Golf Terms Explained

Simon Fagan Golf | Printable glossary

New to golf, or just curious about a word you have heard? You are in the right place. This guide explains common golf terms in plain English, with simple examples to help you feel more at home on the course.

You do not need to memorise them all. Keep this page handy, look up a word when you need it, and enjoy learning as you go.

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The course

Teeing area The starting area for a hole. It is the rectangle between the two tee markers, extending two club-lengths behind them. Choose tees that suit your experience and distance.

Fairway The shorter-cut grass that usually provides the main route from the teeing area towards the green.

Rough The longer grass beside the fairway or around other parts of the course. It can make clean contact with the ball more difficult.

Green The closely mown putting surface containing the hole. This is where you will usually use your putter.

Bunker A specially prepared area of sand that adds a challenge to the hole. You may also hear it called a sand trap.

Hole The cup you are trying to get the ball into. The word also means the whole stretch from a particular teeing area to its green, as in “the first hole”.

Penalty area A body of water or another area defined by the course committee, normally marked red or yellow. You may usually play the ball as it lies without penalty, if safe, or take a permitted relief option for one penalty stroke. Red areas offer an extra lateral-relief option. No-play zones have additional restrictions.

Out of bounds (OB) Ground outside the course boundary, often marked by white stakes or lines. Your ball is OB only when all of it is outside the boundary. Normally, add one penalty stroke and play again from where you made the previous stroke. Do not simply drop beside where it went out. Some courses use a specific alternative Local Rule, so check before playing.

Equipment

Driver A large-headed club designed mainly for long shots from a tee. You do not have to use it on every hole.

Irons Numbered clubs used for many shots towards the green. Within a typical set, higher-numbered irons generally send the ball higher and a shorter distance.

Wedge A club with plenty of loft, used for shorter shots, higher shots and many shots around the green. Pitching and sand wedges are common examples.

Putter The club designed mainly to roll the ball along the ground, especially on the green.

Hybrid A club combining features of a wood and an iron. Many golfers find it easier to launch than a long iron.

Tee The small peg that holds your ball above the ground for a shot from the teeing area. Golfers also use “the tee” as shorthand for the starting area of a hole.

The swing and shots

Address Your set-up position before starting a shot. You will hear a coach say “at address” when talking about how you stand and position the club.

Stance The position of your feet as you prepare to swing, including how far apart they are and where they point.

Alignment Where your clubface and body are aimed in relation to your intended target line.

Approach shot A shot played towards the green, with the aim of leaving the ball on or close to the putting surface.

Chip A short shot near the green that usually flies a little way and then rolls towards the hole.

Pitch A short shot that generally flies higher and travels farther through the air than a chip, with less roll relative to its flight.

Putt A shot intended to roll the ball towards the hole, usually played with a putter on the green. You can putt from off the green too.

Slice A shot that curves noticeably to the right for a right-handed golfer, or to the left for a left-handed golfer.

Hook A shot that curves noticeably to the left for a right-handed golfer, or to the right for a left-handed golfer.

Scoring and etiquette

Stroke A forward swing made with the intention of hitting the ball. If you try to hit it and miss, that still counts as a stroke. A practice swing is not a stroke.

Par The benchmark number of strokes for a hole. Most holes are par 3, par 4 or par 5. It is a reference point, not a score you need to achieve as a beginner.

Birdie A score of one stroke under par on a hole. Taking 3 on a par-4 hole is a birdie.

Eagle A score of two strokes under par on a hole. Taking 3 on a par-5 hole is an eagle.

Bogey A score of one stroke over par on a hole. Taking 5 on a par-4 hole is a bogey.

Double bogey A score of two strokes over par on a hole. Taking 6 on a par-4 hole is a double bogey.

Handicap A measure of demonstrated playing ability that helps golfers of different standards compete fairly. The strokes you receive depend on the course, tees and format being played.

Fore! The warning shout used when a ball could hit someone. Shout it loudly and immediately if there is a risk. Always wait until people ahead are safely out of range before playing.

Divot A piece of turf removed by a golf shot, or the mark left behind. Follow the course's instructions for replacing the turf or filling the mark.

Pitch mark A small dent made when a ball lands on the green. Repair yours carefully with a pitch-mark tool, and ask someone to show you the technique if you are unsure.

