

# Spotter's Guide to Rail Transit

The most common kinds of rail transit are vintage trolleys, modern streetcars, light rail, heavy rail, and commuter rail. Unfortunately, these terms are often misused, which leads to confusing debates. This guide presents the basic characteristics of each type.



Vintage trolleys are usually designed to appear old fashioned and mainly serve as tourist attractions to popular shopping areas.



Modern streetcars appear streamlined and most often run in streets as single cars and are powered by electricity, connecting to the overhead wires with a single pole. They are designed to serve downtown residents and shoppers.



Light rail may run in streets or on exclusive rights of way, often runs in trains of two or three cars, and is powered by electricity, connecting to the overhead wires with a pantograph. The “light” refers to the load capacity, not the weight of the cars or rail.



Heavy rail runs in subterranean or elevated lines, always on exclusive rights of way, in trains of four to eight or more cars, and is powered by electricity. The “heavy” refers to load capacity, not weight.



Commuter rail usually runs on existing or abandoned freight railroad tracks, which may cross streets or pedestrian paths. It is usually powered by Diesel locomotives pulling several passenger cars except in the New York-Connecticut areas where it is usually powered by electric locomotives.