

# Amazon Echo with Alexa

## 20 Useful Skills and Functions



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This document outlines 20 of the most useful skills and functions available with Alexa on an Amazon Echo device. Please note, these are only my thoughts, and of course, there will be dozens, if not hundreds of other things you can do!

Before continuing with this document, I want to spend a few minutes explaining what an Amazon Echo is, what you need in order to make one work and how to talk to Alexa, Amazon's voice assistant, for best results.

### **What is an Amazon Echo?**

In simple terms, an Amazon Echo is a device which contains one or more microphones, a loud speaker and a small processing unit. It can come in a range of sizes. The smallest of all is called the Amazon Echo Dot. This is round in shape and is a little larger than a tennis ball. Earlier models of the Dot are shaped like a small tin of baked beans! The next size up is called the Amazon Echo. This is shaped like the Dot, but around 3 times the size. Earlier models are shaped like a tube of Pringles, but not quite as tall. The largest model is called the Amazon Echo Studio. This is rectangular in shape, with rounded edges and has top quality sound. There is even a model which contains a screen - ideal for video calling! This model is called the Amazon Echo Show and it comes in a range of screen sizes. It has a deep round base (containing the microphones and speakers) with a screen attached to the top.

### ***How much does an Amazon Echo cost?***

At the time of writing (25 November 2023), the Amazon Echo Dot is priced at £54.99. The Amazon Echo is priced at £109.99, the Amazon Echo Studio is priced at £219.99, the 5" Amazon Echo Show is priced at £89.99, the 8" Echo Show is priced at £119.99, the 10" Amazon Echo Show is priced at £259 and the 15" Echo Show is priced at £299.99. You can purchase an Amazon Echo device direct from Amazon UK, or from a number of High Street stores such as Argos, Curry's PC World, John Lewis, Tesco etc.

From time to time, Amazon offer each device at a reduced rate, so look out for special offers! In addition, Amazon often bring out new and updated versions of their Amazon Echo devices, so the models and prices may vary!

## What do you need to make an Amazon Echo work?

In order for an Amazon Echo device to work, you need 6 things:

- An Amazon Echo device.
- An electrical wall socket to plug your Echo device into.
- An available Wi-Fi network.
- An Amazon Shopping Account.
- A Smart Phone or Tablet.
- The Amazon Alexa App.

## How does an Echo device actually work?

In order for an Amazon Echo to work, you need a piece of software called Alexa. Alexa is a virtual, computer-generated personal assistant, that is able to communicate with you in human-sounding speech. It is Alexa that provides the real power to the Amazon Echo.

Alexa can be downloaded as an app on your Smart Phone or Tablet from the Play Store (Android) or the App Store (Apple iOS). Once the app has been installed, you go through a fairly simple set-up process in which you provide your Amazon Account details (User Name and Password) and then finally enter the details of your Wi-Fi network to connect to the internet. Once the set-up procedure has been completed, you are ready to use your Amazon Echo!

You communicate with Alexa by issuing voice commands or requests. When you issue a command or make a request, your Amazon Echo connects to the Internet via your Wi-Fi network. It then gathers the voice commands that follow and sends them to a natural voice recognition service on the web called Alexa Voice Service, which interprets them and sends back the appropriate response, in human-sounding speech.

Before you can communicate with Alexa though, you first need to wake her up by saying the wake-up word. The default wake-up word is 'Alexa'. When you say the wake-up word, the Amazon Echo displays a blue coloured light ring which indicates that the microphone has been initiated and Alexa is ready to record your command. To stop the device recording, either stay silent for 5 seconds, or say "Alexa, stop".

It is possible to change the wake up word to Amazon, Computer, Echo or Ziggy. This might be a good idea if someone in the household is called Alex. Saying their name might inadvertently result in Alexa waking up and recording what you say afterwards!

## How do I talk to Alexa?

To get the most out of Alexa, you need to know how to talk to her. Phrasing your commands and questions in the correct way will make a huge difference to how she answers them!

When asking Alexa for information, or issuing a command, it is best to pause for a couple of seconds after saying "Alexa". This will allow the Amazon Echo to turn on the microphone and detect your voice and prepare itself for your request or command. A blue coloured light ring will be displayed around the top of the device to indicate that Alexa is listening to you! If you are unable to see the light ring, then it is possible to have a sound played to indicate that Alexa is listening.

