

Smartphone Essentials for Daily Life

By 2040, it's predicted that more than 364 million Americans will be using smartphones. While these devices are everywhere and will likely remain so, many of us feel a bit lost at times, and we share this sentiment:

"I know the phone can do so much more, but I'm not sure how to navigate it or whether I'm even doing it right."

This highlights that the real "smartness" of a mobile device comes from how we use it to meet our needs. Ease can feel out of reach at first, especially when the phone no longer offers the physical cues we once relied on. Instead of buttons or clear labels, we are met with a slick surface that expects us to guide it with our hands.

Using Screen Gestures Effectively

Touchscreens aren't just limited to phones anymore; they're everywhere, from cars and ATMs to ticket kiosks and beyond. Because of that, learning to use them isn't just a tech aptitude; it's part of how we navigate our increasingly digital world.

A touchscreen gesture is an intentional finger movement that starts at a specific spot and moves in a specific way, which the device interprets as an instruction. It's not just placing your finger on the screen or brushing against it; the device only responds when the motion has a clear beginning, direction, and purpose.



A **tap** is the simplest gesture, a light, quick touch. It's how you select something: opening an app, pressing a button, or confirming an option. The key is to touch and release without sliding your finger, because even a subtle drag can be interpreted as a swipe.



A **touch-and-hold** is similar, but you keep your finger down for one to two seconds. This reveals additional options, such as a context menu, or lets you move apps around the Home screen. The nuance here is timing: too quick, and it becomes a tap; too long, and the phone may interpret it as a drag.



A **swipe** occurs when you place your finger on the screen and drag it in a single, smooth motion. This is how you move between pages or reveal hidden panels. The motion must be continuous; lifting your finger halfway through stops the action. For instance,

On iPhones without a Home button, **swipe up from the very bottom edge** of your device, then pause your finger in the middle of the screen. The “App Switcher” will emerge, revealing all your active apps as cards lined up side by side. Each card previews your last activity in that app. To close one, swipe its card upward until it slides off the screen.

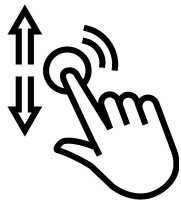


On most modern **Android phones**, as on iPhones, you can see which apps are running in the background by swiping up from the bottom edge to the midpoint of the screen.

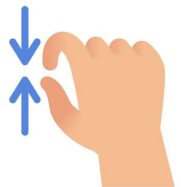
However, if your phone uses the classic navigation buttons...



Look for the “*Recents*” button at the bottom of the screen. On some phones, it appears as a square; on others, as three vertical lines.



A **scroll** is simply a longer swipe. Place your finger on the screen and glide it up or down in one smooth motion to move through content. This is how you read a webpage, browse a long message, or move through a list of contacts. The motion should feel steady and continuous. Lifting your finger stops the scroll, and placing it back down continues where you left off.



A **two-finger pinch**, bringing your fingers together, zooms out; spreading them apart zooms in. This works on photos, maps, webpages, and documents. Small, controlled movements give you more precise zooming.

As soon as these gestures feel more familiar, the phone's operation becomes easier. Applications, menus, and settings rely on a handful of motions, so each new action feels like a variation or extension of something you already know rather than a brand-new skill.

Navigating Smartphone Menus

Although iPhones and Android phones differ in many respects, including how their screens are arranged and how certain options are presented, at their core, they share basic components:

 **Home Screen**

 **Quick Controls**

 **Settings**

1 Home Screen — Starting Place

When you unlock your phone, the Home Screen is where you land. It's where your apps are stored and where you tap to open anything you want to use.

Most phones also display the time, date, or weather near the top. These aren't necessarily apps you need to open; they're small information panels that update automatically, called "widgets."

If you glance at the bottom of a home screen 

••• You'll usually see a row of small dots; these simply indicate how many Home Screens you have. The filled-in dot shows which one you're on.

— Newer phones also show a small line at the bottom acting as your home indicator, which you swipe up from to return to this screen.

The arrangement of apps varies by phone:

On iPhone, every app appears somewhere on the Home Screen, and if you keep swiping left, you'll eventually reach the "App Library," which groups apps into categories by default.

On Android, the Home Screen shows your chosen apps, while the full list lives in the "App Drawer," which you open by swiping up from the bottom.

The App Library and App Drawer provide a single place for all installed apps, so no matter how your Home Screen is set up, you always have one predictable spot that holds everything. This lets you keep your Home Screen uncluttered by removing the apps you use least without deleting them, leaving only what you want visible.

