What is CS?

We like to say that CS teaches you how to think more methodically and how to solve problems more effectively. As such, its lessons are applicable well beyond the boundaries of CS itself.

But CS is also, more generally, the study of information. How do you represent it? With what methods (aka algorithms) can you process it?

Perhaps the most liberal answer, though, is that CS “has no exclusive domain of its own, and that its importance comes from the problems to which it is applied.” And therein lies the excitement. CS empowers you with tools and ideas that can be applied to practically any domain of interest to you, both in college and beyond.

What is CS not?

Contrary to popular belief, CS is not really about programming, even though you do learn how to program. Programming languages are tools that computer scientists use or create in order to solve problems of interest to them.

How can I get a secondary in CS?

Take any four courses out of CS50, CS51, CS61, or courses numbered 100 or higher. See page 9 for popular study cards. See Computer Science under Secondary Fields in the Handbook for Students.

How do I concentrate in CS?

Take at least two of CS50, CS51, and CS61; take CS121 and another “theory” course; take four technical electives; and take both Math 21b and either Math 21a or Stat 110. Plus take any of Math M, Math 1a, Math 1b, and CS20 as needed. See page 8 for popular study cards. See Computer Science under Fields of Concentration in the Handbook for Students.

Can I change my concentration to CS?

Yes, so long as you still have time to satisfy the requirements. Even David J. Malan ’99, who now teaches CS50, didn’t take his first CS course until his sophomore year, when he switched from Government to CS.

Does CS require a thesis?

No, not for non-Honors or Honors, but for High Honors and Highest Honors, it’s expected. See Computer Science under Fields of Concentration in the Handbook for Students.

Is a thesis just a big program?

No, a thesis is a research paper. You might end up writing programs in order to evaluate your ideas, but those programs are ordinarily means to an end, not an end in themselves. Visit cs.harvard.edu/thesis for examples.
How do I graduate with Honors in CS?
Take six technical electives instead of four and have a sufficiently high concentration GPA. See Computer Science under Fields of Concentration in the Handbook for Students.

How do I graduate with High Honors in CS?
High Honors are decided by faculty vote. You must ordinarily write an “excellent thesis” to be considered. See Computer Science under Fields of Concentration in the Handbook for Students.

How do I graduate with Highest Honors in CS?
Highest Honors are decided by faculty vote. You must ordinarily write an “outstanding thesis” to be considered. See Computer Science under Fields of Concentration in the Handbook for Students.

Do any CS courses count for Gen Ed?
Yes! To satisfy Empirical & Mathematical Reasoning, take CS1, CS20, CS50, or CS171. (Note that CS1 does not count toward a concentration or secondary in CS.) To satisfy Culture & Belief, take CS105.

Should I study CS even if I don’t want to be a programmer?
Yes! CS concentrators head off in all sorts of directions after graduation. See Figure 1 for titles that alumni since 1984 now hold. See Figure 2 for fields in which alumni since 1984 can now be found.

Should I activate Advanced Standing and get a fourth-year master’s degree in CS?
Maybe! If you are eligible for Advanced Standing and think you could handle eight (mostly) 200-level CS courses, it’s a great opportunity. Your bachelor’s degree doesn’t even need to be in CS, so long as you can still satisfy the prerequisites for the 200-level courses. See Other Academic Opportunities in the Handbook for Students.

Can I do a joint concentration between CS and another field?
Yes, but you probably shouldn’t. Joint concentrations are really for students who want to write a thesis on some research problem in the intersection of two fields. If you simply want to study both fields, it’s generally best to get a secondary or simply take courses in CS or the other field.

Is CS part of Mind, Brain, and Behavior?

Does a grade of SAT in CS50 count toward concentration or secondary credit?
Yes, a SAT in CS50 would count toward concentration or secondary credit.
Should I concentrate or minor in CS even if I don’t want to work in tech?

