

Forms of Honor and Recognition

People and institutions honor achievement in many different ways. The names often overlap, and the distinctions are partly historical and cultural, but there are recurring patterns.

1. Prize

A **prize** is usually something won in a competition or for a specific accomplishment.

Examples:

- The Fields Medal is often described as a prize.
- The Pulitzer Prize.
- The Nobel Prize.

Typical features:

- Often competitive.
- Usually tied to a specific achievement.
- Frequently comes with money.
- Emphasizes being judged “best” or “most outstanding.”

A prize often has the flavor of “you won.”

2. Award

An **award** is the broadest and most general term.

Examples:

- Teaching awards.
- Service awards.
- Lifetime achievement awards.

Typical features:

- Can recognize excellence, service, leadership, or contributions.
- May or may not involve competition.
- Often includes a certificate, plaque, medal, or trophy.

An award is essentially any formal recognition.

3. Medal

A **medal** is both a physical object and a type of distinction.

Examples:

- Fields Medal.
- National Medal of Science.
- Presidential Medal of Freedom.

Typical features:

- Traditionally a metal disk worn or displayed.
- Often intended to signal prestige and permanence.
- Historically associated with military or state honors.

A medal tends to sound more ceremonial and elite than “award.”

4. Trophy

A **trophy** is usually a large physical object symbolizing victory.

Examples:

- The Stanley Cup.
- Sports championship trophies.

Typical features:

- Strongly associated with sports and contests.
- Often displayed publicly.
- Symbolizes triumph over competitors.

Trophies emphasize victory and spectacle.

5. Ribbon

A **ribbon** is often a visible marker of rank, placement, or participation.

Examples:

- Military ribbons.
- County fair ribbons.
- Participation ribbons.

Typical features:

- Often less formal than medals.
- Can indicate categories or levels.
- Easy to wear or display.

Ribbons frequently communicate status efficiently and visibly.

Other Forms of Honor

6. Plaque

A mounted engraved plate recognizing achievement.

Examples:

- "Employee of the Month" plaques.
- Commemorative building plaques.

Features:

- Usually permanent or display-oriented.
 - Often local or institutional.
 - Common in schools and organizations.
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7. Certificate

A formal written recognition.

Examples:

- Certificates of achievement.
- Certificates of appreciation.

Features:

- Relatively inexpensive.
 - Common for participation or completion.
 - Emphasizes official acknowledgment.
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8. Citation

A formal statement praising accomplishments.

Examples:

- Military citations.
- Civic citations.

Features:

- Often textual rather than physical.
 - Can accompany another honor.
 - Emphasizes the reasons for recognition.
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9. Decoration

A formal honor, especially military or governmental.

Examples:

- Military decorations.
- State decorations.

Features:

- Highly ceremonial.
 - Often tied to bravery or national service.
 - Usually includes insignia or ribbons.
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10. Order

A structured system of honors, often with ranks.

Examples:

- Order of the British Empire.
- Legion of Honor.

Features:

- Membership in an elite body.
- Often has levels such as Knight, Officer, Commander.
- Traditionally linked to monarchies or states.

An “order” is less a single prize and more admission into a distinguished class.

11. Fellowship

Recognition through affiliation and status.

Examples:

- Fellow of the Royal Society.
- ACM Fellow.
- IEEE Fellow.

Features:

- Common in academia and professional societies.
- Recognizes sustained accomplishment.
- Often lifelong.

A fellowship often conveys peer recognition and professional standing.

12. Chair or Named Professorship

An academic honor attached to a position.

Examples:

- Endowed chairs.
- Distinguished professorships.

Features:

- Combines prestige with funding.
 - Signals long-term scholarly distinction.
 - Often named after donors or famous scholars.
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13. Honorary Degree

A degree granted without completing normal academic requirements.

Examples:

- Honorary doctorate.

Features:

- Symbolic recognition of achievement or impact.
 - Often awarded by universities to public figures, scientists, writers, or philanthropists.
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14. Title

An honorary label attached to a person.

Examples:

- Professor Emeritus.
- Poet Laureate.
- National Artist.

Features:

- May be lifelong.
 - Often signals official standing or esteem.
 - Sometimes purely symbolic.
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15. Hall of Fame Induction

Permanent public recognition.

Examples:

- Baseball Hall of Fame.
- Rock and Roll Hall of Fame.

Features:

- Emphasizes historical importance.
 - Usually selective.
 - Creates a sense of immortality or legacy.
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16. Monument or Memorial Naming

Recognition through naming something after a person.

Examples:

- Buildings.
- Schools.
- Streets.
- Scholarships.
- Theorems.

Features:

- Intended to preserve memory.
- Often one of the most enduring honors.

Academia frequently honors people this way:

- Gödel's theorem.
 - Turing Award.
 - Abel Prize.
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17. Knighthood or Nobility

State-bestowed social rank.

Examples:

- Knight Bachelor.
- Baron.

Features:

- Historically connected to monarchy.
 - Often carries titles like "Sir" or "Dame."
 - Sometimes hereditary, sometimes not.
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18. Canonization or Sainthood

Religious recognition.

Examples:

- Saints in Christianity.

Features:

- Spiritual rather than secular.

- Recognizes holiness or martyrdom.
 - Often permanent and deeply symbolic.
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Informal Differences Between Terms

Although the categories overlap, the words tend to carry different connotations.

Term	Typical Flavor
Prize	Competitive victory
Award	General recognition
Medal	Prestige and ceremony
Trophy	Visible triumph
Ribbon	Rank or participation
Fellowship	Peer recognition
Order	Elite membership
Decoration	Formal/state honor
Title	Social standing
Hall of Fame	Historical legacy

In Academia Specifically

Academia particularly values:

- Prizes.
- Medals.
- Fellowships.
- Named lectures.
- Named professorships.
- Election to academies.
- Honorary degrees.

Some academic distinctions differ subtly:

- A **prize** often recognizes one breakthrough.
- A **fellowship** often recognizes a sustained body of work.

- Election to an academy (for example, the National Academy of Sciences) is often viewed as peer validation.
 - A named chair combines recognition with institutional support.
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Why So Many Different Forms Exist

Different forms of honor evolved in different institutions:

Institution	Typical Honor
Military	Medals, ribbons, decorations
Sports	Trophies, championships
Academia	Prizes, fellowships, chairs
Government	Orders, titles, medals
Religion	Sainthood, canonization
Corporations	Awards, plaques, bonuses
Arts	Awards, prizes, hall of fame

The form often reflects what the institution values:

- Competition.
 - Loyalty.
 - Prestige.
 - Legacy.
 - Service.
 - Public visibility.
 - Permanence.
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Interesting Borderline Cases

Some honors blur categories.

- The Fields Medal is called a medal but functions like a prize.
- The Turing Award is called an award but is treated like a Nobel-level prize in computer science.
- Olympic gold medals are medals but also trophies of competition.
- Nobel Prizes come with medals.

So the terminology is partly historical branding.

A Deeper Observation

Different honors reward different kinds of achievement:

Achievement Type	Typical Recognition
Single great accomplishment	Prize
Long-term contribution	Fellowship or lifetime award
Courage or service	Decoration
Competitive victory	Trophy
Elite status	Order or title
Historical importance	Hall of Fame or naming
Spiritual example	Canonization

The type of honor often says as much about the institution giving it as about the person receiving it.