

AA motor vehicle glossary of terms | AA Cars

Not sure what's meant by a particular car term? Our extensive motor vehicle glossary has it covered.

Cars are complicated machines with hundreds of specialist terms to describe their parts, mechanisms and features.

It can be confusing to come across a term you've never heard before. And unless you're an expert, it's likely this will happen to every driver from time to time.

Arranged in alphabetical order, our comprehensive glossary aims to help whenever you come across an unknown term. If you're looking for something specific, scroll down to find out more.

A

A-pillar/post: The two vertical struts that sit either side of the windscreen and support it. Some A-pillars are split in 2 to improve visibility. Behind the A-pillars you can find B-pillars and C-pillars, while some large cars also come with D-pillars.

ABS: Antilock Braking System. An electronic system that prevents the wheels from locking during emergency braking. It helps improve steering control and reduce the distance it takes to come to a stop.

ACC: Adaptive Cruise Control. A system that monitors traffic ahead and reduces or increases the car's speed based on the flow of traffic, keeping a safe distance in the process.

Adaptive headlights: Lights that are not in a fixed position and can swivel when cornering, providing greater visibility.

AdBlue: A mixture of Urea and deionised water that when injected into the exhaust reduces NOx.

AEB: Autonomous Emergency Braking: An important safety system that steps in automatically to brake the car in an emergency in order to avoid a potential collision. Some systems can also steer the car as well as brake.

Airbag: A bag designed to protect vehicle occupants from injury in the event of a crash, inflating upon a heavy enough impact. Airbags can be found throughout the interior and deflate immediately following inflation, absorbing the impact as they do so.

Air-conditioning: A system that cools the temperature of your car's interior down.

Alcantara: A suede-like material used mainly in sporty and premium vehicles.

Alternator: Converts mechanical energy from the engine into electrical current for the 12-volt battery, which powers the vehicle's electrical systems.

Android Auto: A connectivity function that allows you to mirror your phone screen onto your car's infotainment system. Most require you to plug into your car, but some work wirelessly with Bluetooth.

Antifreeze: A liquid in the coolant of an engine, normally based on ethylene Glycol, which lowers the freezing point.

Apple CarPlay: Apple's version of Android Auto.

Automatic Transmission: A gearbox that shifts through gears automatically, removing the need for a manual clutch. In some automatic cars, there's still the option to manually change gear.

AWD: All-Wheel Drive. When power is available at all 4 wheels. AWD is a four-wheel drive system more often found on passenger cars and SUVs and is geared towards providing better road handling rather than off-road capability.

Auxiliary drivebelt: A belt which is driven off a crankshaft pulley and used to turn parts such as the alternator, water pump and power steering pump.

B

B7: Diesel fuel with a maximum seven per cent of biofuel.

B-pillar: Vertical struts running from the roof to the window line of a vehicle, between the front and rear side windows. These provide strength to the middle of the vehicle.

Blind spot monitoring: A system that uses cameras that can detect if a vehicle is in your blind spot. A light or audible sound usually alerts you, and can even stop you changing lanes to prevent collisions. It can also be known as blind spot warning.

Brake fluid: Used to operate hydraulic brakes. This has a limited life span, so needs changing periodically.

Brake discs and pads: These can either be found on the front or back axle, or both. The discs rotate with the wheels and the pads are clamped onto the discs using brake callipers when the vehicle needs to slow down or stop, operated by the driver.

Bumper: Situated at the front and rear of the vehicle under the lights. It's now quite often made from a plastic material and colour matched to the rest of the vehicle.

BEV: Battery Electric vehicle see 'EV'.

Brake Booster: A Vacuum chamber that assists braking performance when pressing the brake pedal.

C

Cam Belt: Also referred to as a timing belt, this toothed belt is used to keep the valve gear and other internal engine components in time. This belt requires replacement periodically please refer to your service documentation.

Catalytic converter: Converts harmful gas produced as a result of the combustion process into less harmful emissions when fitted to the exhaust system of an engine.

C-pillar: The third strut running from the roof to the waistline of a vehicle. On saloons and coupes, the C-pillar is the final post and supports the rear window.

Charge post: Commonly found in public parking areas e.g. Motorway Service areas used to charge electric cars.

CCS: Stands for Combined Charging system and is a type of fast charging Plug used mainly on Battery Electric vehicles.

