



API vs MCP

The 1-page cheat sheet, in plain English

THE 10-SECOND VERSION

API = a door with its own lock

Every app or service exposes its own interface: its own addresses, rules and keys. To use ten services, you deal with ten different "doors".

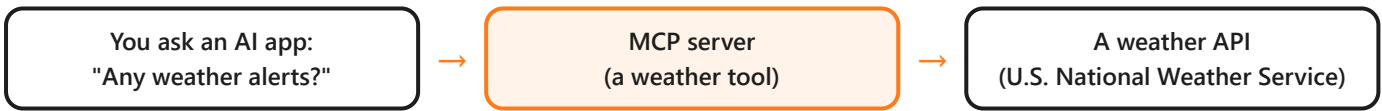
MCP = a USB-C port for AI

An open standard for connecting AI applications to external systems (data, tools, workflows) in one consistent way, instead of a custom connection each time.

SIDE BY SIDE

	API	MCP (Model Context Protocol)
What it is	An interface a service exposes so other software can talk to it.	An open-source standard for connecting AI applications to external systems.
Who uses it	Any software or developer.	AI applications (like Claude or ChatGPT) and the tools or data they connect to.
Connecting many things	Usually a separate integration for each service.	One standard way, so a tool can be built once and used by many AI apps.
Relationship	Still the layer that real services provide.	Does not replace APIs. An MCP server can call an API underneath.

HOW THEY FIT TOGETHER: A REAL EXAMPLE



The official MCP tutorial builds exactly this: a weather server that queries the U.S. National Weather Service API. So the API is still there. MCP is the standard way the AI app reaches it.

RULE OF THUMB

- **Building software** that talks to a service? Use its **API**.
- **Want an AI assistant** to use your tool or data? Expose it through an **MCP server** (it can call APIs underneath).
- Not sure? Start with the API. Add MCP when an AI app needs to use it.

BEFORE YOU CONNECT ANYTHING

- Only connect servers you trust.
- Check what data and actions you are allowing.
- Start with read-only access when you can.
- Never paste API keys into chats.

General good practice. See the official MCP security guide for details.

MINI GLOSSARY

MCP client

The AI application that connects to MCP servers (e.g. Claude, ChatGPT, VS Code).

MCP server

A program that exposes data or tools to AI applications.

API key

A secret that lets software use a service as you. Keep it private.