

What's a token, the 'piece' AI talks in?

Five-Minute AI Lessons · Sep 8, 2026

In the end, a sentence is a line of pieces called tokens

In a nutshell

- 1 The “next piece” from yesterday has a name in the AI world: a **token**.
- 2 A token is **not a letter and not a word** — it's a piece cut to be easy for AI to compute with, and its size changes from case to case.
- 3 So the same sentence gets **a different count in tokens**, and time and cost go up with that count.

Sentence → words → tokens

Example My bestie lowkey devoured nachos tbh

↓ Split into words (the unit people read)

My

bestie

lowkey

devoured

nachos

tbh

↓ Split again into tokens (the unit AI counts)

My

best

ie

low

key

dev

oured

nach

os

tb

h

6 words → 11 tokens. People and AI count in different units.

One sentence, cut three ways

7 pieces

Every character

u w y d r n ?

The finest cut. Lots of pieces, but they aren't units of meaning.

3 pieces

By spaces (words)

u wyd rn?

Easy for people, but AI finds a never-seen word strange as a whole.

5 pieces

Like tokens (mock)

u wy d rn ?

Between a character and a word: common chunks stay whole, rare ones get cut finer.

The rule for cutting text like this has a name — a tokenizer.

※ The split above is a simplified model for explaining.

Just three questions

Q1

What is a “token”?

- ① Always exactly one letter
- ② Always exactly one word
- ③ A piece cut for AI's math (size varies)
- ④ The whole word list people set up

Q2

As the number of tokens goes up, what happens for the AI?

- ① It gets faster
- ② More to compute, and it takes longer
- ③ No effect at all
- ④ It always gets smarter

Q3

(True / False) Different AIs can split the same sentence into tokens differently.

Know the why, too

Q1

③

A token is a piece cut to make AI's computing easier. Sometimes it's one letter, sometimes a whole word — there's no fixed size.

Q2

②

More tokens means more for AI to compute, and more time (and cost). Say the same thing more briefly and the AI handles it faster.

Q3

T

True. Some AIs cut by character, others by common chunks — so the same sentence can be a different number of tokens in different AIs.

**To AI, a sentence isn't letters or words —
it's a line of pieces called tokens.**



Tomorrow: probability and temperature — a deeper dig into yesterday's 'boldness knob.'