Chademo: is an abbreviation of "CHARge de MOve" and refers to a method of fast charging used on some Battery Electric vehicles.

Climate control: Having climate control in your vehicle means that the passenger compartment can be kept at a comfortable temperature regardless of the outside temperature. The moisture in the air is removed, helping to de-mist the windows too.

Clutch: A mechanical device which engages and disengages power from an engine to a gearbox.

Coupé: A 2-door car with a fixed roof, often shorter and more steeply angled at the rear than its saloon equivalent, giving it a sporty look.

CO₂: Carbon dioxide. An exhaust emission, measured in grams produced per kilometre (g/km) driven. CO₂ emissions are used to work out car tax on those registered before April 2017, and on new cars in the first year. Vehicles that produce more CO₂ will pay more in tax.

Coolant: All modern car and light goods vehicle engines contain coolant, which is now quite specific in its application; it should only be filled with the manufacturer's recommended type for that vehicle.

There shouldn't be any loss of coolant from the vehicle unless there is a problem.

Crossover: A vehicle class between small car and SUV. Crossovers are like SUVs in styling. but are based on a car platform.

Cruise control: A system that keeps the car at a speed set by the driver (see also ACC).

Cylinder: The part of the engine where petrol or diesel is burned and turned into power. Cars can have anywhere from 2 to 16 cylinders.

D

Dampers: American name for shock absorbers. Suspension parts that depress the impact energy of the car, rising and falling as it travels.

DCT: Dual clutch transmission as the name suggests this is an automatic gearbox which consists of 2 gear sets odd and even with 2 electronically controlled clutches.

Diesel engine: An internal combustion engine that runs on diesel fuel. Diesel engines don't use spark plugs to ignite the fuel – instead, the fuel is compressed in the cylinders until it reaches a temperature hot enough to trigger combustion.

Diesel Exhaust fluid (DEF): Same as Adblue but in some countries referred to as this

Differential: A device that allows the driven wheels of a car to turn at different speeds, splitting engine torque between the wheels so that additional torque can be sent to a particular wheel to improve traction.

Displacement: see 'CCS'.

DPF: Diesel Particulate Filter. Found in most modern diesel cars, the filter traps soot to help reduce emissions. This is then burned off later as part of a regeneration of the DPF.

DRL: Daytime Running Lights or Daytime Lamps. Lights fitted to the car that switch on automatically at the front whenever the vehicle is in operation. This increases the visibility of the vehicle to other road users. Since February 2011, European legislation has required DRLs to be fitted to all new passenger cars and light goods vehicles.

Dry weight: The weight of an empty vehicle, without any consumables such as fuel, oil and water, and with no occupants or cargo.

DSC: Dynamic Stability Control, See Electronic Stability Control (ESC) or Electronic Stability Program (ESP).

DSG: Direct-Shift Gearbox. The name for Volkswagen Group's dual-clutch automatic gearbox.

Dual fuel: A car that can run on one or more different types of fuel. LPG/Petrol conversion is the most common. Sometimes called bi-fuel, too.

E

E5 and E10 - A biofuel made up of regular unleaded and ethanol – the number relates to the percentage of the latter in the fuel.

eCall: Emergency Call: A safety technology that can automatically call the emergency services if your car is involved in a crash.

EGR: Exhaust Gas Recirculation: A method of controlling the amount of nitrogen oxide (NOx) produced in the combustion process.

Engine mounts: Usually made of metal and rubber, these hold the engine in place and reduce the vibrations travelling into the chassis.

Electronic parking brake: A modern replacement for the handbrake. A button operates a motor or motors which lock the rear brakes when parked. In an emergency situation, the button applies the ABS until the vehicle is stopped, then locks the rear brakes.

Engine auto stop start system: This automatically stops the engine when the vehicle isn't moving, then re-starts it when the driver wants to set off. This helps reduce exhaust emissions.

Engine warning light: Also known as the Engine Management Light (EML). This light comes on if there's a fault with the engine or its controls which is likely to have an effect on exhaust emissions.

ESC: Electronic Stability Control. An electronic program that applies the brakes to a specific wheel when a loss of control is detected, to improve safety. Also known as Dynamic Stability Control (DSC) or Electronic Stability Program (ESP).

Estate cars: Essentially a stretched version of a conventional car. They're usually very practical, with a spacious boot. Manufacturers have various names for them, such as Touring, Avant and Sports Touring.