To enable the sound which informs you that Alexa is listening to you, follow these suggested steps:

- a. Open the **Amazon Alexa** app on your Smart Phone or Tablet.
- b. Activate the **More** tab, situated at the bottom right corner of the screen. Visually, this looks like 3 horizontal lines of differing lengths. Upon doing this, a popup menu will be displayed.
- c. From the menu, activate the button labelled **Settings**. Upon doing this, the **Settings** screen will be displayed.
- d. In the **Settings** screen, activate the button labelled **Device Settings**. Upon doing this, the **All Devices** screen will be displayed.
- e. In the **All Devices** screen, activate the button for the device you wish to have the sound played on. For reference, this will probably be labelled **Echo Dot**, or **Echo**. Upon doing this, the **Device Settings** screen for the device you specified will be displayed.
- f. Activate the **Device Settings** button, situated at the upper right corner of the screen. Visually, this looks like a cog wheel. Upon doing this, the Device Settings screen will be displayed.
- g. Towards the bottom of the screen, you will find a heading labelled **General**. Directly under this heading, you will find a button labelled **Sounds**. Activate this button! Upon doing this, the **Sounds** screen will be displayed.
- h. Towards the bottom of the **Sounds** screen, you will find a heading labelled **Request Sounds**. Directly under this heading, you will find two buttons. Activate the first of these buttons to enable the sound.
- i. Finally, activate the **Home** tab, situated at the bottom left corner of the screen. Upon doing this, the changes you made will be saved and the **Home** screen of the Alexa app will be displayed. That's it, a sound will now play after you speak to Alexa, to let you know that she is listening to you!

OK, you are now ready to find out my top 20 Amazon Echo Skills and functions! These are in no particular order, and only make up a tiny fraction of what you can actually say and achieve!

## **1. Changing Alexa's Voice and Speaking Rate**

By default, Alexa speaks with an American sounding female voice. For the majority of people, this is absolutely fine. However, if you have a hearing difficulty, or just don't like American accents, changing the voice to another dialect or a male voice, may make listening to Alexa a lot easier!

To change voices, simply say "Alexa, change your voice". Upon doing this, Alexa will say, "I have a few voices to choose from" and will then offer you another voice. Alternatively, if you want to hear another voice suggestion, say "Another one" and Alexa will suggest another voice and so on. When you have identified a suitable voice, say "Use this voice" and your device will play a short tone and Alexa will say "OK, you're all set, I'll be the voice you hear when you use this device".

If you find that Alexa is speaking too slowly, you can increase the speed. Simply say "Alexa, speak faster. Upon doing this, Alexa will say "OK, I will speak at this speed now" and increase the speed by approximately 10%. Conversely, if you find that Alexa is speaking too quickly, simply say "Alexa, speak slower". Again, Alexa will say "OK, I will speak at this speed now" and decrease the speed by approximately 10%.

## **2. Adjusting the Volume of your Echo Device**

Although there are buttons on your Amazon Echo device for increasing and decreasing the volume, you don't have to use them in order to turn the volume up or down.

You can ask Alexa to alter the volume for you. For example, say "Alexa, turn the Volume up". Alternatively, you can say "Alexa, Volume 7", to set the volume to level 7. For reference, the volume range goes from 1 (the quietest) all the way up to 10 (the loudest). The default volume is 5.

## **3. Making a Shopping List**

Alexa can compile lists. One which is always available is called the Shopping List! For example, to add bread to the shopping list, simply say "Alexa, add bread to my shopping list". Upon doing this, Alexa will say "OK, I've added bread to your shopping list". The Shopping List is actually stored in the Alexa app on your Smart Phone or Tablet, and on the Amazon Alexa web site.

To find out what is on your shopping list, say "Alexa, what's on my shopping list". Upon doing this, Alexa will read aloud all items on the list. If the list is empty, Alexa will inform you of this!

## Deleting Items from your Shopping List

You can delete items from the Shopping List using Alexa or the Alexa App on your Smart Phone or Tablet.

To delete an item on your Shopping List using Alexa, simply say for example, "Alexa, delete bread from my shopping list", assuming that the item to be deleted is bread. Alternatively, to delete an item from your shopping list using the Alexa app on your Smart Phone or Tablet, follow these suggested steps:

- a. Open the **Amazon Alexa** app on your Smart Phone or Tablet.
- b. Activate the **More** tab, situated at the bottom right corner of the screen. Upon doing this, a popup menu will be displayed.
- c. From the menu, activate the button labelled **Lists and Notes**. Upon doing this, the **Lists** screen will be displayed.
- d. In the **Lists** and Notes screen, you will find two tabs at the top of the screen labelled Lists and Notes. Activate the Lists tab! Upon doing this, a number of buttons for various lists will become available. One of these will be labelled **Shopping**. Activate this button! Upon doing this, the **Shopping** screen will be displayed.
- e. In the **Shopping** screen, you will find all of the items you have added to the Shopping List. To delete an item, tap the check box associated with an item. Upon doing this, the Item Details screen will be displayed.
- f. Now locate and activate the button labelled Delete Item. Upon doing this, the item will be deleted!
- g. Now activate the Back button, situated at the upper left corner of the screen, to return to the Shopping list Screen.
- h. Finally, activate the **Home** tab, situated at the bottom left corner of the screen. Upon doing this, the changes you made will be saved and the **Home** screen of the Alexa app will be displayed.