Ready golf In stroke play, playing when you are ready, even if you are not farthest from the hole, when it is safe and responsible to do so. It helps keep the round moving without rushing anyone.

Provisional ball An extra ball played to save time when your original may be OB or lost outside a penalty area. Clearly announce it as "provisional" before playing. It is not a free second attempt; whether it counts depends on what happens to the original.

Keep learning, one step at a time

Use this guide alongside your beginner lessons and your first rounds. If a word is unfamiliar, ask. Every golfer started somewhere, and understanding a little more each time will help you enjoy the game.

These are beginner-friendly explanations, not the full Rules of Golf. For a specific situation, check the course's Local Rules and the official R&A guidance on penalty areas, out of bounds and provisional balls, and pace of play.

First Round Ready terms

These entries follow the checklist from booking through playing your first round.

Round A session of golf on the course. A round commonly covers nine or 18 holes.

Par-3 course A course made up of par-3 holes. The holes are usually shorter than those on a full-length course.

Tee time The reserved time for your group to start its round. Arrive early enough to check in and warm up.

Cart fee The charge for using a golf cart. Ask whether it is included in the price when you book.

Golf shop The course shop, often called the pro shop. It is usually where you check in, pay, or pick up rental clubs.

Tee off Hit the first shot on a hole from the teeing area.

First tee The starting area for the first hole your group is scheduled to play. See Teeing area.

Forward tees A set of tee markers that makes the course play shorter. Choose tees that suit how far you hit the ball.

Ball marker A small, flat object, such as a coin, used to mark your ball’s spot on the green before you lift it.

Divot repair tool A small tool used to repair dents left by balls landing on the green. See Pitch mark.

Ball mark Another name for a pitch mark, the dent a ball leaves when it lands on the green.

Putting line The path a golfer intends the ball to roll along toward the hole. Walk around it when you can.

Rake a bunker Smooth the footprints and marks you leave in the sand after playing a bunker shot.

Pick up Lift your ball and stop playing the hole. In a casual practice round, this can help your group keep moving.

Beginner Course | Swing and contact

Backswing The part of the swing that takes the club away from the ball before it changes direction.

Downswing / forward swing The downswing moves the club from the top toward the ball. The lesson uses forward swing for the motion toward and through the ball.

Grip How you place your hands on the club. The same word also means the covering on the handle.

Lead side / trail side Your lead side is nearer the target at address. Your trail side is farther away. For a right-handed golfer, the left side leads.

Ball position Where the ball sits relative to your feet at address, such as near the center of your stance.

Pivot The turning motion of your body during the swing. The course rehearses it with a club across the shoulders.

Pressure shift The change in how firmly you press into the ground through each foot as you swing.

Swing sequence How the motion of the hips, chest, arms, and club is coordinated. In the lesson, those movements overlap as you swing through.

Wrist hinge / wrist action Hinge is the angle that forms between your lead arm and the club shaft as you swing back. Wrist action includes how your wrists move through the rest of the swing.

Clubface / sweet spot The clubface is the surface that strikes the ball. The sweet spot is the area near its center where a strike typically feels most solid.

Heel / toe The heel is the part of the clubhead nearest the shaft. The toe is the part farthest from it.

Ground contact / ball-first contact Ground contact is where the club brushes or strikes the turf. On a ball-first iron shot, the club strikes the ball before contacting the turf on the target side.

Three-tee drill Two outside tees form a gate for the clubhead. Start without a ball.
Clip the middle tee with an iron, then brush the grass just beyond it on the target side.
Once you can repeat that, put a ball where the middle tee was and strike it before the turf.

Half swing / partial swing A shorter swing used to practice control or hit a shorter shot. A half swing is a common practice cue for shortening the motion.

Two-knuckle grip check The course cue to look down at address and see two knuckles on your lead hand after placing it on the club.

Top of the backswing / transition The top is where the backswing ends. Transition is the change from swinging back to swinging down.

Unhinge / re-hinge Unhinge means letting the wrist angle open as the club swings through. Re-hinge means letting the wrists bend again on the follow-through side.

Follow-through / balanced finish The follow-through is the motion after the club passes the ball. A balanced finish means you can hold your ending position without stumbling.

