



Towing Terminology

Towing comes with its own lingo, which can be intimidating at first. But all the terms boil down to simple measurements, and there's no need to memorize them — you can always look them up again here. Let's break them down.

Towing Capacity

Your vehicle's Towing Capacity is the maximum amount of weight it can safely pull, which changes based on how it's configured, how much weight it's already carrying, and how you distribute and control the load you need to tow.

GVWR

Gross Vehicle Weight Rating is the maximum amount of weight a vehicle can hold while sitting still. It takes into account the strength of the frame, suspension, axles, and wheels.

Your tow vehicle and the trailer you are using it to tow will each have their own GVWR. It's possible to overload each one separately.

Your tow vehicle's GVWR and its Towing Capacity are different numbers.

- The GVWR is the limit of a fully loaded vehicle (including all people, suitcases, food etc).
- The Towing Capacity is how much weight the vehicle can handle pulling horizontally.

GTW

GTW is the Gross Trailer Weight. It is the total weight of your trailer and its cargo. If you were to place the fully loaded trailer on a scale, the resulting measurement would be the GTW. If your GTW exceeds your vehicle's Towing Capacity, you will not be able to move it safely. It is crucial that you never attempt to tow a GTW higher than your Towing Capacity. If you do, you're likely to damage the tow vehicle, the trailer, or both and be unable to control the vehicle properly.



GCVWR

Gross Combined Vehicle Weight Rating is the maximum weight of your tow vehicle and trailer combined, both loaded with all cargo. The tow vehicle and trailer each have their own separate GVWR numbers, which, combined, make up the GCWR.

- GVWR Vehicle + GVWR Trailer = GCWR

GAWR

Gross Axle Weight Rating is the maximum amount of weight one axle can support. This number will almost always show differences between the front and rear axles. The two can be different materials or diameters, and few cars have a perfect 50-50 weight balance between the two axles.

TW

Tongue Weight is the force pushing down on the trailer Hitch by the load being hauled. Tongue weight can change based on how the load gets distributed within and on the trailer.

Braked vs. Unbraked Towing Capacity

Some trailers come equipped with their own brakes, connected electrically to the tow vehicle so that stepping on the vehicle's brake pedal activates the tow vehicle's brakes and the trailer's brakes at the same time. A vehicle can tow a much heavier load under control if the trailer operates with its own brakes.

Thus, braked Towing Capacity, or the amount your tow vehicle can tow if the trailer has its own brakes, is higher than unbraked Towing Capacity, or the amount your tow vehicle can tow if the trailer does not have brakes.



Trailer Hitch Classes

Once you know the various weights and capacities of your tow vehicle and trailer, you're not done. The next step is to understand the device that connects them. Tow Hitches operate with their own physical limits.

They get divided into five classes:

Class I

Generally used for small and midsize cars and crossovers, Class I Hitches can pull up to 2,000 pounds and generally withstand a tongue weight of 200 pounds. You might use a Class I Hitch to carry a small cargo tray or pull a small tent camper or personal watercraft.

Class II

Generally used for large cars, crossovers, and minivans, Class II Hitches can pull up to 3,500 pounds and withstand a tongue weight of 350 pounds. You might use a Class II Hitch to tow a trailer carrying a small boat.

Class III

Generally used for full-size vans, trucks, and SUVs, Class III Hitches can pull up to 5,000 pounds and withstand a tongue weight of 800 pounds. You might use a Class III Hitch to tow a medium or midsize camper or boat.

Class IV

Generally used on full-size vans, trucks, and SUVs, Class IV Hitches can pull up to 10,000 pounds and withstand a tongue weight of 1,200 pounds. They are the smallest class of Hitch usable with loads heavy enough to require weight distribution. You might use a Class IV Hitch to tow a large boat, larger camper, or utility trailer carrying a load of lawn equipment.



Class V

These Hitches can pull up to 20,000 pounds and get used only with full-size trucks or SUVs specifically configured for towing heavy loads. Class V can withstand a tongue weight of up to 2,000 pounds. You might use a Class V Hitch to tow a horse trailer or multi-car trailer.

Always remember every component in a towing system must be capable of the load you are planning to pull/haul. The system is only as strong as its “weakest link”.