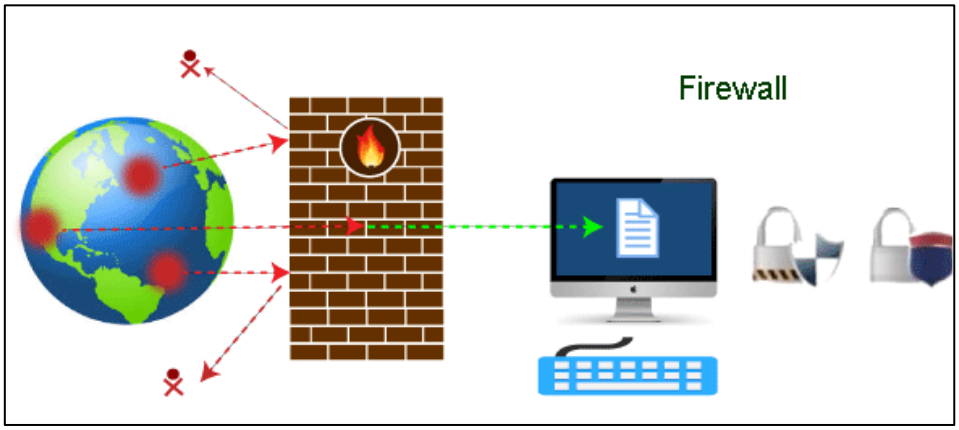
Firewall

A firewall can be defined as a special type of network security device or a software program that monitors and filters incoming and outgoing network traffic based on a defined set of security rules. It acts as a barrier between internal private networks and external sources (such as the public Internet).

The primary purpose of a firewall is to allow non-threatening traffic and prevent malicious or unwanted data traffic for protecting the computer from viruses and attacks. A firewall is a cybersecurity tool that filters network traffic and helps users block malicious software from accessing the Internet in infected computers.



Firewall: Hardware or Software

This is one of the most problematic questions whether a firewall is a hardware or software. As stated above, a firewall can be a network security device or a software program on a computer. This means that the firewall comes at both levels, i.e., hardware and software, though it's best to have both.

Each format (a firewall implemented as hardware or software) has different functionality but the same purpose. A hardware firewall is a physical device that attaches between a computer network and a gateway. For example, a broadband router. On the other hand, a software firewall is a simple program installed on a computer that works through port numbers and other installed software.

Apart from that, there are cloud-based firewalls. They are commonly referred to as FaaS (firewall as a service). A primary advantage of using cloud-based firewalls is that they can be managed centrally. Like hardware firewalls, cloud-based firewalls are best known for providing perimeter security.

Firewalls are primarily used to prevent malware and network-based attacks. Additionally, they can help in blocking application-layer attacks. These firewalls act as a gatekeeper or a barrier. They monitor every attempt between our computer and

another network. They do not allow data packets to be transferred through them unless the data is coming or going from a user-specified trusted source.

Firewalls are designed in such a way that they can react quickly to detect and counter-attacks throughout the network. They can work with rules configured to protect the network and perform quick assessments to find any suspicious activity. In short, we can point to the firewall as a traffic controller.

Some of the important risks of not having a firewall are:

Open Access

If a computer is running without a firewall, it is giving open access to other networks. This means that it is accepting every kind of connection that comes through someone. In this case, it is not possible to detect threats or attacks coming through our network. Without a firewall, we make our devices vulnerable to malicious users and other unwanted sources.

Lost or Comprised Data

Without a firewall, we are leaving our devices accessible to everyone. This means that anyone can access our device and have complete control over it, including the network. In this case, cybercriminals can easily delete our data or use our personal information for their benefit.

Network Crashes

In the absence of a firewall, anyone could access our network and shut it down. It may lead us to invest our valuable time and money to get our network working again.

Therefore, it is essential to use firewalls and keep our network, computer, and data safe and secure from unwanted sources.

Brief History of Firewall

Firewalls have been the first and most reliable component of defense in network security for over 30 years. Firewalls first came into existence in the late 1980s. They were initially designed as packet filters. These packet filters were nothing but a setup of networks between computers. The primary function of these packet filtering firewalls was to check for packets or bytes transferred between different computers.