When you touch and hold an app, a small menu appears. Choose "Remove" or "Remove App" to take it off your Home Screen without uninstalling it.

If you see "Uninstall" or "Delete App," that option removes the app from your device entirely.

Quick Controls — Fast Switches

They are the place you go when you need to make a quick change, not a permanent one, or for the small adjustments you make throughout the day.

Generally, quick controls are accessed with a brief gesture ↴





→On newer iPhones, swipe down from the top-right corner. On older models with a Home button, swipe up from the bottom edge.

→On Android phones, swipe down from the top; swipe again for more options, such as viewing notifications.

Once you open Quick Controls, you'll see a mix of buttons.

Tap-to-toggle Buttons — the “on/off” switches

These are the switches you tap once to turn something on and again to turn it off. You'll recognize them in places like:

-  **Wi-Fi:** connects your phone to your home modem or a public hotspot.
-  **Mobile Data:** uses your phone company's signal when you're away from Wi-Fi.
-  **Bluetooth:** links your phone to hearing aids, speakers, or your car.
-  **Screen Rotation Lock:** keeps the screen from rotating sideways when you don't want it to.

You can always tell what's happening by the way the icon looks:


◆ **When something is ON**, the icon usually looks brighter, filled in, or colored.


◆ **When it's OFF**, the icon looks dim, grey, or outlined.

Sliders

Some items aren't meant to be turned on or off; they're designed to be adjusted. That's where sliders come in.

You'll see sliders for the following:

- Brightness:** 







Makes the screen easier to see both indoors and outdoors.
- Volume:** 

Raises or lowers the sound for calls, videos, or other alerts.

You move a slider by dragging it left or right (or up/down, depending on the phone). *More filled* means more brightness or a louder sound. *Less filled* means dimmer or quieter.

Multi-step Buttons — cycling through choices

These cycles are a set of actions that change with each tap. A common example is your phone's "sound mode," which cycles through three states:

-  Sound 
-  Vibrate 
-  Silent 

Each mode has its own icon, which indicates what the phone will do when you tap it.

Now, if the Home Screen is where you start, and Quick Controls are where you make quick, on-the-spot adjustments, then Settings is where you personalize the phone to your needs.

3 Settings — Where Your Phone Learns Your Preferences

It's the space for making deeper decisions that you don't revise daily, but that you're glad to have when troublesome things happen.

You open Settings by tapping the gear icon 

- On **iPhones**, it's always on the Home Screen.
- On **Android phones**, you'll find it in the "App Drawer" and in "Quick Controls" too.

In both iPhone and Android settings, there is a feature often overlooked: a search bar with a magnifying glass at the top. This serves as a shortcut to avoid scrolling through lengthy lists.

You can just type "display," "security," or any other term. The device then suggests a brief list of the closest matches, effectively saying, *"Here are the options related to your search. Select the one you prefer."*

The range of settings on your smartphone is quite broad, so it is only natural to lean toward those that improve safety, clarity, and day-to-day usability.

Connections / Network & Internet

This section controls how your phone stays connected, whether via Wi-Fi at home or in public hotspots, or your carrier's cellular network. It's where you go when something simply won't load.

If your apps show "No internet" while you're at home, you can verify your Wi-Fi connection here.

Similarly, you can tell your phone to connect to whichever internet signal is stronger—Wi-Fi or cellular data—so it adjusts automatically rather than relying on you to notice and switch between them.

→ **On iPhone**, focus on *Wi-Fi Assist*

→ **On Android**, look for “*Adaptive Connectivity*,” “*Switch to Mobile Data*,” or “*Auto Data Switching*,” depending on your device brand.

Sounds / Sounds & Haptics

It's where you go when the phone isn't getting your attention the way you expect, and it lets you control how you're alerted, whether it's for a message, a call, or an email.

Say goodbye to calls or messages going unheard 🖐️

→ **On iPhone**, Look for *Ringer & Alerts* with a slider. Make sure the slider is set high enough. Also, check “*Vibrate on Ring*” and “*Vibrate on Silent*” if vibration matters to you.

→ **On Android**, look for “*Ringtone Volume*”. Ensure that “*Vibrate while ringing*” or “*Notification vibration*” is enabled if you rely on it heavily.

Display / Display & Brightness

Control how things look on the screen, including brightness, text size, color style, and how long the screen stays on. ↴

Have you ever been reading on your cellphone when the screen suddenly went dark, even though you were still actively using it?

Check out “*Auto-Lock*” on an iPhone, “*Screen Timeout*,” or “*Sleep*” on an Android device to adjust how long the screen stays on before it locks and requires you to interact with it.

