

Below is an overview of common roofing terms, components, and accessories that contractors, inspectors, and homeowners should be familiar with. Understanding these terms can help you identify the different parts of a roof and how they work together to protect a home from the elements.

1. Roof Structure & Basic Terminology

1. Roof Deck (Sheathing)

The roof deck is the structural foundation to which the roofing materials are attached. Common materials include plywood, OSB (Oriented Strand Board), or wooden planks.

2. Rafters / Trusses

Rafters: Sloping beams that support the roof deck from the ridge to the eaves.

Trusses: Pre-engineered triangular frameworks that can replace or supplement rafters; they provide structural support for the entire roof.

3. Pitch / Slope

The pitch (or slope) of a roof is the measure of how steep the roof is. It is commonly stated as a ratio of vertical rise over horizontal run (e.g., 4:12 means 4 inches of rise over 12 inches of run).

4. Eave

The eave is the lower edge of a roof (the part that overhangs the exterior walls). It helps direct water away from the structure and often includes a soffit underneath.

5. Rake

The rake is the sloped edge of a roof that extends from the ridge to the eave, usually on the gable side.

6. Ridge

The ridge is the highest horizontal line of a roof where two roof planes meet. A ridge cap (a specialized shingle or accessory) often covers and protects this seam.

7. Hip

The external angle formed by the meeting of two sloped sides of a roof that meet at a ridge that runs diagonally.

8. Valley

The internal angle or “gutter” formed by the intersection of two sloped roof planes, where water typically converges.

2. Roofing Materials & Layers

1. Underlayment

A layer of material (felt paper or synthetic membrane) placed over the roof deck and under the main roofing material to provide additional moisture and weather protection.

2. Shingles

Asphalt Shingles: The most common roofing material in residential construction. They come in three-tab or architectural (dimensional) styles.

Metal Shingles / Panels: Made of steel, aluminum, or copper, often coated or painted to prevent corrosion.

Wood Shakes / Shingles: Traditional roofing material made from cedar, redwood, or other rot-resistant wood.

Tile (Clay / Concrete): Durable and heavy roofing option with a distinctive appearance, common in certain architectural styles.

Slate: A natural stone material known for its longevity and appearance, often more expensive and heavier than most other options.

3. Starter Strips (Starter Shingles)

Special shingles or cut shingle strips installed along the eaves or rakes. They provide an extra seal and help anchor the first row of shingles.

4. Ridge Cap Shingles

Specifically designed shingles that fit over the ridge or hip of a roof, covering the seam where two roof planes meet. They protect against water infiltration and enhance appearance.

5. Ventilation Products

Ridge Vent: A continuous vent installed along the ridge that allows hot air to escape from the attic.

Soffit Vents: Located under the eaves, allowing cooler air to be drawn in from outside.

Box Vents (Static Vents): Individual vents placed near the ridge to allow hot air to rise and escape.

Power Vents (Attic Fans): Mechanized vents that actively pull hot air out of the attic.

3. Roofing Accessories & Components

1. Flashing

Thin, waterproof metal (aluminum, copper, galvanized steel) used to direct water away from critical roof intersections (chimneys, vents, skylights, valleys).

Step Flashing: Individual pieces of flashing used along areas like the intersection of a roof plane and a sidewall (e.g., dormers).

Continuous (Apron) Flashing: A single piece of metal that covers transitions in roof planes.

2. Drip Edge

A metal strip installed along the edges of the roof (eaves and rakes) to protect the underlying structure, guide water away from the fascia, and prevent water from wicking back under the shingles.

3. Fascia

The vertical finishing board attached to the ends of roof rafters; gutters are often attached here.

4. Soffit

The underside portion of the eave, often containing vents to allow air intake into the attic.

5. Gutters & Downspouts

Gutters: Channels along the eave edges to collect and direct water away from the structure.

Downspouts: Pipes that channel water from the gutters down to the ground level or drainage systems.

6. Vent Boots (Pipe Boots)

Protective flashing that seals around roof penetrations, such as plumbing vent pipes, preventing leaks.

7. Ice & Water Shield

A self-adhering membrane placed along eaves, valleys, and other roof areas prone to ice dams or water infiltration.

8. Snow Guards / Snow Retention Systems

Devices mounted on roofs (particularly metal roofs) to prevent large amounts of snow from sliding off all at once.

9. Skylights / Sun Tunnels

Skylights: Roof-mounted windows to allow natural light (and sometimes ventilation).

Sun Tunnels (Solar Tubes): Smaller, tubular skylights that guide daylight through a reflective tube into the interior.

4. Roof Installation & Maintenance Terms

1. Roof Penetrations

Any opening or intrusion through the roof (e.g., vents, chimneys, skylights). They require careful flashing and sealing.

2. Nailing Pattern

The specified arrangement of nails on each shingle. Proper nailing pattern ensures shingles are secure and less prone to wind damage.

3. Counterflashing

A second, overlapping piece of flashing designed to protect the top edges of base flashing; often used around chimneys or walls.

4. Dormer

A structural element that protrudes from the roof surface, typically housing windows to create more usable space or light in an attic.

5. Cricket / Saddle

A small, peaked roof structure placed on the high side of a chimney or other large penetration to divert water around it.

6. Ice Dam

A ridge of ice that forms at the roof edge (often in cold climates), preventing melting snow from draining. This can force water back up under shingles, causing leaks.

7. Re-Roofing / Overlay

Installing new shingles over existing shingles. This is sometimes permissible, but local codes may limit the number of layers.

Tear-Off: Removing all existing roofing materials down to the deck before installing new materials.

8. Wind Uplift

The upward force caused by wind that can loosen or remove shingles if they are not properly fastened or sealed.

5. Tips for Selecting & Maintaining Roofing Accessories

1. Material Compatibility

Use flashing, drip edges, and other accessories that are compatible with the roofing material for optimal performance and longevity.

2. Proper Ventilation

Ensure a balanced roof ventilation system (intake at soffits and exhaust at the ridge or other vents). Proper attic ventilation helps regulate temperature, reduce moisture buildup, and prolong the roof's lifespan.

3. Regular Inspections

Inspect the roof at least once or twice a year (and after major storms). Promptly address any damage to flashing, shingles, or other components to prevent leaks.

4. Quality Underlayment & Waterproofing

Investing in higher-quality underlayment (e.g., synthetic underlayment, ice & water shield in cold climates) can prevent water infiltration and extend roof life.

5. Professional Installation

Ensuring proper installation techniques, such as correct nailing patterns, underlayment application, and flashing placement, is key to a leak-free roof.

Final Thoughts

Roofing systems may look straightforward from the outside, but they are composed of many layers and details designed to keep a building safe, dry, and properly ventilated. Familiarity with roofing accessories, components, and key terminology helps in making better decisions regarding maintenance, repairs, and replacements, ultimately preserving the roof's integrity and value over time.