Firewalls have become more advanced due to continuous development, although such packet filtering firewalls are still in use in legacy systems.

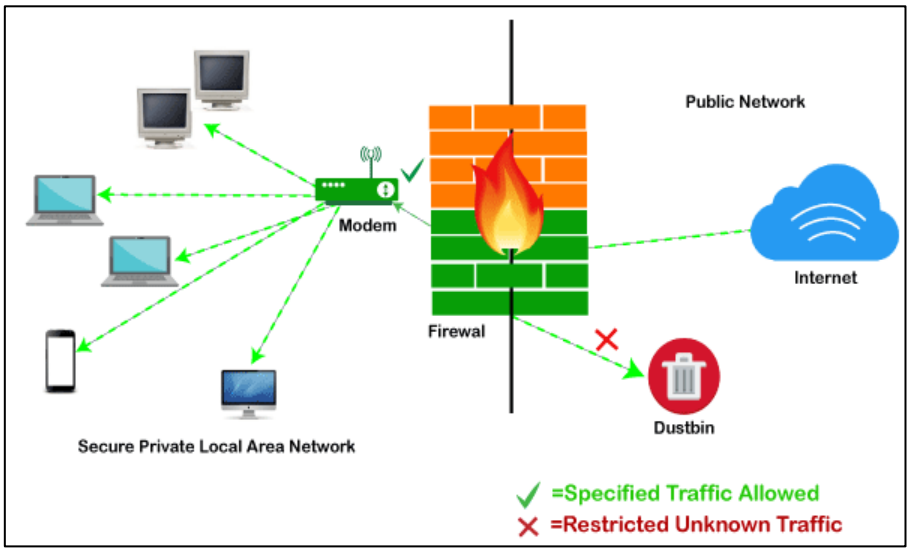
As the technology emerged, **Gil Shwed** from **Check Point Technologies** introduced the first stateful inspection firewall in 1993. It was named as FireWall-1. Back in 2000, **Netscreen** came up with its purpose-built firewall **'Appliance'**. It gained popularity and fast adoption within enterprises because of increased internet speed, less latency, and high throughput at a lower cost.

The turn of the century saw a new approach to firewall implementation during the mid-2010. The **'Next-Generation Firewalls'** were introduced by the **Palo Alto Networks**. These firewalls came up with a variety of built-in functions and capabilities, such as Hybrid Cloud Support, Network Threat Prevention, Application and Identity-Based Control, and Scalable Performance, etc. Firewalls are still getting new features as part of continuous development. They are considered the first line of defense when it comes to network security.

Working of Firewall

A firewall system analyzes network traffic based on pre-defined rules. It then filters the traffic and prevents any such traffic coming from unreliable or suspicious sources. It only allows incoming traffic that is configured to accept.

Typically, firewalls intercept network traffic at a computer's entry point, known as a port. Firewalls perform this task by allowing or blocking specific data packets (units of communication transferred over a digital network) based on pre-defined security rules. Incoming traffic is allowed only through trusted IP addresses, or sources.



Functions of Firewall

As stated above, the firewall works as a gatekeeper. It analyzes every attempt coming to gain access to our operating system and prevents traffic from unwanted or non-recognized sources.

Since the firewall acts as a barrier or filter between the computer system and other networks (i.e., the public Internet), we can consider it as a traffic controller. Therefore, a firewall's primary function is to secure our network and information by controlling network traffic, preventing unwanted incoming network traffic, and validating access by assessing network traffic for malicious things such as hackers and malware.

Generally, most operating systems (for example - Windows OS) and security software come with built-in firewall support. Therefore, it is a good idea to ensure that those options are turned on. Additionally, we can configure the security settings of the system to be automatically updated whenever available.

