History of technology, the development over time of systematic techniques for making and doing things. The term technology, a combination of the Greek techne, “art, craft,” with  logos, “word, speech,” meant in Greece a discourse on the arts, both fine and applied. When it first appeared in English in the 17th century, it was used to mean a discussion of the applied arts only, and gradually these “arts” themselves came to be the object of the [designation](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/designation). By the early 20th century the term embraced a growing range of means, processes, and ideas in addition to [tools](https://www.britannica.com/technology/tool) and [machines](https://www.britannica.com/technology/machine). By mid-century [technology](https://www.britannica.com/technology/technology) was defined by such phrases as “the means or activity by which man seeks to change or manipulate his environment.” Even such broad definitions have been criticized by observers who point out the increasing difficulty of distinguishing between scientific inquiry and technological activity.

A highly compressed account of the history of technology such as this one must adopt a rigorous methodological pattern if it is to do justice to the subject without grossly distorting it one way or another. The plan followed in the present article is primarily chronological, tracing the development of technology through phases that succeed each other in time. Obviously, the division between phases is to a large extent arbitrary. One factor in the weighting has been the enormous acceleration of Western technological development in recent centuries; Eastern technology is considered in this article in the main only as it relates to the development of modern technology.

Within each chronological phase a standard method has been adopted for [surveying](https://www.britannica.com/technology/surveying) the technological experience and [innovations](https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/innovations). This begins with a brief review of the general social conditions of the period under discussion, and then goes on to consider the dominant materials and sources of [power](https://www.britannica.com/science/power-physics) of the period, and their application to [food](https://www.britannica.com/topic/food) production, [manufacturing](https://www.britannica.com/technology/manufacturing) [industry](https://www.britannica.com/money/topic/industry), [building construction](https://www.britannica.com/technology/construction), transport and communications, [military technology](https://www.britannica.com/technology/military-technology), and medical technology. In a final section the sociocultural consequences of technological change in the period are examined. This framework is modified according to the particular requirements of every period— discussions of new materials, for instance, occupy a substantial place in the accounts of earlier phases when new metals were being introduced but are comparatively unimportant in descriptions of some of the later phases—but the general pattern is retained throughout. One key factor that does not fit easily into this pattern is that of the development of tools. It has seemed most convenient to relate these to the study of materials, rather than to any particular application, but it has not been possible to be completely consistent in this treatment. Further discussion of specific areas of technological development is provided in a variety of other articles: for example, see [electronics](https://www.britannica.com/technology/electronics); [exploration](https://www.britannica.com/topic/Earth-exploration); [information processing](https://www.britannica.com/technology/information-processing).