Privacy & Security

Here, you manage passwords, fingerprints, and face recognition, as well as which apps can access your data.

If a video-conferencing app (e.g., FaceTime or Google Meet) says it “*can’t access the camera*,” the issue may stem from the device blocking the camera request for safety reasons, either by default or because the permission was previously denied, intentionally or unintentionally.

→**On iPhone**, the Camera permission is found in Privacy & Security, toward the lower part of the screen, just after items like Bluetooth. When you tap Camera, you see a list of apps that have requested access, each with a switch you can turn on or off to restore or remove permissions.

→**On Android**, go to Security & Privacy, then “*Privacy*,” “*Permissions*,” or “*App Permissions*.” Once there, decide how each app can use the camera, for example, “*Allow while using the app*,” “*Ask every time*,” or “*Don’t allow*.”

The Accessibility Settings

Although located in the “*Settings*” app, they deserve their own spotlight.↴

Think of accessibility as the place where you can get your phone to adapt to you, not the other way around.

Text & Display Enhancements

- Is the on-screen text legible but tiring?
- Do the gray letters appear too faint, or do you want everything a bit larger without zooming the whole screen?

You have these options to turn to. In both systems, you can increase text size, adjust contrast, and use bold text so words stand out more clearly.

→**iPhone** places these controls under *“Display & Text Size.”*

→**Android** includes them under *“Visibility Enhancements”* or *“Text and Display.”*

Touch & Interaction Support

Helps your phone recognize how you tap and hold, so actions register as you intend.

→**iPhone’s** *“Touch Accommodations”* includes *“Hold Duration,”* *“Ignore Repeat,”* and *“Tap Assistance,”* which help if your finger lifts too soon, taps repeat unintentionally, or drifts slightly while you are tapping.

→**Android** offers *“Touch & Hold Delay”* with *“Short,”* *“Medium,”* and *“Long”* options, along with *“Tap Duration”* or *“Ignore Repeated Touches”* on some devices.

Closed Captions

If you've ever listened to a voice message that felt rushed or unclear, captions assist you in catching every word without replaying it or turning up the volume.

→ **On an iPhone**, turn on *“Live Captions.”* It works for phone calls, FaceTime calls, and any real-time spoken audio. Likewise, look for *“Auto-Transcribe Audio Messages”* on newer iPhone models.

→ **Android** includes a feature called *“Call captions,”* but it isn't in Accessibility. You'll find it in the Phone app under *“Call Settings.”*

Built-in Apps

Every phone comes with a handful of preinstalled apps. These include, but are not limited to, Mail, Camera, Photos or Gallery, FaceTime, and Google Meet.

Mail

Bring all your accounts into one unified inbox so you don't have to bounce between apps. It shows a single, easy-to-scan list of messages and provides standard tools to read, move, delete, or reply to messages, avoiding the confusing tabs, filters, and ads that vary by email provider.

When you open the Mail app for the first time on an iPhone or Android phone, it will indicate the email services it supports. AOL may appear under *“Other.”* You will then be prompted to enter your username and password, as you usually do when signing in.

Standout Feature

Swipe Actions for Quick Cleanup

Clear clutter without opening every message. How does it work?

→ Go to Settings

— **On iPhone**, Mail settings are in the Settings app under “Mail” (sometimes listed under “Default Apps” as “Email”).

— **On Android**, Mail settings are inside the Mail app, behind a menu icon—three horizontal lines ☰, or vertical dots ⋮

→ Locate the “Swipe actions” or “Swipe options.”

Choose what a left or right swipe should do: “Delete,” “Archive,” or “Mark as Read,” etc.

Camera

Does far more than capture snapshots, yet some of its capabilities are disregarded.

Tap-to-Focus + Brightness Control

Tapping the screen tells the camera exactly what you want in focus. After you tap, a brightness slider appears so you can brighten or darken the shot before taking it.

Say you’re trying to photograph a medication bottle, but the print looks blurry. Tap the part of the label you want to make clearer, then slide your finger (up, down, or left to right) to brighten it. The text sharpens and becomes easier to read in your photo.

Automatic Document Scanning

Your camera can function as a document scanner. When it detects a document, it outlines the edges with colored markers and captures a clean, straightened image.

Have you just filled out a paper form and want to save a clean copy? Open your camera and point it at the page. Wait for the framing box and small corner circles to lock onto the document. When the outline looks right, tap the shutter. A preview of the scan appears. Check that it's straight and readable, then select "Confirm" or "Save."

QR Code Scanning

No need to download an ad-filled QR app or fight with pop-ups. The camera app detects QR codes automatically.