Firewalls have become so powerful, and include a variety of functions and capabilities with built-in features:

- Network Threat Prevention
- Application and Identity-Based Control
- Hybrid Cloud Support
- Scalable Performance
- Network Traffic Management and Control
- Access Validation
- Record and Report on Events

Limitations of Firewall

When it comes to network security, firewalls are considered the first line of defense. But the question is whether these firewalls are strong enough to make our devices safe from cyber-attacks. The answer may be "no". The best practice is to use a firewall system when using the Internet. However, it is important to use other defense systems to help protect the network and data stored on the computer. Because cyber threats are continually evolving, a firewall should not be the only consideration for protecting the home network.

The importance of using firewalls as a security system is obvious; however, firewalls have some limitations:

- Firewalls cannot stop users from accessing malicious websites, making it vulnerable to internal threats or attacks.
- Firewalls cannot protect against the transfer of virus-infected files or software.
- Firewalls cannot prevent misuse of passwords.
- Firewalls cannot protect if security rules are misconfigured.
- Firewalls cannot protect against non-technical security risks, such as social engineering.
- Firewalls cannot stop or prevent attackers with modems from dialing in to or out of the internal network.
- Firewalls cannot secure the system which is already infected.

Therefore, it is recommended to keep all Internet-enabled devices updated. This includes the latest operating systems, web browsers, applications, and other security software (such as anti-virus). Besides, the security of wireless routers should be another practice. The process of protecting a router may include options such as repeatedly changing the router's name and password, reviewing security settings, and creating a guest network for visitors.

Types of Firewall

Depending on their structure and functionality, there are different types of firewalls. The following is a list of some common types of firewalls:

- Proxy Firewall
- Packet-filtering firewalls
- Stateful Multi-layer Inspection (SMLI) Firewall
- Unified threat management (UTM) firewall
- Next-generation firewall (NGFW)
- Network address translation (NAT) firewalls

Difference between a Firewall and Anti-virus

Firewalls and anti-viruses are systems to protect devices from viruses and other types of Trojans, but there are significant differences between them. Based on the vulnerabilities, the main differences between firewalls and anti-viruses are tabulated below:

Attributes	Firewall	Anti-virus
Definition	A firewall is defined as the system which analyzes and filters incoming or outgoing data packets based on pre-defined rules.	Anti-virus is defined as the special type of software that acts as a cyber-security mechanism. The primary function of Anti-virus is to monitor, detect, and remove any apprehensive or distrustful file or software from the device.
Structure	Firewalls can be hardware and software both. The router is an example of a physical firewall, and a simple firewall program on the system is an example of a software firewall.	Anti-virus can only be used as software. Anti-virus is a program that is installed on the device, just like the other programs.
Implementation	Because firewalls come in the form of hardware and software, a firewall can be implemented either way.	Because Anti-virus comes in the form of software, therefore, Anti-virus can be implemented only at the software level. There is no possibility of implementing Anti-virus at the hardware level.

Responsibility	A firewall is usually defined as a network controlling system. It means that firewalls are primarily responsible for monitoring and filtering network traffic.	Anti-viruses are primarily responsible for detecting and removing viruses from computer systems or other devices. These viruses can be in the form of infected files or software.
Scalability	Because the firewall supports both types of implementations, hardware, and software, therefore, it is more scalable than anti-virus.	Anti-viruses are generally considered less-scalable than firewalls. This is because anti-virus can only be implemented at the software level. They don't support hardware-level implementation.
Threats	A firewall is mainly used to prevent network related attacks. It mainly includes external network threats?for example- Routing attacks and IP Spoofing.	Anti-virus is mainly used to scan, find, and remove viruses, malware, and Trojans, which can harm system files and software and share personal information (such as login credentials, credit card details, etc.) with hackers.

