

Winter Storm Naming by The Weather Channel FAQ

- 1. Why name winter storms in the first place?** When Twitter became a force in 2011, it was clear that a hashtag would be required for each storm, so information could be filtered. The challenge for The Weather Channel was compounded by the fact that the digital unit occasionally sent out Tweets for more than one storm at a time. Predetermined storm names were the only apparent solution.
- 2. Was it a marketing gimmick?** No. Every aspect of naming, from the criteria to the selection of the names was handled by meteorologists. The exception was that management had to approve the initiative.
- 3. Why were strange names used for winter storms?** In the beginning, there was fear, justified or not, that the names would be confused with hurricane names. A staff member had the idea of using Greek or Roman names, and that was adopted as a base. The Latin Club at Bozeman, Montana High School took on an extra-curricular project of coming up with future names, and their lists were used as the basis for the names for a few years. Now the names are based on the currently most popular baby names, with other relatively common names used to fill in gaps.
- 4. Are any names excluded?** Yes. Names on any of the six lists of Atlantic storm names, on the next two years of Eastern Pacific storm names, or on the list of retired Atlantic storm names are excluded. Additionally, long names with complicated spelling are generally not used, since they make poor hashtags.
- 5. What are the criteria for naming a winter storm?** The thresholds are based on National Weather Service Winter Storm Warnings. If at least 2-million people are under Warnings, or the Warnings cover at least 400,000 km (about the size of Montana), or it is forecast that Warnings will be issued meeting one of those criteria, a storm is named.
- 6. A 3-inch snowfall in Atlanta is an entirely different event than the same storm in Minneapolis. How does The Weather Channel account for that?** That issue is built into the National Weather Service Winter Storm Warning criteria. The warning thresholds vary based on climatology. Cities in the South have much lower thresholds.
- 7. How do you know if the warnings cover or will cover enough people or area to prompt a name?** The Weather Channel built an easy-to-use tool that overlays warnings over population. It automatically shows the population and area covered.
- 8. How are winter storms that do not have a single, well-developed low-pressure center dealt with?** If more than one surface low develops from the same trough, AND there is a gap of no more than 12 hours between the snow caused by the first low stopping and

then snow starting again caused by the second, the same name is used. Otherwise, the second system is treated as a different storm.

9. **How often are subjective judgements required in determining whether to name?** Not often, and certainly no more often than the National Hurricane Center has to exercise judgement in any number of marginal situations. The key is to be consistent. In general, the snow starts and stops, and people think of it as a storm.
10. **Does The Weather Channel name lake-effect storms?** No. Pure lake-effect events generally do not meet the population or aerial-coverage criteria.
11. **Does The Weather Channel name strong Pacific storms that affect the West Coast?** Most often the snow caused by these storms does not meet the population or aerial-coverage criteria until they move farther east. Therefore, they are generally not named while they are affecting the West Coast.
12. **How have The Weather Channel's names been received?** The names have found widespread use by politicians, schools, airlines, utilities, and some newspapers. Meteorologists have generally been critical, some because of the fuzziness of winter meteorology, but mostly because The Weather Channel is doing it instead of the National Weather Service.
13. **Do any television stations use the names?** Individual television stations in Wisconsin and Connecticut have been naming local storms longer than The Weather Channel's project, but no television station, to my knowledge, routinely use The Weather Channel's names. An early survey of TV meteorologists found, however, that the vast majority would use the names if they were sanctioned by the NWS. This finding would seem to have been verified in Great Britain where names found immediate widespread use because the process was created and sanctioned by the Met Office.
14. **Have any storms been named that didn't meet the thresholds in the end?** A few because occasionally Winter Storm Warnings don't verify. But it's rare. In any case, no harm is done. The amount of use the names get varies with the population affected and the forecast impact of the storm. Marginal storms simply have fewer people using the names on social media.
15. **Some winter storms can have a severe-weather component. Is that confusing?** No. It is analogous to severe weather produced by a named tropical system. The verbiage might be, the warm sector of Winter Storm X is producing severe thunderstorms or tornadoes, for example. It is not confusing in practice.
16. **Is there anything different about the British/Irish system that might be considered?** They solicited names from the public, which engendered a lot of good will. Also, they

use a hashtag with “Storm” in it. For example: #StormErik. Both processes might be considered.

17. **Have there been unintended positive or negative side effects of naming winter storms?** Since Winter Storm Warnings are at the heart of the naming process, the timing of a storm getting a name is approximately coincident with a city or region being warned. Naming the storm seems to have greater impact, however, than simply the release of the warnings. This tracks with our experience with tropical storms. Also, as confirmed by the British Office, it seems that storms are remembered by their name, as opposed to simply by their year. The biggest negatives have arisen from a lack of understanding of the process and its intrinsic connection to Winter Storm Warnings, plus the lack of official sanction.
18. **How might The Weather Channel’s naming criteria be changed or augmented if the National Weather Service were to name storms?** Bearing in mind that the underlying reason to name storms is to improve and focus communications, there are situations for which names seem appropriate that are not covered by the garden-variety snowstorm that affects a lot of people or geography, which underpin The Weather Channel’s system. For example:
 - Consideration could be given to naming a system for which Winter Weather Advisories are issued, but over a densely populated area. If a storm is going to have a significant effect of traffic, schools, or other aspects of day-to-day life, there will naturally be a lot of communications about it. Perhaps a name would focus the communications.
 - High-impact lake-effect storms should probably get a name. A specific set of criteria could be developed for them.
 - Strong Pacific low-pressure systems that are forecast to have significant impact on a large population should probably be named, even though the area and population covered by the snow does not meet Winter Storm Warning thresholds.
 - Intense snow storms (blizzards) that affect a significant part of a low-population state should probably be named. For example, it’s not fair to exclude a severe blizzard affecting all of North Dakota simply because the state has too few people to meet the thresholds. Within the broad criteria could be individual local criteria – perhaps related to blizzard warnings, but over a smaller area.
 - Wildly unusual winter storms should perhaps be named. Snow in Miami, for example. Again, local criteria might be called for.
19. **What are the next steps?** The Weather Channel process, which mimicked the NHC’s “experimental” process, was to create a set of criteria and then test them internally for at least a season. A group of operational meteorologists could be designated to draw up a set of thresholds and procedures to test to see if they hold up in practice, and if or how then should be modified. Separately, the process for selecting names could be imagined. The British/Irish have found great success soliciting names from the public as a starting point. That might be a good path to consider.