Imagine you sit down at a restaurant and notice that the menu is accessible via a QR code. Open your camera and point it at the code. Wait a moment for your phone to recognize it. A small link banner appears on the screen. Tap it to open the menu.

Photos or Gallery

It is where your phone stores and organizes the images and videos it saves locally. Likewise, they show whatever you've chosen to sync from cloud services.

What is stored on the device, either physically or locally?

— Any photo or screenshot captured using the built-in Camera app will be visible in the Photos or Gallery app unless you have modified the default storage location. ↴

— Images saved from text messages, email, or apps that offer the “*Save to device*” alternative.

Editing Tools

Make the images saved in the Photos or Gallery app your own. Select the image you want to work with, then find the edit functionality:

On an iPhone, it is 

On Android, it is 

Although the icons have distinct shapes, they share similar features:

Crop 

Cut away parts of a photo you don't need.

Filters 

Change the overall look of a photo. Adjust color, brightness, and tone to give the image a unique style.

Markup  or **Draw** 

Write, circle, highlight, or point directly to something in the photo. This lets you add notes, shapes, or drawings on top of the image.



It is the videoconferencing app of choice on Apple devices. It comes preinstalled on every iPhone, iPad, and Mac, so you can start video or audio calls on the go. To use it, you must be signed in with an Apple ID.

Standout Features

SharePlay & Share Screen


Whether you want to gently guide someone through multiple steps, follow along as something is explained to you, or simply share an experience or special moment that feels like being in the same room together, these are the go-to skills for doing so.


↳ Open the FaceTime app on your *iPhone*

↳ You can tap any of your recently reached contacts or opt for “*New FaceTime*” to start a call. Your phone will display a:

— “*To*” so you can type names or numbers, as well as “*Suggested*,” which is the list of your most-used contacts.

↳ Once on the call, refer to the vertical dots ⋮ to find


— **Share My Screen**  shows the other person exactly what is on your screen, every tap, swipe, and app you open in real time.


— **SharePlay**  plays the same video, music, or app content for everyone on the call at the same time without showing your whole screen.

Google Meet

It's a videoconferencing app that now comes preinstalled on most Android phones because the Android operating system is closely tied to Google. It can also be installed on iPhones and works on any computer with a standard web browser, making it easy to join or start a call.

On a mobile device, whether an Android phone or otherwise, Google Meet offers a few ways to start a call within “New”:

Create link  It generates a reusable link you can copy and send to anyone via text, email, or messaging apps. Use it for recurring check-ins or to send a link on the spot.

Schedule  It opens Google Calendar with a preconfigured Meet link, so you can set a date, time, and reminders. Ideal for virtual classes, telehealth, or anything that requires a bit more planning and preparation.

People who only want to join someone else’s Google Meet do not need a Google account. However, anyone who wants to use the “*Create link*,” “*Schedule*,” or “*Group call*” options must be signed in to the app, as any of those actions makes them the host.

Alongside some of the built-in apps we’ve covered, your iPhone and Android devices also have their own App Stores to safely find, download, and update additional apps when you need to go past what’s preinstalled.

Default App Stores

These are the ones that come with your smartphone's operating system and are the official way the system expects you to get apps.

Apple App Store


On any iOS device, such as an iPhone or iPad, you can use the App Store, which stands out for its user-friendly design and high-quality apps.

Google Play Store

The preferred choice for most Android devices. One benefit is its integration with Google services. If you use Gmail or have an Android phone or tablet, you can easily sync your apps across devices.

On both platforms,

- “*Search*” is what you use to quickly find specific apps by typing keywords. It suggests apps as you type a few letters.
- You will see that free apps are labeled “*Get*” (iPhone) or “*Install*” (Android), while paid apps display a price next to the app’s name.
- Before you download an app, visit the “*App Listing Page*,” the screen that unfolds after you tap an app’s name or icon, to learn what kind of app you are getting on your device.¹

¹ To learn more about the App Store and safe app downloading, please refer to our how-to guide:  [What to Know Before You Download That App.pdf](#)



In the U.S., most people who text have iPhones, so iMessage quietly takes over; you don't choose it; it just pops up as the app everyone uses. In many other countries, WhatsApp fills that role. It's the app everyone already has, the one families use across borders, and all that's required is the person's phone number.

Get it installed for free from the App Store. Once you see the label, tap *"Open,"* then accept the terms to complete setup.

↪ **Enter your phone number**

WhatsApp sends a verification code via text or call to confirm the number is valid.

↪ **Add your name and a profile photo**

↪ **Allow access to your contacts**

This lets WhatsApp match the numbers in your phone with people who already use the app. Without it, you would have to enter phone numbers manually.