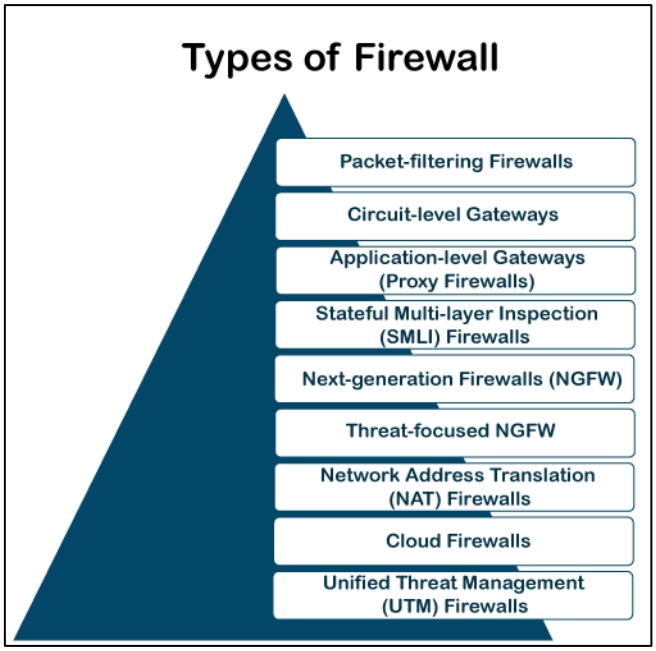
Types of Firewall

There are mainly three types of firewalls, such as **software firewalls, hardware firewalls, or both**, depending on their structure. Each type of firewall has different functionality but the same purpose. However, it is best practice to have both to achieve maximum possible protection.

A hardware firewall is a physical device that attaches between a computer network and a gateway. For example- a broadband router. A hardware firewall is sometimes referred to as an **Appliance Firewall**. On the other hand, a software firewall is a simple program installed on a computer that works through port numbers and other installed software. This type of firewall is also called a **Host Firewall**.

Besides, there are many other types of firewalls depending on their features and the level of security they provide. The following are types of firewall techniques that can be implemented as software or hardware:

- Packet-filtering Firewalls
- Circuit-level Gateways
- Application-level Gateways (Proxy Firewalls)
- Stateful Multi-layer Inspection (SMLI) Firewalls
- Next-generation Firewalls (NGFW)
- Threat-focused NGFW
- Network Address Translation (NAT) Firewalls
- Cloud Firewalls
- Unified Threat Management (UTM) Firewalls



Packet-filtering Firewalls

A packet filtering firewall is the most basic type of firewall. It acts like a management program that monitors network traffic and filters incoming packets based on configured security rules. These firewalls are designed to block network traffic IP protocols, an IP address, and a port number if a data packet does not match the established rule-set.

While packet-filtering firewalls can be considered a fast solution without many resource requirements, they also have some limitations. Because these types of firewalls do not prevent web-based attacks, they are not the safest.

Circuit-level Gateways

Circuit-level gateways are another simplified type of firewall that can be easily configured to allow or block traffic without consuming significant computing resources. These types of firewalls typically operate at the session-level of the OSI model by verifying **TCP (Transmission Control Protocol)** connections and sessions. Circuit-level gateways are designed to ensure that the established sessions are protected.

Typically, circuit-level firewalls are implemented as security software or pre-existing firewalls. Like packet-filtering firewalls, these firewalls do not check for actual data, although they inspect information about transactions. Therefore, if a data contains malware, but follows the correct TCP connection, it will pass through the gateway. That is why circuit-level gateways are not considered safe enough to protect our systems.

Application-level Gateways (Proxy Firewalls)

Proxy firewalls operate at the application layer as an intermediate device to filter incoming traffic between two end systems (e.g., network and traffic systems). That is why these firewalls are called **'Application-level Gateways'**.

Unlike basic firewalls, these firewalls transfer requests from clients pretending to be original clients on the web-server. This protects the client's identity and other suspicious information, keeping the network safe from potential attacks. Once the connection is established, the proxy firewall inspects data packets coming from the source. If the contents of the incoming data packet are protected, the proxy firewall transfers it to the client. This approach creates an additional layer of security between the client and many different sources on the network.

Stateful Multi-layer Inspection (SMLI) Firewalls

Stateful multi-layer inspection firewalls include both packet inspection technology and TCP handshake verification, making SMLI firewalls superior to packet-filtering firewalls or circuit-level gateways. Additionally, these types of firewalls keep track of the status of established connections.

In simple words, when a user establishes a connection and requests data, the SMLI firewall creates a database (state table). The database is used to store session information such as source IP address, port number, destination IP address, destination port number, etc. Connection information is stored for each session in the state table. Using stateful inspection technology, these firewalls create security rules to allow anticipated traffic.

