

# Cloud Identification Guide

A Dichotomous Key

Created by Dr. Tina Cartwright, Marshall University  
tina.cartwright@marshall.edu



Look carefully at your cloud. Answer the questions below, and follow the instructions. When you reach a cloud name in **bold**, that is the type of cloud you are observing.

---

## 1. Is it raining?

No- go to number 2.

Yes- with thunder, lightning, & heavy rain - your cloud is a **cumulonimbus**.



Yes- but only drizzly, with small raindrops - your cloud is a **nimbostratus**.



## 2. Is it a high wispy cloud, like a horse's tail?

No- go to number 3.

Yes- your cloud is a **cirrus**.



## 3. Is it flat & layered, puffy & bumpy, or some of both?

Flat & layered-go to number 4

Puffy & bumpy-go to number 5

Both- If your cloud is a nearly solid layer of large puffs (the size of your fist or larger), your cloud is a **stratocumulus**.



**4. Determine how high and how thick your flat layered cloud is.**

If your cloud is high, thin, and the sun is shining casting distinct shadows, it is a **cirrostratus**.



If it is thicker, the sun is dimmer, and there are hardly any shadows, it is an **altostratus**.



If it is a low cloud, so low it's hard to see the bottom and it covers most of the sky, it is a **stratus**.



**5. Hold your hand up toward your cloud. Look at the size of the puffs.**

**Compare them to your hand.**

If the puffs are the size of your fingernail (very small), your cloud is a **cirrocumulus**.



If the puffs are the size of your thumb (medium-sized), your cloud is an **altocumulus**.



If the puffs are the size of your fist (large), your cloud is a **cumulus**.