Hitting mat A practice surface that stands in for turf. For the three-tee drill on a mat, set the tees on its surface.

Next Level Skills | Putting and chipping

Tap-in A very short putt left near the hole.

Lag putt A longer putt played mainly to leave an easy next putt.

Leave Where the ball stops after a shot, especially how far away it leaves the next putt.

Break / read Break is how a putt curves because of slope. Your read is your judgment of how it will roll at the speed you choose.

Start line The direction the ball initially travels. A breaking putt can start away from the hole and curve toward it.

Pace / distance control Pace is the speed of a putt. Distance control is your ability to roll the ball the intended distance.

Putting gate Two markers set apart to make an opening. Rolling the ball through it helps you check your start line.

Putt out / hole out Putt out means continue putting until the ball is in the cup. Hole out means finish by getting it in the cup with any club.

Three-putt Taking three putts to finish a hole.

Up-and-down Getting the ball into the hole in two strokes from off the green, usually with one short shot and one putt.

Fringe The narrow strip of slightly longer grass around the putting green.

Landing spot / landing zone The spot or area where you want the ball to touch down first.

Rollout / release Rollout is how far the ball rolls after landing. In these challenges, release refers to that forward movement after landing.

Short-sided A situation where you have very little green between your ball and the hole, leaving limited room for the ball to land and roll.

Conversion Finishing the scoring opportunity you created, such as making the putt after a good chip.

Next Level Skills | Ball flight and clubs

Lie / clean lie A lie is how and where the ball is sitting. A clean lie gives the club a clear path to the ball, as on closely cut grass.

Heavy / thin / topped A heavy strike catches the ground before the ball. A thin strike catches the ball low on the face and often flies lower than intended. A topped shot catches the upper part of the ball and usually stays near the ground.

Loft How much the clubface tilts back from vertical. More loft generally helps the ball launch higher.

Trajectory / ball flight The path, height, and curve of a shot in the air.

Carry / total distance Carry is the distance from the starting point to the first landing. Total distance includes what happens after landing.

Required carry The distance the ball must fly to get past a feature such as a bunker or the front edge of a green.

Carry window / finish window A carry window defines acceptable first landings. A finish window defines where the ball should come to rest.

Stock shot / stock carry A stock shot is your usual, repeatable shot with a club. Stock carry is how far that shot typically flies before landing.

Distance gap / overlap A gap is the difference between two clubs' typical carry distances. Overlap occurs when some shots from both clubs carry similar distances.

Short irons / long irons Short irons are higher-numbered irons generally used for shorter shots. Long irons are lower-numbered irons generally used for longer shots.

Fairway wood A club such as a 3-wood or 5-wood designed for longer shots from the turf or a tee.

Tee height and ball position: Driver vs. iron
Driver: ball near lead heel, half above the crown. Iron: tee just above the grass; ball first.
Tempo The overall rhythm and timing of the swing.

Impact tape A marking strip applied to the clubface to show where the ball struck it.

Next Level Skills | Strategy and progress

Target corridor A lane of acceptable shots, often used to represent the playable width of a fairway or approach.

Aim point The specific spot you use to direct your setup or start your shot.

Safe miss / costly miss A safe miss leaves a manageable next shot. A costly miss can force a difficult recovery or bring a penalty into play.

Positional tee shot A tee shot planned to leave a useful location or angle for the next shot.

Layup A shot intentionally played short of a hazard or the green to leave a more manageable next shot.

Run-up A low shot designed to land short of the target and roll toward it.

Fairway finder A controlled tee shot chosen to improve the chances of finishing in a playable position.

Recovery shot A shot played from trouble to get back to a position where you can continue normally.

Shot pattern / dispersion The way a group of shots spreads out around the target. It shows both where you usually miss and how far apart the shots finish.

Proximity How close the ball finishes to the hole or another stated target.

Scratch golfer / plus handicap A scratch golfer has a Handicap Index around zero. A plus Handicap Index indicates demonstrated ability better than scratch.

Practice station A designated spot or setup for one attempt within a challenge.

Baseline / retest A baseline is a starting result. A retest repeats the challenge under comparable conditions to see what changed.

Carry error The difference between intended carry and actual carry. Absolute carry error measures the size of the miss whether the ball lands short or long.