## 4. Spelling Words

Alexa is great at spelling words. Simply say "Alexa, how do you spell", followed by the word you want to be spelt. Upon doing this, Alexa will spell the word to you, nice and slowly!

This is a really nice feature if you enjoy doing crosswords and you want to know the spelling of a word!

## 5. Getting the Definition of a Word

Sometimes you will want to know what a particular word means. Well, Alexa can help with this! Say "Alexa, what is the definition of the word", followed by the word in question. Upon doing this, Alexa will provide you with the definition!

## 6. Converting Units of Measure

Alexa can convert many things. Say "Alexa, Convert" followed by what it is you want to be converted. For example:

"Alexa, convert 5 Stones into Kilogrammes".

"Alexa, convert 7 Miles into Kilometres".

"Alexa, convert 50 Yards into Metres".

"Alexa, convert 3 Inches into Centimetres".

"Alexa, convert 3 pints into litres".

Alexa can even convert currency. For example, "Alexa, convert 100 UK Pounds into Euros". This is especially useful for when you are due to travel abroad and you want to know how much money you need!

## 7. Setting a Timer

You can ask Alexa to set a timer. This is especially handy when cooking. Say "Alexa, set a timer for 5 minutes". Alexa will then say "Setting timer for 5 minutes". When 5 minutes has elapsed, the Timer sound will begin to play. To dismiss the Timer, simply say "Alexa, stop".

If you don't like the Timer sound, or the volume is too low, you can change these in the Alexa App on your Smart Phone or Tablet. To do this, follow these suggested steps:

- a. Open the **Amazon Alexa** app on your Smart Phone or Tablet.
- b. Activate the **More** tab, situated at the bottom right corner of the screen. Upon doing this, a popup menu will be displayed.
- c. From the menu, activate the button labelled **Settings**. Upon doing this, the **Settings** screen will be displayed.
- d. In the **Settings** screen, activate the button labelled **Device Settings**. Upon doing this, the **All Devices** screen will be displayed.
- e. In the **All Devices** screen, activate the button for the device you wish to change the Timer volume and/or Sound. For reference, this will probably be labelled **Echo Dot**, or **Echo**. Upon doing this, the **Device Settings** screen for the device you specified will be displayed.

- f. Activate the **Device Settings** button, situated at the upper right corner of the screen. Upon doing this, the Device Settings screen will be displayed.
- g. Towards the bottom of the Settings screen, you will find a heading labelled General. Directly beneath this heading, you will find a button labelled Sounds. Activate this button! Upon doing this, the Sounds screen will be displayed.
- h. Towards the top of the Settings screen, you will find a heading labelled **Alarms, Timers and Notifications**. Directly under this heading, you will find a slider for adjusting the volume. Make your adjustment by dragging the slider to the right to increase the volume, or to the left to decrease the volume.
- i. About half way down the **Sounds** screen, you will find another heading labelled **Customised Sounds**. Directly under this heading, you will find 2 buttons. The first button shows the name of the current sound used for alarms and timers. The second button shows the current setting for notifications.
- j. Activate the button associated with the alarm! Upon doing this, the Alarm Tone screen will be displayed.
- k. The **Alarm** Tone screen contains a list of available **Alarm/Timer** sounds. The list consists of a number of options starting with the current default sound), then Grand Tour Season 2 and Grand Tour. These play a couple of voice recordings of the stars of the Grand Tour Amazon TV program. Also in the list, you will find more traditional alarm sounds!
- l. Activate each **Alarm** sound to hear what they sound like. Upon doing this, the option you activate will become the sound for your **Alarms** and **timers**.
- m. When you have selected the desired sound for your Alarms and Timers, activate the Save button, situated at the upper right corner of the screen.
- n. **Finally, activate the Home** tab, situated at the bottom left corner of the screen. Upon doing this, the changes you made will be saved and the **Home** screen of the Alexa app will be displayed. That's it, you have now adjusted the volume and sound for your **Timers and alarms!**

## 8. Reminders

Alexa can remind you to do things. For example, you might want to be reminded to put the bins out. Simply say "Alexa, remind me to put the bins out at 6pm today". At 6pm, Alexa will play a sound, and say "Reminder, put the Bins out". To dismiss the reminder, say "Alexa, stop".