EV: Electric Vehicle. A common way to refer to an electric car.

F

Fast idle: The speed (revolutions per minute) when the engine has been started up from cold. It's a little higher until it warms up.

FDSH: Full Dealer Service History. As FSH (see below) but when the services have all been carried out at a main dealer. May also be seen as FMDSH and appreciated for the brand, e.g FFSH is Full Ford Service History.

FSH: Full Service History. Often seen in used car adverts to show a full log of regular maintenance and annual service stamps.

Fuel injection: Fuel injection is an efficient way of delivering fuel to the engine. Early systems were mechanical, but later became electronically controlled. The most modern versions are high pressure direct injection systems which deliver fuel directly into the combustion chamber.

FWD: Front Wheel Drive. When engine power and torque is sent to the front wheels only.

Four-wheel-drive (4x4): Describes a transmission that delivers drive to all 4 wheels. The term is often used to describe vehicles fitted with off-road capable four-wheel-drive systems.

G

GPS: Global Positioning System. The network of satellites that provides the location and time information used by a vehicle's Satellite Navigation (Sat Nav) system.

Gross weight: The kerb weight of a vehicle or trailer plus the maximum load that can be carried safely for use on the road, including cargo and trailers.

GT: Grand Tourer. Usually a high-performance or luxury vehicle that's been designed for long-distance driving.

H

Hatchback: A car with a boot lid that opens upwards and includes a glass rear window. On a saloon or coupe, the glass remains fixed in place when the boot is opened.

HBA: High Beam Assist: A driver assistance technology that can automatically dip your car's full beam lighting to avoid dazzling other drivers.

HP: Horsepower. A measurement of a car's power. Can also be measured in brake horse power (BHP), PS (a German term) or kilowatts (kW).

HID: High intensity discharge headlamps have 2 tungsten electrodes and the light chamber is filled with noble gas. An arc is fired between the 2 electrodes in the noble gas chamber, which greatly intensifies visible light from the arc.

HPI Check: A used vehicle history check that provides a report to determine if the car has been stolen, damaged in an accident, written off or clocked. A vital thing to do before buying a car.

Hybrid: A vehicle that's powered by both a combustion engine and electric motors.

HUD: Head-Up Display. A projector that can beam key information onto the screen of the windscreen – including speed and traffic sign.

I

ICE: Internal Combustion Engine vehicle. Acronym increasingly used to differentiate vehicles purely powered by petrol or diesel from electric or hybrid vehicles. ICE is also an initialism used by enthusiasts for In Car Entertainment.

ISG: Integrated Starter Generator: An ISG replaces a conventional starter motor, generator and flywheel to offer a smoother stop-start system.

ISOFIX: The international standard attachment for fitting child car seats safely. The seat is fixed to anchor points in the car, rather than just fastened with a seatbelt.

Inverter: An inverter works in the same way in a hybrid or battery electric car by converting the direct current (DC) of the Battery into alternating current (AC) for the electric motor and vice versa.

J

Jack: A small hydraulic or mechanical device used to lift part of a vehicle, usually a corner or front or back. An axle stand should be used as a safeguard in case the jack fails.

Judder: A severe, low frequency vibration.

K

Kerb weight: The weight of a vehicle including fluids such as fuel, oil and water. In some standards it includes 75kg for a driver. The most accurate measure of how much a vehicle actually weighs.

KESSEY: Keyless Entry, Start and Exit System: A system that allows you to get into and start your car without having to press or turn the key.

KPH: Kilometres Per Hour. The number of kilometres a vehicle can travel at a constant speed in one hour. Used in many countries, though Miles Per Hour (MPH) is also used in the UK.

L

Leaf-spring suspension: A simple suspension system made up of one or more springy metal strips clamped together.

LED: Light Emitting Diode. A type of light source that requires less power to run than conventional filament bulbs. Used on many modern cars for low-beam headlights, brake lights, indicators and daylight running lights.

Limousine: Used to describe a long-wheel-based luxury car, usually driven by a chauffeur.

LKAS: Lane Keep Assist: An autonomous system that can lightly steer your car to keep it in its lane. Usually accompanied by a warning, such as a sound or vibration through the steering wheel.

