regular functions, long names are less problematic for test functions because they are not visible to users or called repeatedly throughout the codebase.

```
1 # bad: test_retrieve_commands
2 # good: test_all_saved_commands_should_be_retrieved
```

# Names should be difficult to misinterpret

Try your best to misinterpret candidate names and see if you succeed.

```
1 # ambiguous - what kind of size?
2 def get_size(
3     file_path: str,
4 ) -> int:
5     pass
```

How I interpret:

*“File size in bytes on disk”*

```
1 # clear - character count!
2 def get_character_count(
3     file_path: str,
4 ) -> int:
5     pass
```

In reality:

*“Number of characters in the file content”*



Tip

Precise and unambiguous names leave little room for misconstrual.

# Names should be appropriately abstract

Find the right level of detail and domain focus—precise enough to be clear, concise enough to be readable, and focused on *what* rather than *how*.

## Use context to eliminate redundancy:

```
1 # redundant in context
2 Router.run_router()
3 BeerShelf.beer_count
```

```
1 # leverages context
2 Router.run()
3 BeerShelf.count
```

## Choose problem domain over implementation details:

```
1 # implementation domain - how it works
2 binary_search_users()
3 sql_query_products()
4
5 # data structure in name
6 bonuses_pd # pandas DataFrame
```

```
1 # problem domain - what it does
2 find_user()
3 fetch_products()
4
5 # implementation independent
6 bonuses # any data structure
```

## Find the precision sweet spot:

```
1 # too imprecise → okay → good → unnecessarily precise
2 d → days → days_since_last_accident → days_since_last_accident_floor_4_lab_23
```



Tip

Good names focus on purpose, include critical details, and remain meaningful across implementations.

# Names should maintain standards

Standards **reduce cognitive burden**: readers can reuse knowledge across contexts.

**Avoid conflicting meanings and maintain consistency:**

```
1 # inconsistent - size means different things
2 size = len(x.encode('utf-8')) # bytes
3 size = len(a)                  # elements
4
5 # inconsistent - different words, same concept
6 CreditCardAccount().retrieve_expenditure()
7 DebitCardAccount().fetch_expenditure()
```

```
1 # consistent - clear distinctions
2 byte_size = len(x.encode('utf-8'))
3 length = len(a)
4
5 # consistent - same word, same concept
6 CreditCardAccount().retrieve_expenditure()
7 DebitCardAccount().retrieve_expenditure()
```

**Follow language and domain conventions:**

```
1 # violates conventions
2 class playerEntity:
3     self.HairColor = ""
```

```
1 # follows conventions
2 class PlayerEntity:
3     self.hair_color = ""
```

**Use consistent prefixes for IDE tab completion:**

```
1 # bad - scattered when tab-completing
2 parse_json()
3 xml_reader()
4 csv_processor()
```

```
1 # good - groups related functions
2 parse_json()
3 parse_xml()
4 parse_csv()
```

Following a standard consistently is more important than *which* standard you adopt.

# Unnecessary details in names should be removed...

```
1 # okay
2 convert_to_string()
3 file_object
4 str_name # Hungarian notation
```

```
1 # better
2 to_string()
3 file
4 name
```

## Avoid redundancy

- In type names, avoid using *class*, *data*, *object*, and *type* (e.g. bad: `classShape`, good: `Shape`)
- In function names, avoid using *be*, *do*, *perform*, etc. (e.g. bad: `doAddition()`, good: `add()`)

# but important details should be kept!

```
1 # okay
2 child_height
3 password
4 id
5 address
```

```
1 # better
2 child_height_cm
3 plaintext_password
4 hex_id
5 ip_address
```

## Tip

If some information is critical to know, it should be part of the name.

# Boolean names should be clear

Names for Boolean variables or functions should make clear what true and false mean. This can be done using prefixes (**is**, **has**, **can**, etc.).

```
1 # not great
2 if child:
3     if parent_supervision:
4         watch_horror_movie = True
```

```
1 # better
2 if is_child:
3     if has_parent_supervision:
4         can_watch_horror_movie = True
```

In general, use positive terms for Booleans since they are easier to process.

```
1 # double negation - difficult
2 is_firewall_disabled = False
```

```
1 # better
2 is_firewall_enabled = True
```

But if the variable is only ever used in its false version (e.g. `is_volcano_inactive`), the negative version can be easier to work with.