Yes! CS empowers you to solve problems in all sorts of domains. Here's where alumni since 1984 can be found:

ACME Labs • AECOM • AT&T • AXA Equitable • Abercrombie and Fitch • Addison-Wesley Publishing Co • Administration for Children & Families • Adobe Systems • Adult Cardiovascular Consultants, P.A. • Advanced Research Projects Agency - Energy U.S. Department of Energy • Agilex Technologies, Inc. • Air Force Research Laboratory • Airbnb.com • Alberto Campari Knoepfler, Architect • Amazon.com • American Express • Amgen Inc. • Ancestry.com • Angelynn Grant Design • Angle Assoc • AppNexus, Inc • Apple Inc. • Apple, Inc. • Arbor Scientia • Argosy Partners • Associates International, Inc. • Atco Plastics Inc • Athens University of Economics • Autodesk, Inc. • BBN • BBW Technologies • BC Partners • BMO Capital Markets • Babcock & Wilcox Alliance Research Center • Bain Capital Sankaty Advisors • Banaras Hindu University • Bank of America • Bay Imaging Consultants • Bechtel Limited • Bell Laboratories • Bellcore • BlackBerry • Blue Mountain Capital Management • Boeing Satellite Systems • Bogazici University • Boston Common • Boston Public Schools • Bradley Woods & Co. Ltd. • Brickhouse Freight • Bridgewater Associates • Bridgewood Design • Brooktrout Technology • Bungie, LLC • C A McNary and Associates • C S Draper Laboratory • CBCS • CISCO Systems Foundation • CTB/McGraw-Hill • Cambridge Innovation Center • Canadian Consulate General • Cancer Services of New Mexico • Cane & Boniface, PC • Canon Inc. • Capital One • Center Mfg Co • Charles Schwab • Chelmsford Public Schools • Chevron Corporation • Chrysler/JTE • Cisco Systems • Citibank • Citigroup • Citigroup Inc. • City Gas Pte Ltd • Code.org • Cohera Medical, Inc. • College of Engineering • Comcast • CommonMind LLC • Cornell University • Craig Taylor Equipment • Creare Inc • Ctr. for Sustainability and Global Environment University of Wisconsin-Madison • D. E. Shaw & Co. • DAVA Oncology • Dalberg Global Development Advisors • Damtp Center for Mathematical Sciences • Davidson
Life after 50

You can head off in all sorts of directions after CS50, but here are some popular routes. See Computer Science in the Courses of Instruction for prerequisites.
Can I do research in CS?

Yes! Many CS courses offer opportunities for research, particularly 200-level courses. And you can take CS91r to work one-on-one with faculty. Students and faculty do research in all sorts of areas, including, but not limited to:

- Architecture
- Artificial Intelligence
- Computational and Data Science
- Computational Neuroscience
- Economics and Computation
- Graphics, Vision, Visualization, and Interaction
- Information and Society
- Programming Languages
- Systems, Networks, and Databases
- Theory of Communication
- Theory of Computation

Will everyone in CS know more than me?

No! Contrary to popular belief, not every Computer Scientist has been programming since childhood! In fact, 68% of the students who took CS50 in Fall 2017 had never taken a CS course before. Only 22% had taken one, and only 10% had taken two or more, per Figure 3.

Figure 3: CS50 is most students’ very first course in CS. 68% of the students who took CS50 in Fall 2017 had never taken a CS course before, 22% had taken one, and 10% had taken two or more.
Popular Study Cards for Secondaries

Plenty of other combinations are possible. Graduate-level (200-level) courses are also allowed!

For “those less comfortable”
- CS50: Introduction to Computer Science I
- CS105: Privacy and Technology
- CS108: Intelligent Systems: Design and Ethical Challenges
- CS179: Design of Usable Interactive Systems

For “those more comfortable”
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS61: Systems Programming and Machine Organization
- CS124: Data Structures and Algorithms
- CS161: Operating Systems

For those interested in data
- CS50: Introduction to Computer Science I
- CS109a: Introduction to Data Science
- CS109b: Advanced Topics in Data Science
- CS126: Fairness, Privacy, and Validity in Data Analysis

For those interested in economics
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS121: Introduction to Theoretical Computer Science
- CS134: Networks
- CS136: Economics and Computation

For those interested in efficiency
- CS50: Introduction to Computer Science I
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS121: Introduction to Theoretical Computer Science
- CS124: Data Structures and Algorithms

For those interested in graphics
- CS50: Introduction to Computer Science I
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS171: Visualization
- CS175: Computer Graphics

For those interested in hardware
- CS61: Systems Programming and Machine Organization
- CS141: Computing Hardware
- CS146: Computer Architecture
- CS148: Design of VLSI Circuits and Systems

For those interested in life sciences
- CS50: Introduction to Computer Science I
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS124: Data Structures and Algorithms
- CS171: Visualization

