To understand and enjoy American football, get familiar with key terms and what they mean. Until you grasp basic football lingo, listening to announcers call a football game can be like listening to monkey gibberish. The following list fills you in on the basic American football terms you need to know:

* **Backfield:** The group of offensive players — the [running](http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/american-football-terms-and-definitions.html#glossary-running_back;_tailback;_halfback;_wingback) [backs](http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/american-football-terms-and-definitions.html#glossary-running_back;_tailback;_halfback;_wingback) and [quarterback](http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/american-football-terms-and-definitions.html#glossary-quarterback) — who line up behind the line of scrimmage.
* **Down:** A period of action that starts when the ball is put into play and ends when the ball is ruled dead (meaning the play is completed). The offense gets four downs to advance the ball 10 yards. If it fails to do so, it must surrender the ball to the opponent, usually by [punting](http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/american-football-terms-and-definitions.html#glossary-Punt) on the fourth down.
* **Drive:** The series of plays when the offense has the football, until it punts or scores and the other team gets possession of the ball.
* **End zone:** A 10-yard-long area at each end of the field. You score a touchdown when you enter the end zone in control of the football. If you're tackled in your own end zone while in possession of the football, the other team gets a safety.
* **Extra point:** A kick, worth one point, that's typically attempted after every touchdown (it's also known as the *point after touchdown,* or PAT). The ball is placed on either the 2-yard line (in the [NFL](http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/american-football-terms-and-definitions.html#glossary-NFL)) or the 3-yard line (in college and high school) and is generally kicked from inside the 10-yard line after being snapped to the holder. It must sail between the uprights and above the crossbar of the goalpost to be considered good.
* **Fair catch:** When the player returning a punt waves his extended arm from side to side over his head. After signaling for a fair catch, a player can't run with the ball, and those attempting to tackle him can't touch him.
* **Field goal:** A kick, worth three points, that can be attempted from anywhere on the field but is usually attempted within 40 yards of the goalpost. Like an extra point, a kick must sail above the crossbar and between the uprights of the goalpost to be ruled good.
* **Fumble:** The act of losing possession of the ball while running with it or being tackled. Members of the offense and defense can recover a fumble. If the defense recovers the fumble, the fumble is called a turnover.
* **Handoff:** The act of giving the ball to another player. Handoffs usually occur between the quarterback and a running back.
* **Hash marks:** The lines on the [center](http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/american-football-terms-and-definitions.html#glossary-center) of the field that signify 1 yard on the field. Before every play, the ball is spotted between the hash marks or on the hash marks, depending on where the ball carrier was tackled on the preceding play.
* **Huddle:** When the 11 players on the field come together to discuss strategy between plays. On offense, the quarterback relays the plays in the huddle.
* **Incompletion:** A forward pass that falls to the ground because no receiver could catch it, or a pass that a receiver dropped or caught out of bounds.
* **Interception:** A pass that's caught by a defensive player, ending the offense's possession of the ball.
* **Kickoff:** A free kick (meaning the receiving team can't make an attempt to block it) that puts the ball into play. A kickoff is used at the start of the first and third quarters and after every touchdown and successful field goal.
* **Line of scrimmage:** An imaginary line that extends from where the football is placed at the end of a play to both sides of the field. Neither the offense nor the defense can cross the line until the football is put in play again.
* **Offensive line:** The human wall of five men who block for and protect the quarterback and ball carriers. Every line has a center (who snaps the ball), two guards, and two tackles.
* **Punt:** A kick made when a player drops the ball and kicks it while it falls toward his foot. A punt is usually made on a fourth down when the offense must surrender possession of the ball to the defense because it couldn't advance 10 yards.
* **Red zone:** The unofficial area from the 20-yard line to the opponent's goal line. Holding an opponent to a field goal in this area is considered a moral victory for the defense.
* **Return:** The act of receiving a kick or punt and running toward the opponent's goal line with the intent of scoring or gaining significant yardage.
* **Rushing:** To advance the ball by running, not passing. A running back is sometimes called a *rusher.*
* **Sack:** When a defensive player tackles the quarterback behind the line of scrimmage for a loss of yardage.
* **Safety:** A score, worth two points, that the defense earns by tackling an offensive player in possession of the ball in his own end zone.
* **Secondary:** The four defensive players who defend against the pass and line up behind the linebackers and wide on the corners of the field opposite the receivers.
* **Snap:** The action in which the ball is *hiked* (tossed between the legs) by the center to the quarterback, to the holder on a kick attempt, or to the punter. When the snap occurs, the ball is officially in play and action begins.
* **Special teams:** The 22 players who are on the field during kicks and punts. These units have special players who return punts and kicks, as well as players who are experts at covering kicks and punts.
* **Touchdown:** A score, worth six points, that occurs when a player in possession of the ball crosses the plane of the opponent's goal line, when a player catches the ball while in the opponent's end zone, or when a defensive player recovers a loose ball in the opponent's end zone.