LPG: Liquid Petroleum Gas. A mixture of propane and butane that can be used as a vehicle fuel, though it's not widely used. It's considered a 'greener' alternative to petrol because less exhaust CO₂ is produced.

LSD: Limited Slip Differential. A system that can distribute power to a particular wheel to maximise traction and grip. Generally fitted to high performance vehicles.

LWB: Long Wheelbase. A lengthened version of an existing vehicle chassis, often used to describe long commercial vehicles. Sometimes it describes limousine versions of luxury vehicle models.

M

MacPherson strut: A type of compact suspension where the shock absorber, spring and steering pivot are contained in a single unit.

Mennekes: Is a type of Plug used on Plug-in and Battery Electric vehicles. Also referred to as Type 2

MHEV: Mild-hybrid Electric Vehicle. Also called mild-hybrids, it's a system increasingly being used in new petrol and diesel cars to maximise efficiency by pairing an engine with a small electric motor and battery.

Monocoque chassis: Widely adopted structure of modern cars where the body supports the car's load, rather than relying on a separate chassis.

MPG: Miles Per Gallon. The number of miles a vehicle can travel per gallon of fuel consumed.

MPH: Miles Per Hour. The number of miles a vehicle can travel at a constant speed in 1 hour.

MPV: Multi-Purpose Vehicle. Widely considered to be the most practical car on sale today. They're often referred to as 'people carriers', as that's what they do best. They're usually very roomy, have seven seats and are ideal for family duties.

Multi-link suspension: A type of suspension using 3 or more lateral arms and 1 or more longitudinal arms, allowing good ride and handling. This type of suspension is more expensive and complex than others.

N

Nearside: The nearest side to the kerb (or the passenger side of a vehicle).

Naturally aspirated: An engine that makes do without a turbocharger or supercharger.

NCAP: New Car Assessment Programme. This is a star rating given to new vehicles based on their performance in safety tests and the safety equipment fitted. Vehicles are awarded 1 to 5 stars, with 5 being the safest.

NVH: Noise, Vibration and Harshness. A measure of the noise and vibration characteristics of vehicles as well as a subjective measure of the quality of the ride. Manufacturers spend a lot of time developing NVH for maximum comfort and refinement.

NOx: Nitrogen Oxide a by-product of the fuel burn process, a harmful gas found in the exhaust.

O

Octane: Short for octane rating, which describes the level of compression a fuel can withstand before detonating. High octane fuels are used in high performance petrol engines.

Odometer: Device used to record mileage throughout a vehicle's lifetime. Can be clocked (reducing the miles) or replaced, so it's always worth verifying mileage with a vehicle history check.

OEM: Original Equipment Manufacturer: A term often used to refer to original manufacturer parts, as opposed to aftermarket ones.

Offside: The side furthest away from the kerb, once you're sat in the vehicle.

Oversteer: A scenario where the rear wheels lose grip as the car turns a corner, increasing the possibility of a slide.

P

Petrol Engine: A type of internal combustion engine that uses petroleum fuel.

PHEV: Plug-in Hybrid Electric Vehicle. A type of hybrid vehicle with a larger battery that gives better range in pure electric power, usually between 20 and 40 miles. Unlike a standard hybrid, these vehicles have to be plugged in to make the most of their efficiency.

Platform: The base components of a car including its chassis, floor pan, suspension and steering system. A platform can be adapted to suit a host of cars – from superminis through to SUVs – and can enable different powertrains, including electrified options alongside petrol and diesel.

Power steering: Steering that's aided by electric or hydraulic motors. This reduces the effort required by the driver to turn the wheels, particularly at low speed. Some systems have fluid reservoirs that should be periodically checked.

PS: A slightly different measure of engine power output to BHP. PS comes from the German term 'Pferdestärke' meaning 'horse strength'.

Privacy glass: Another term for tinted windows.

Q

Q Plate: A registration issued by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency when a car's age or identity isn't known. Often used on kit cars.

R

Range: The number of miles a vehicle can travel, usually on a tank of fuel. In reference to an electric vehicle (EV), it's how far the car can be driven before needing to stop to charge.

Range-extender: An electric vehicle that also features a 'back-up' petrol engine for longer journeys.

Recall: When a manufacturer needs to bring a vehicle back in for extra work. Usually safety related.

Regenerative braking: An energy recovery system used in most electric and hybrid cars. 'Regen' helps to extend range and improve efficiency. It can also help to slow the vehicle down, and in some cases bring the car to a complete stop, in the same way as usual braking.