After that, you're ready to start messaging. When you save a new contact, it's best to include their full number, including the country code. WhatsApp relies on it to properly recognize the contact, even if the person lives in the same country as you.

Standout Feature

Anyone with your number can reach you from anywhere without worrying about phone plans, long-distance charges, or the type of phone they use—whether by call, video call, or message, all over Wi-Fi or a cellular data connection.



DEFINITIONS

***Ads in email**, promotional messages, or offers placed inside your email inbox by companies. They often look like regular emails but are usually labeled as “Ad” or placed in a Promotions tab; you can open, ignore, or delete them.

***Allow while using the app**, the app can use the feature only when you have it open and are actively using it.

***Apple ID**: The personal account you use with Apple devices and services. It's usually your email address and a password; it identifies you to Apple so you can download apps, back up data, buy media, and sync settings across devices.

***Archive (email)** move a message out of your inbox without deleting it. It's kept safely so you can find it later, but it won't show in your main inbox.

***Ask for permission every time**; an app must ask you each time it needs access; it won't remember your choice.

***By default**, the setting a device or app uses automatically unless you change it. Example: a phone's default ringtone is the sound it plays for calls unless you pick a different one.

***Cloud services**, internet-based tools, and storage you use without keeping files or software on your own device, e.g., iCloud, OneDrive, Google Drive.

***Default storage location (smartphone)**: The place your phone automatically saves photos, downloads, and files unless you pick somewhere else.

***Don't allow permission**: prevents apps from using a feature on your device.

***Drag** to move something on a screen by clicking and holding it (or touching and holding), then sliding it to a new place, and releasing.

***Home modem:** a small box that connects your house to the internet. It connects to your internet provider via phone, cable, or fiber-optic lines and enables your router, computers, phones, and smart devices to access the internet. Unplugging it cuts your home internet.

- **Fiber optic:** thin, hair-like glass or plastic thread that carries internet and phone signals as pulses of light. It provides very fast, reliable internet because light travels quickly through these fibers and can carry a lot of data over long distances.
- **Router:** a home device that directs internet traffic between your modem and your devices (phones, computers, smart TVs). It creates your Wi-Fi network, allowing multiple devices to connect to the internet at once.

***Hidden panel:** a part of an app or webpage that stays out of view until you ask for it (by clicking a button, tapping an icon, or swiping). It slides or pops open to show extra options or information, then hides again when you're done.

- **Web page:** a single screen of information on the internet that you see in your browser. It can include text, images, links, and buttons; many web pages together make up a website.

***iOS:** the operating system (software) that runs iPhones and iPads, managing apps, touch controls, calls, messages, and settings so the device works.

***Link banner:** usually a horizontal graphic or strip on a webpage or app that contains a link; tapping it takes you to another page, offer, or site.

***Load (loading a page):** The process of a web page appearing on your screen after you ask for it.

***Mark as read (email):** tell your email app that a message has already been seen. The message stays in your mailbox but no longer appears as a new/unread item (no bold or unread count).

***On-screen text:** any words or letters you see displayed on your device's screen, like labels, instructions, or messages, or article text.

***Pop-up:** a small window or message that suddenly appears over what you were viewing on your screen, often asking you to take action (like sign up, confirm, or close). You can usually close it with an "X" or a "Close" button.

***Public hotspot:** a place where you can connect your phone or laptop to the internet using Wi-Fi provided for anyone nearby, like at a café, library, or airport.

***QR—Quick Response:** A square barcode you scan with your phone's camera to open a website, see information, or add a contact.

***Real spoken content audio:** a recording of a real person talking (not music, beeps, or computer-generated speech). Examples: a voice message, an interview, or someone's recorded instructions.

***Reusable link—**keeps working each time (unless the owner changes or removes it).

***Screenshot:** a picture of whatever is currently shown on your device's screen, saved as an image you can view, share, or keep.

***Sync:** means that multiple places holding the same kind of information keep each other updated automatically. When something changes in one place, the other copies reflect that change without the user having to do anything.

***Tab (email):** a labeled section or folder in your email app that sorts messages into groups (for example: Primary, Social, Promotions). Tapping a tab shows only the emails in that category.

***Unlock phone.** This usually means entering a passcode, using your fingerprint, or using your face to unlock the screen and access apps.

***Zoom in:** make what's on the screen appear larger so you can see details more clearly (pinch out on a touchscreen or use a plus button).

***Zoom out:** make what's on the screen appear smaller so you can see more of the page or image at once (pinch in on a touchscreen or use a minus button).