For those interested in business
- CS50: Introduction to Computer Science I
- CS105: Privacy and Technology
- CS127: Cryptography
- CS165: Data Systems

For those interested in math
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS121: Introduction to Theoretical Computer Science
- CS124: Data Structures and Algorithms
- CS191: Classics of Computer Science

For those interested in networks
- CS50: Introduction to Computer Science I
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS143: Computer Networks
- CS144r: Networks Design Projects

For those interested in programming languages
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS61: Systems Programming and Machine Organization
- CS152: Programming Languages
- CS153: Compilers

For those interested in robotics
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS121: Introduction to Theoretical Computer Science
- CS181: Machine Learning
- CS189: Autonomous Multi-Robot Systems

For those interested in speech recognition
- CS50: Introduction to Computer Science I
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS182: Artificial Intelligence
- CS187: Computational Linguistics

For those interested in software development
- CS50: Introduction to Computer Science I
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS124: Data Structures and Algorithms
- CS182: Artificial Intelligence
Popular Study Cards for Concentrators

Plenty of other combinations are possible. Graduate-level (200-level) courses are also allowed!

For late converts to CS

- Math 1a: Introduction to Calculus
- Math 1b: Calculus, Series, and Differential Equations
- AM21b: Mathematical Methods in the Sciences
- CS20: Discrete Mathematics for Computer Science
- CS50: Introduction to Computer Science I
- CS61: Systems Programming and Machine Organization
- CS109a: Introduction to Data Science
- CS109b: Advanced Topics in Data Science
- CS121: Introduction to Theoretical Computer Science
- CS124: Data Structures and Algorithms
- CS126: Fairness, Privacy, and Validity in Data Analysis
- CS141: Computing Hardware
- CS179: Design of Usable Interactive Systems

For those without prior college-level math, interested in human-computer interaction

- Math 1a: Introduction to Calculus
- Math 1b: Calculus, Series, and Differential Equations
- AM21a: Mathematical Methods in the Sciences
- AM21b: Mathematical Methods in the Sciences
- CS20: Discrete Mathematics for Computer Science
- CS50: Introduction to Computer Science I
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS61: Systems Programming and Machine Organization
- CS96: System Design Projects
- CS121: Introduction to Theoretical Computer Science
- CS124: Data Structures and Algorithms
- CS127: Cryptography
- CS141: Computing Hardware
- CS146: Computer Architecture
- CS179: Design of Usable Interactive Systems
- CS182: Artificial Intelligence

For those with stronger math backgrounds, interested in hard-core systems

- AM21a: Mathematical Methods in the Sciences
- AM21b: Mathematical Methods in the Sciences
- CS50: Introduction to Computer Science I
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS61: Systems Programming and Machine Organization
- CS96: System Design Projects
- CS121: Introduction to Theoretical Computer Science
- CS124: Data Structures and Algorithms
- CS127: Cryptography
- CS143: Computer Networks
- CS144r: Network Design Projects
- CS148: Design of VLSI Circuits and Systems
- CS153: Compilers
- CS161: Operating Systems
- CS165: Data Systems

For budding theorists writing theses

- Math 25a: Honors Linear Algebra and Real Analysis I
- Math 25b: Honors Linear Algebra and Real Analysis II
- AM107: Graph Theory and Combinatorics
- CS50: Introduction to Computer Science I
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS91r: Supervised Reading and Research
- CS121: Introduction to Theoretical Computer Science
- CS124: Data Structures and Algorithms
- CS127: Introduction to Cryptography
- CS134: Networks
- CS141: Computing Hardware
- CS152: Programming Languages
- CS175: Computer Graphics
- CS191: Classics of Computer Science

For those interested in machine intelligence

- AM21a: Mathematical Methods in the Sciences
- AM21b: Mathematical Methods in the Sciences
- CS20: Discrete Mathematics for Computer Science
- CS50: Introduction to Computer Science I
- CS51: Introduction to Computer Science II
- CS61: Systems Programming and Machine Organization
- CS121: Introduction to Theoretical Computer Science
- CS124: Data Structures and Algorithms
- CS136: Economics and Computation
- CS141: Computing Hardware
- CS146: Computer Architecture
- CS181: Machine Learning
- CS187: Computational Linguistics
- CS189: Autonomous Multi-Robot Systems