Tip

Boolean variable names should convey what true or false values represent.

# Utilizing tools



# Naming limitations of linters

Linters can only do so much when it comes to naming.

## What they CAN do:

- Enforce naming conventions
- Check for reserved keywords
- Detect naming pattern violations
- Flag overly short or long names
- Ensure consistent formatting

## What they CANNOT do:

- Understand the intent behind your code
- Suggest meaningful names based on context
- Assess whether names represent what entities do
- Determine problem domain consistency
- Evaluate clarity for future developers

### The fundamental limitation

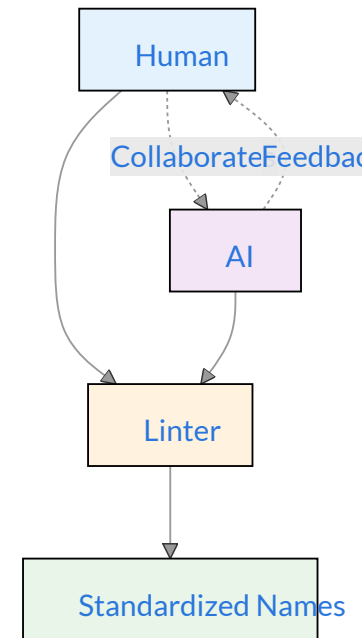
Linters can enforce *syntax* but not *semantics*. Good naming requires human understanding of both the problem and the solution.

# Generative AI tools can be valuable allies

AI tools have context of your entire codebase and can provide meaningful names.

## Why AI tools can help:

- Full context understanding of functions/classes
- Cross-domain pattern recognition
- Inconsistency detection across codebase
- Multiple naming suggestions with rationales

