

What's the Difference Between a Street and a Road?



Reader Brit asks: "Is there any rhyme or reason to calling a road an avenue, a boulevard, a street or a lane? Is it just at the discretion of whoever names the street?"

Although both terms are often applied to the same thing, a road is different from a street, at least in theory. Looking at the definitions that folks like city planners use and the history of the usage of the words, the difference is a matter of place and purpose.

Roads run between two distant points — two towns, for example. In each of those towns, you'll find **streets**: paved roads lined with houses and other buildings. It used to be the paving and the buildings that made a street a street, but today you'll find many paved roads that have buildings on them (I grew up on Wisteria Road). Modern sticklers for usage will tell you that what sets streets apart today is the street life that comes with them. On Main Street in a given town, you might find people walking their dogs, having lunch in a sidewalk cafe, waiting for a friend on the corner, or simply people watching. On the road connecting Town A to Town B, you're not likely to find any of this.

The term street, then, should be specifically applied to urban roadways. Streets

connect people for interaction, while roads connect towns and cities for travel.

In the real world, though, these textbook distinctions aren't always made.

As cities grow, roads can become urbanized and serve the purposes of streets without having their names changed. Some cities and towns may be planned with naming systems that designate roadways one thing or another without regard to their function. Other roadways serve different purposes along different parts of their length and get different designations accordingly. Pennsylvania Route 611 is a major state highway that runs from South Philadelphia north to Coolbaugh Township in the Poconos. Within Philadelphia, 611 is Broad Street, where you'll find homes, businesses, street life and, on New Year's Day, Mummers urinating everywhere. At the northern end of Philadelphia, PA 611 leaves Broad Street and becomes Old York Road, a historic road that connected Philadelphia to New York City. As it continues north, it also becomes Easton Road, Delaware Drive, and Fox Town Hill Road along certain stretches.

Other Places on the Map



[Street sign](#) via Shutterstock

Now that we've hashed out roads and streets, what about the alleys, avenues, boulevards, circles, courts, drives, expressways, highways, lanes, parkways, paths, places, squares, terraces, trails, ways and other roadway name suffixes we use? Here are some select definitions (that aren't always followed):

An **avenue** is traditionally a straight road with a line of trees or shrubs running along

each side, which emphasize arrival at a landscape or architectural feature.

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A **boulevard** is usually a widened, multi-lane arterial street with a median and landscaping between the curbs and sidewalks on either side.

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A **court** is a short street that ends as a cul de sac.

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A **drive** can be short for driveway, a private road for local access to one, or a small group of structures. Other times it refers to meandering, rather than straight, roads and highways.

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An **expressway** is a divided highway meant for high-speed traffic.

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A **freeway** is a road designed for safe high-speed traffic through the elimination of intersections at the same grade or level.

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A **highway** is a main road intended for travel between destinations like cities and towns.

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A **lane** is a narrow road or street usually lacking a shoulder or a median.

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A **way** is a minor street off a road in a town.