*Another example of using Reminders, is to ask Alexa to remind you to go to the Doctor's on Thursday. For this one, simply say "Alexa, remind me to go to the Doctor's on Thursday". Alexa will then ask what time you would like to be reminded. Say the time and you are done!*

Other examples for using Reminders are as follows:

"Alexa, remind me to take my medication at 9 o'clock tonight".

"Alexa, remind me to call Gary this afternoon at 2 O'clock".

"Alexa, remind me to record the final of Master Chef at 8 o'clock tonight".

"Alexa, remind me to buy a birthday card for Elizabeth on Saturday at 9:00am".

"Alexa, remind me to book a table at the restaurant".

## **Cancelling a Reminder**

If you want to cancel a reminder, simply say "Alexa, cancel my reminders". If you have more than one reminder, Alexa will ask you which one you wish to cancel. Simply say the particular entry and you are done. The reminder will be cancelled!

## **9. Setting Alarms**

If you want an early morning alarm call, for example for 6:00am, you can say "Alexa, Set an alarm for 6 O'clock in the morning". Alexa will then announce that the alarm has been set. At 6:00am, an alarm will sound. To stop the alarm, simply say "Alexa, stop".

It is possible to snooze an alarm. For example, if your alarm goes off, and you want another 10 minutes in bed, simply say "Alexa, snooze for 10 minutes". 10 Minutes later, the alarm will go off again!

You can even specify a radio station to be woken up to. For example, say "Alexa, wake me up to Classic FM at 6 o'clock in the morning". This time, Classic FM will start to play, instead of the usual alarm sound.

Other options for setting alarms are as follows:

"Alexa, wake me up to Heart Radio at 6:00am.

"Alexa, wake me up to Rock Music tomorrow morning at 7 O'clock".

"Alexa, set an alarm for every week day at 6:30 in the morning".

"Alexa, wake me up on Saturday morning at 8 O'clock".

## **Cancelling an Alarm**

To cancel an alarm, simply say "Alexa, cancel my alarms". If you have more than one alarm set, you will be prompted to specify which alarm you wish to cancel!

## **10. Finding Out the Weather Forecast**

Alexa can provide you with information about the weather. Say "Alexa, what is the weather like ". Alexa will then provide you with the weather conditions for your local area. You can specify a particular town or city if you wish!



**Note 1:** For local weather forecasts, you must first enter your Address, including your Post Code, into the Alexa App. You can do this by activating the More tab situated at the bottom right corner of the screen. Then by selecting **Settings**, Device Settings, Device Name (probably Amazon Echo) and then **Device Location**.

You can find out the weather for the next 7 days by saying "Alexa, what is the weather going to be like this week". When you say this, Alexa will provide you with the temperature and conditions for the next 7 days in your local area.

If you are going abroad in the near future, for example to Vienna in Austria, you can say "Alexa, what's the weather like in Vienna, Austria". Upon doing this, Alexa will inform you of the current weather conditions for Vienna!

## 11. Playing Radio Stations

One of the most popular uses of the Amazon Echo is playing radio stations. Say "Alexa, play BBC Radio 2". Upon doing this, Alexa will begin playing Radio 2 from the BBC. To stop the playing of the programme, say "Alexa, stop".

Alexa can play almost any radio station you can think of. These range from all of the BBC National and Local Radio Stations, to stations in America, Australia, India and even places such as Greenland!

If the radio station you are playing is from the BBC (national or local), you can ask Alexa to tell you what is currently playing. Simply say "Alexa, ask BBC what's playing". Upon doing this, Alexa will tell you the name of the song and the artist (if a song is playing). It will also tell you the name of the radio show you are listening to and the name of the presenter!

**Note 2:** In order to play radio stations from the BBC, you'll need to link your BBC Sounds account with Alexa. This involves entering your BBC sign-in details into the Alexa app.

## 12. Playing Music

You can ask Alexa to play songs by a particular artist, for example Frank Sinatra. Say "Alexa, play songs by Frank Sinatra", or "Play New York, New York by Frank Sinatra". In both cases, Alexa will start to play the music. To stop the music, say "Alexa, stop".

To play the next song, say "Alexa, next". To play the previous song, say "Alexa, previous".

You can ask Alexa to stop playing music after a specific time frame. For example, "Alexa, stop playing in half an hour".