RHD: Right Hand Drive: A vehicle with its steering wheel on the right-hand side of the vehicle.

Road tax band: Your road tax band determines how much annual tax needs to be paid on your car. In the UK, bands range from 'A' (least tax payable) to 'M' (most tax payable). Up until April 2017, it was based on CO₂ emissions, but since then the tax band only applies on the first year of registration, before reverting to a standardised fee.

RPM: Revolutions Per Minute. A way of measuring how fast an engine is operating at any given moment. It shows how many times the engine's crankshaft makes a full rotation every minute.

RWD: Rear Wheel Drive. When power from the engine is sent to the rear wheels only. Often used on sports cars.

S

Saloon: Often sleeker models, saloons have 4 doors, which have a sloping rear window that levels off to leave the 'boot' area. Because of how they're shaped, it's only this part of the boot that opens and the glass remains in place – unlike a hatchback.

Sat nav/Satellite navigation: A system that uses satellites to dictate the vehicle's position and then calculate a route to a particular location.

Selective Catalytic Reduction (SCR): is an emissions control technology system that injects a liquid-reductant agent (AdBlue) through a special catalyst into the exhaust stream of a diesel engine.

Shock absorbers: Suspension parts that depress the impact energy of the car, rising and falling as it travels.

Speedometer: The display on a car's dashboard that shows the vehicle's speed. It may also show how many miles the vehicle has travelled since it was first driven (see odometer).

Starter motor: An electrical motor which is operated by the ignition to turn an engine over in order for it to start.

SUV: Sports Utility Vehicle. High-riding models that are considered to be larger than crossovers, and are often fitted with a four-wheel drive system. They commonly come with 7 seats, but 5-seaters are available too.

Supercharger: An air compressor used to increase the pressure or density of air entering an engine. Different to a turbocharger, which is instead powered by the exhaust system. They're powered mechanically by a belt or chain.

T

TCS: Traction Control System. An electronic system that can limit the amount of slip on a car's driven wheels, improving safety and traction.

TFT: A digital screen used to display information about the car's functions and controls.

Torque: Measured in pounds per foot (lb ft) or Newton Metres (NM) at a given number of revolutions per minute, torque is the measure of how much 'twisting force' is available within an engine.

TPMS: Tyre Pressure Monitoring System. An onboard electrical system that monitors air pressure in tyres.

Torque steer: Often an issue with powerful front-drive cars, torque steer is what happens when the engine's torque overcomes the front tyre when heavily accelerating – causing the car to want to tug to the side of the road.

Tonneau Cover: A protective cover for the rear seats in a convertible when not in use. Also the name used to describe a cover for a pick-up's flat bed.

Transmission: Another name that can be given for a car's gearbox, with either manual or automatic transmissions available.

Transmission fluid: Also known as gearbox oil. A lubricant used in manual and automatic transmissions. It comes in a number of types and standards. It's essential that the correct type is used when topping up or replacing.

Turbocharger: A method of getting more air into the cylinders by compressing air and forcing it in, increasing the engine's power. Used in most modern petrol and diesel cars.

Type 1 charging plug: A single-phase plug used on some Plug-in and Battery Electric vehicles.

U

Understeer: This can happen when a car loses grip, either when driving hard or braking hard. When turning the wheels, rather than actually going around the corner, the car may instead slide straight ahead.

V

Valves: Components used in engines that allow or restrict fuel or gases to and from the combustion chambers and cylinders.

VIN: Vehicle Identification Number – a unique number, usually 17 digits, given to each vehicle during the manufacturing process. VINs can be used to identify vehicles so that their history can be checked. Can be found in various places, so check your vehicle manual to find out where to locate it.

VRM: Vehicle Registration Mark. Another name for the number plate.

Vacuum Pump: Commonly used on Diesel engines to provide Vacuum for the Brake Booster.

W

Wall box: A device which can be installed at home and used to charge an electric vehicle.

Waterpump: Pumps coolant around the engine, driven by an electric motor or by the engine itself.

Wheelbase: The distance between the centre of the front and rear wheels. Cars with a longer wheelbase typically have more spacious interiors.

X

Xenon: High-powered headlight bulbs with high intensity and brightness.

xDrive: A type of all-wheel-drive system used by BMW.