In most cases, SMLI firewalls are implemented as additional security levels. These types of firewalls implement more checks and are considered more secure than stateless firewalls. This is why stateful packet inspection is implemented along with many other firewalls to track statistics for all internal traffic. Doing so increases the load and puts more pressure on computing resources. This can give rise to a slower transfer rate for data packets than other solutions.

Next-generation Firewalls (NGFW)

Many of the latest released firewalls are usually defined as **'next-generation firewalls'**. However, there is no specific definition for next-generation firewalls. This type of firewall is usually defined as a security device combining the features and functionalities of other firewalls. These firewalls include **deep-packet inspection (DPI),** surface-level packet inspection, and TCP handshake testing, etc.

NGFW includes higher levels of security than packet-filtering and stateful inspection firewalls. Unlike traditional firewalls, NGFW monitors the entire transaction of data, including packet headers, packet contents, and sources. NGFWs are designed in such a way that they can prevent more sophisticated and evolving security threats such as malware attacks, external threats, and advance intrusion.

Threat-focused NGFW

Threat-focused NGFW includes all the features of a traditional NGFW. Additionally, they also provide advanced threat detection and remediation. These types of firewalls are capable of reacting against attacks quickly. With intelligent security automation, threat-focused NGFW set security rules and policies, further increasing the security of the overall defense system.

In addition, these firewalls use retrospective security systems to monitor suspicious activities continuously. They keep analyzing the behavior of every activity even after the initial inspection. Due to this functionality, threat-focus NGFW dramatically reduces the overall time taken from threat detection to cleanup.

Network Address Translation (NAT) Firewalls

Network address translation or NAT firewalls are primarily designed to access Internet traffic and block all unwanted connections. These types of firewalls usually hide the IP addresses of our devices, making it safe from attackers.

When multiple devices are used to connect to the Internet, NAT firewalls create a unique IP address and hide individual devices' IP addresses. As a result, a single IP address is used for all devices. By doing this, NAT firewalls secure independent

network addresses from attackers scanning a network for accessing IP addresses. This results in enhanced protection against suspicious activities and attacks.

In general, NAT firewalls works similarly to proxy firewalls. Like proxy firewalls, NAT firewalls also work as an intermediate device between a group of computers and external traffic.

Cloud Firewalls

Whenever a firewall is designed using a cloud solution, it is known as a cloud firewall or **FaaS (firewall-as-service)**. Cloud firewalls are typically maintained and run on the Internet by third-party vendors. This type of firewall is considered similar to a proxy firewall. The reason for this is the use of cloud firewalls as proxy servers. However, they are configured based on requirements.

The most significant advantage of cloud firewalls is scalability. Because cloud firewalls have no physical resources, they are easy to scale according to the organization's demand or traffic-load. If demand increases, additional capacity can be added to the cloud server to filter out the additional traffic load. Most organizations use cloud firewalls to secure their internal networks or entire cloud infrastructure.

Unified Threat Management (UTM) Firewalls

UTM firewalls are a special type of device that includes features of a stateful inspection firewall with anti-virus and intrusion prevention support. Such firewalls are designed to provide simplicity and ease of use. These firewalls can also add many other services, such as cloud management, etc.

Which firewall architecture is best?

When it comes to selecting the best firewall architecture, there is no need to be explicit. It is always better to use a combination of different firewalls to add multiple layers of protection. For example, one can implement a hardware or cloud firewall at the perimeter of the network, and then further add individual software firewall with every network asset.

Besides, the selection usually depends on the requirements of any organization. However, the following factors can be considered for the right selection of firewall:

Size of the organization

If an organization is large and maintains a large internal network, it is better to implement such firewall architecture, which can monitor the entire internal network.

Availability of resources

If an organization has the resources and can afford a separate firewall for each hardware piece, this is a good option. Besides, a cloud firewall may be another consideration.

Requirement of multi-level protection

The number and type of firewalls typically depend on the security measures that an internal network requires. This means, if an organization maintains sensitive data, it is better to implement multi-level protection of firewalls. This will ensure data security from hackers.