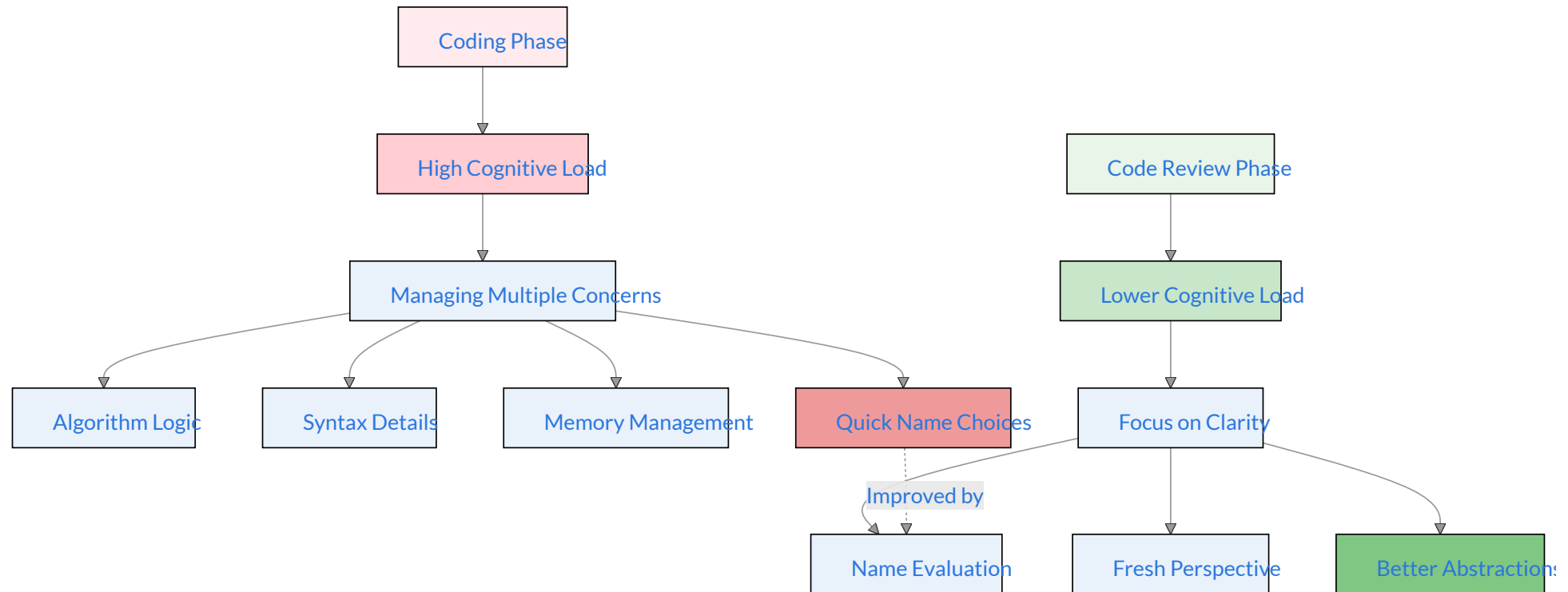


### Symbiotic Naming

Try to come up with good names yourself. Then, ask AI tools to validate, assess, or suggest improvements.

# Code Review: A fresh perspective

When coding, we operate at peak cognitive load and this mental overload makes it the worst time to choose thoughtful names.



## The Code Review Advantage

It provides the mental space needed to evaluate whether names truly capture the intent and abstraction level of code.

# Benefits of good names

*“In your name I will hope, for your name is good.” - Psalms 52:9*

# *“What’s in a name?”* Well, everything!

- Intent-revealing names make the **code easier to read**.
- Trying to find good names forces you to detach from the problem-solving mindset and to **focus on the bigger picture** that motivates this change. This is critical for thoughtful software design.
- Searching for precise names requires clarity, and seeking such clarity **improves your own understanding** of the code.
- Naming precisely and consistently **reduces ambiguities and misunderstandings**, reducing the possibility of bugs.
- Good names **reduce the need for documentation**.
- Consistent naming **reduces cognitive overload** for the developers and makes the code more maintainable.

# Naming is hard, but worth it

Invest time in good names early—they pay dividends by reducing system complexity.

**The more you do it, the easier it will get!**

*“Using understandable names is a foundational step to producing quality software.” - Al Sweigart*

# Thank You

And Happy Naming! 😊

# TL;DR Summary

## **Principle:** Names are a form of abstraction

“\*[T]he best names are those that focus attention on what is most important about the underlying entity, while omitting details that are less important.” - John Ousterhout

## **Importance:** Names are at the core of software design

If you can't find a name that provides the right abstraction for the underlying entity, the design may be unclear.

## **Properties:** Good names are precise and consistent

If a name is good, it is difficult to miss out on critical information about the entity or to misunderstand what it represents.



# ICYMI: Available casing conventions

There are various casing conventions used for software development.



Illustration (CC-BY) by Allison Horst

# Further Reading

For a more detailed discussion about how to name things, see the following references.

# References

- McConnell, S. (2004). *Code Complete*. Microsoft Press. (pp. 259-290)
- Boswell, D., & Foucher, T. (2011). *The Art of Readable Code*. O'Reilly Media, Inc. (pp. 7-31)
- Martin, R. C. (2009). *Clean Code*. Pearson Education. (pp. 17-52)
- Hermans, F. (2021). *The Programmer's Brain*. Manning Publications. (pp. 127-146)
- Ousterhout, J. K. (2018). *A Philosophy of Software Design*. Palo Alto: Yaknyam Press. (pp. 121-129)
- Goodliffe, P. (2007). *Code Craft*. No Starch Press. (pp. 39-56)
- Padolsey, J. (2020). *Clean Code in JavaScript*. Packt Publishing. (pp. 93-111)
- Thomas, D., & Hunt, A. (2019). *The Pragmatic Programmer*. Addison-Wesley Professional. (pp. 238-242)
- [Ottinger's Rules for Variable and Class Naming](#)
- For a good example of organizational naming guidelines, see [Google C++ Style Guide](#).

# For more

If you are interested in good programming and software development practices, check out my other [slide decks](#).

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