**Note 3:** Often, Alexa will not play a song, and will say, for example, "I didn't find songs by Frank Sinatra in your library". Then, Alexa will ask you if you want to find out about Amazon Music Unlimited. This is a subscription based service, where you can choose from over 50 million songs for £4.99 per month. If you choose not to

subscribe, you will be very limited in what you can play. In my opinion, paying £4.99 a month for unlimited music is an absolute bargain! Alternatively, if you have a Spotify or Apple Music account, you can setup your Echo to play music from these services instead!

### **13. Finding Out Days of the Week**

You can ask Alexa to tell you what day of the week a certain date is. For example, "Alexa, what day of the week is 19 November?" Or, "Alexa, what day of the week does Christmas Day fall on". This feature is really useful if you are the kind of person who plans lots of days out or entertains a lot!

### **14. General Searches on the Web**

Alexa can provide you with a massive amount of information, straight out of the box. It can search the web and bring back information about almost anything. For example, "Alexa, how far is Mercury from the Earth?", "Alexa, what is the deepest lake in the world?" and "Alexa, who was the second President of the United States?" are very easy questions for Alexa to answer!

Sometimes, when asking Alexa to find information on the web, it will be unsuccessful. If this is the case, try rephrasing your web search. Doing this will often result in Alexa finding the information you are requesting!

### **15. World Capital Cities**

Alexa can tell you the name of every capital city in the world. For example, try saying "Alexa, what is the capital city of Brazil?". Alexa will inform you straightaway that it is Brasilia. You can even ask Alexa to inform you of the population of a particular city!

### **16. World Currencies**

Alexa can tell you the currency used in a particular country, for example Vietnam. Try saying "Alexa, what is the currency used in Vietnam?". Alexa will inform you that it is the Vietnamese Dong.

### **17. Making Voice Calls**

It is possible to voice call another Amazon Echo device. For example, if you have an Amazon Echo Dot and your friend David has an Amazon Echo, you can say "Alexa, call David's Echo". A second or two later, David's Echo will announce that he has an incoming call from you. All David then needs to do is say "Alexa, answer call" and you will be able to talk to each other! When you are done, say "Alexa, end call". You can even call landline and mobile phones. To do this, simply say "Alexa, call David" (assuming it is David you wish to call), and Alexa will place the call. If more than one number is listed for David, Alexa will ask which one you wish to use. In this case, simply say the one you want and the call will be placed.

Alternatively, you can say "call", followed by the telephone number you wish to call. For example, "call 01372 377701".

**Note 4:** To call a person by name, they must be in your contacts list on your Smart Phone or Tablet. Additionally, the Calling and Messaging options must be enabled in the Alexa App!

## 18. Finding Out Train Times

One skill which works really well for finding out the departure times of trains is called On My Way. To enable this skill, simply say "Alexa, enable On My Way".

Now, for example, to find out the time of the next train from Redhill to London Victoria, simply say "Alexa, ask On My Way to find the next train from Redhill to London Victoria". A few seconds later, Alexa will inform you of the next train which is leaving Redhill for Victoria, whether or not it is on time, and most importantly, which platform it will be departing from! Additionally, Alexa will inform you of the following train to depart Redhill to Victoria!

**Note 5:** It is not currently possible to plan a journey for another day using On My Way, nor is it possible to find out information regarding changes during a journey. Having said this, this kind of information is bound to be included in the near future!

## 19. Finding Out What's On TV

One really useful feature of Alexa is its ability to tell you what is on TV. Try saying "Alexa, what's on TV tonight". Upon doing this, Alexa will inform you of a number of programs on TV tonight, along with the channel number and time slot. You can also ask what is on TV now! In both cases, Alexa will only provide you with a few of the available programs.

You can be more specific! Say, for example, "Alexa, what is on ITV this afternoon". Alexa will then read the schedule for the afternoon's programs. In fact, you can ask what is on most Freeview channels and Alexa will tell you.

Here are some examples of finding out what is on TV:

"Alexa, what is on BBC2 tomorrow night"

"Alexa, what is on Channel 4 on Saturday afternoon"

"Alexa, when is Coronation Street next on".

## 20. Finding Recipes

Alexa is great at finding recipes and reading them to you. Try saying, "Alexa, give me a recipe for chocolate cake". A few seconds later, Alexa will provide you with a suggested recipe and will state how long it takes to make. Simply say "Start recipe" and Alexa will talk you through the ingredients and the method.

Using Alexa for finding recipes is easy and will probably encourage you to do more home cooking! It will also make you feel rather hungry!

This is the end of my list of top 20 skills and functions. As time goes by, this list is bound to change, as dozens of new skills are released every day.

There really is no limit to what you can ask Alexa to do. From time to time, you will not get the answer you are looking for, however, it is not often this will happen! If this is the case, try rephrasing your question. It might just make the difference!

## **Contacting the Author**

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