

Watch, Warning, Advisory: What the Weather Service Is Telling You

By the rock. August 8, 2026. Grounded in National Weather Service definitions.

The short version

A **watch** means conditions are favorable for a hazard: the ingredients are gathering, so get ready. A **warning** means the hazard is happening, about to happen, or highly likely: act now. An **advisory** means conditions are less serious than warning criteria but still hazardous enough to cause trouble if you ignore them. One question separates the first two: are the ingredients gathering, or is it here?

The one question that sorts them

Every one of these headlines answers the same question at a different point in time: how close is the hazard to you, right now?

A **watch** is about ingredients. The atmosphere has assembled what a storm needs, over an area, over a window of hours. Nothing has happened yet and nothing may. The Weather Service is telling you to make your plan while making a plan is still easy.

A **warning** is about the event. It is occurring, it is imminent, or the odds are high enough that waiting is the wrong move. Warnings are usually smaller in area and shorter in time than watches, because by then the Weather Service knows where.

An **advisory** is about a hazard that will not meet warning criteria but can still hurt you or ruin your day: the freezing drizzle that glazes an overpass, the heat that stacks up on someone working outside, the fog that removes the car in front of you.

WATCH: ingredients gathering

WARNING: it is here

ADVISORY: smaller hazard, same day

hours out

now

A watch is wide and early. A warning is narrow and late. An advisory rides alongside for hazards that never reach warning strength. The rock has been under all three and prefers the first one.

Why people mix up watch and warning

The words do not carry their meanings. Nothing in the sound of "watch" says early and wide, and nothing in "warning" says here and now. The Weather Service knows this: its own public surveys found

that people confuse the two, and that "advisory" was the least understood term of the three, often mistaken for a watch.

A trick that survives panic: **watch the sky, warn the family**. Watch means keep looking. Warning means go tell everybody and move.

The change that has been announced

The Weather Service has said it will retire the "advisory" headline, along with "special weather statement", and replace them with plain language headlines that name the hazard first in capitals, followed by what, where, when, and the impacts. Watch and warning stay exactly as they are, with the same criteria.

That change has been announced, not completed. On the day this page was written the national alert feed carried 78 active advisories, including 44 heat advisories, so the term is still very much in service. When it does change, this page changes with it.

What to do with each one

- **Watch.** Decide now what you would do, while you have time and daylight. Charge things. Know where you would shelter. Do not cancel your life; do build the exit.
- **Warning.** Do the thing you decided during the watch. This is not the moment to look out the window and form an opinion.
- **Advisory.** Adjust. Leave earlier, drive slower, drink water, check on whoever is outside in it.

The rock has one advantage over all of this: it only reports what is happening at the rock, right now. The Weather Service has the harder job of telling you what is coming, which is why its words are worth learning.

Check your understanding

1. A Severe Thunderstorm Watch is issued for your county. What has happened?

- ☐ A. A severe storm is hitting your town now
- ☐ B. Conditions are favorable for severe storms over a broad area
- ☐ C. A storm passed and the risk is over

2. Which headline means you should act immediately?

- ☐ A. Watch
- ☐ B. Warning
- ☐ C. Advisory

3. What does an advisory tell you?

- ☐ A. The hazard is worse than a warning
- ☐ B. A hazard below warning criteria that can still cause trouble
- ☐ C. The forecast has been cancelled

4. Which pair is generally wider in area and earlier in time?

- ☐ A. Warnings
- ☐ B. Watches
- ☐ C. They are always the same size

5. The Weather Service has announced a change to these headlines. What is it?

- ☐ A. Warnings will be retired
- ☐ B. The advisory headline will be replaced by plain language naming the hazard
- ☐ C. Watches will be renamed alerts

Answer key

1. A Severe Thunderstorm Watch is issued for your county. What has happened?

B. Conditions are favorable for severe storms over a broad area — A watch means the ingredients are gathering across an area over a window of hours. Nothing has happened yet, which is exactly why it is the good time to prepare.

2. Which headline means you should act immediately?

B. Warning — A warning means the hazard is occurring, imminent, or highly likely where you are. Warnings are smaller and shorter than watches because by then the Weather Service knows where.

3. What does an advisory tell you?

B. A hazard below warning criteria that can still cause trouble — An advisory covers conditions less serious than warning criteria but still hazardous enough to cause problems if you ignore them, like freezing drizzle or dense fog.

4. Which pair is generally wider in area and earlier in time?

B. Watches — Watches are broad and early because the forecaster knows the ingredients but not the exact spot. Warnings narrow down once the event is real.

5. The Weather Service has announced a change to these headlines. What is it?

B. The advisory headline will be replaced by plain language naming the hazard — The advisory headline and special weather statement are set to be replaced with plain language headlines that name the hazard first. Watch and warning stay unchanged. The change has been announced, not completed.

Questions people actually ask

What is the difference between a weather watch and a warning?

A watch means conditions are favorable for a hazard over a broad area and a window of hours, so you should prepare. A warning means the hazard is occurring, imminent, or highly likely where you are, so you should act immediately. Watches are wide and early; warnings are narrow and late.

Is an advisory more serious than a warning?

No. An advisory is less serious than a warning. It covers conditions that do not meet warning criteria but are still hazardous enough to cause inconvenience or danger if you take no care, such as dense fog, freezing drizzle, or heat that is dangerous to people working outside.

Why do people confuse watches and advisories?

Because the words do not carry their meanings. National Weather Service public surveys found that the difference between watch and warning was sometimes confused, and that advisory was the least understood of the three, often mistaken for a watch. That research is the reason the agency plans to replace the advisory headline with plain language.

Are weather advisories being discontinued?

The National Weather Service has announced that the advisory headline and the special weather statement will be replaced by plain language headlines naming the hazard, but the change has not taken effect. Advisories are still issued today. Some products are exceptions, including center weather advisories, space weather advisories, and tropical cyclone advisories, and small craft advisories are set to become warnings instead.

What should I do during a tornado watch?

Decide and prepare while it is still easy: know where your shelter is, keep a way to receive warnings that works if the power fails, charge devices, and keep shoes and a light near the shelter. A watch is the time to make the plan so that a warning only requires you to follow it.

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