**Learn the basic rules of football, one of America's favorite sports**

I am female, and I am a die-hard football fan. I admit it; I love the gridiron. On every Sunday during football season you will find me parked on my couch, snuggled up with a snack and drink of choice (Pepsi in the summer, coffee in the winter), cheering on my beloved Seahawks.

Football, however, is a fairly complicated game. If you want to join the fans of the pigskin during football season and you don't understand why all those big-muscled men are running around the field shoving each other around, you've come to the right place. The basic rules of football are not hard to understand.

**Time**

A football game lasts for four quarters of 15 minutes each, with an intermission after the second quarter, called half time. During the Super Bowl, half time is the part of the game when an aging rock star tries to prove he can still rock, or a younger rock star experiences a wardrobe malfunction.

Four quarters of 15 minutes each would imply that the game lasts 60 minutes, but that's not exactly true. With three timeouts per half for both teams, timeouts for TV commercials and timeouts for injuries, a typical televised game can last around three hours.

At the end of play time, the team with the most points wins. In the event of a tie, another 15 minutes are added to the clock, but this quarter is played sudden death-style: the first team to score, wins.

**Players**

Teams are divided into offense, defense and special teams.

The offense includes the quarterback, center, running backs, offensive linemen and wide receivers. These players are on the field when the team is in possession of the ball. It is their job to move the ball down the field and cross into the opposing team's end zone for a touchdown.

The defense includes defensive linemen, defensive backs and linebackers. Their job is to keep the other team's offense from moving the ball. Special teams are used for punts, kick-offs, extra point conversions and kick-off returns.  
**How the game is played**

Right before the game starts, a coin is tossed to determine which team will kick off and which team will receive. The ball is kicked from the kicking team's 30-yard line, and the receiving team tries to run it as far down the field as they can. When the ball-carrier is stopped, that team's offense comes out on to the field.

The offense has four tries, or downs, to move the ball forward 10 yards. This is considered *gaining a first down*. The ball can be moved by running it or by the quarterback passing it to a receiver. If they advance 10 yards, they get another four downs. If they don't, the opposing team takes possession of the ball.

If a team does not make 10 yards in the first three downs, they will usually punt, or kick off from the line of scrimmage (the spot where the ball was stopped) on fourth down. This keeps their opponent from gaining possession of the ball with good field position close to their end zone.

The offense keeps the ball until they fail to make a first down, they score a touchdown or field goal, a member of the opposing team intercepts a pass or the ball is fumbled (dropped) and recovered by the opponent.

When any of these things happen, the other team gains possession of the ball. They then bring out their offensive players, while the team that just lost the ball brings out their defense. Play continues with possession of the ball moving back and forth between teams until time runs out.

The second half starts like the beginning of the game, with the team who received at the start now kicking off.

**Scoring**

There are four ways to gain points during a football game:

* *Touchdown*: A player on offense carries the ball into his opponent's end zone, or the quarterback passes the ball to a player already in the end zone. Touchdowns are worth six points.
* *Conversion*: After a touchdown, the scoring team attempts a conversion. The ball is either kicked through the goalposts from the three-yard line for one point, or the scoring team tries to run or pass into the end zone like a touchdown, for two points.
* *Field goal*: A kicker from the team on offense kicks the ball through his opponent's goal posts. This is usually attempted on a fourth down when the ball is close to the end zone and trying for a touchdown is too risky.
* *Safety*: If the defense tackles a ball-carrier in their own end zone, it is called a safety and the defense is awarded two points. This doesn't happen very often.

**Penalties**

There are many rules in American football. Rules apply to who you can tackle, when you can tackle them, how you can tackle them, who is allowed to throw the ball and how long the offense has to start play.

I've been watching football since I was a kid, and I still don't have all the intricacies figured out. If a player does break a rule, he is punished with a penalty of yardage, and sometimes a loss of a down.

Now you know the basic rules of football. But don't just read about it! The best way to learn and enjoy the game is to sit down with some good friends and great food and cheer on your favorite team.