

The file Claude reads before it starts

A CLAUDE.md file is the operating manual Claude Code reads at the start of every session, so you stop re-explaining yourself from scratch each time.

A briefing note, not a program

A CLAUDE.md file is nothing exotic. It is a plain markdown file, the same format as this page, that Claude Code loads automatically at the start of every session. It does not run anything by itself; it is read as context, the way a briefing note is read before a meeting.

Two layers, not two drafts

There are two levels, and they layer rather than compete. The global file, at `~/.claude/CLAUDE.md`, loads into every session wherever you are working. It should describe you: your role, your workstreams, how you like Claude to behave, your tone preferences. Project-level files sit inside individual project folders and load only when Claude is working in that folder, carrying the detail specific to one workstream without repeating what the global file already covers.

The point of an operating manual like this is that it beats re-explaining yourself every session. With it, that groundwork is already in place before you say a word.

Global and project files stay separate jobs

The global file should stay stable and general; the project file should stay specific to that one workstream. If the same fact keeps getting written into both, it usually belongs in the global file only. And if the two ever seem to contradict each other, the project-level file is simply describing the more specific case; it does not silently override the global file everywhere else.

What it is not

A CLAUDE.md file is context, not enforcement. It tells Claude what it needs to know; it does not by itself stop Claude doing something you would not want, the way a permission rule does. Writing "never do X" into the file makes it far less likely, because Claude reads and follows it, but it is not a hard technical barrier. It also is not encrypted or specially protected in any way, which is exactly why secrets never belong in it.

Neither file needs to be exhaustive to be useful. A short, accurate manual that actually gets read beats a long one that is quietly out of date. And a file existing is not the same as it being kept current: a stale operating manual describing a role you left months ago actively misleads, rather than simply saying nothing. Revisit both files whenever your role, workstreams or working style genuinely change.

None of this needs you to write markdown yourself. Your Claude drafts both files from your answers and shows you the full draft before saving; your part is reviewing it, not formatting it.

How the two layers work together

Two files, two jobs. Neither replaces good judgement about what belongs where.

01

Global file

~/ .claude/CLAUDE.md
describes you: role, workstreams,
tone, how you like Claude to
behave.

02

Project file

Sits inside one project folder.
Carries the detail specific to that
workstream only.

03

What loads when

The global file loads every
session, everywhere. A project file
loads only inside its own folder.

04

What it carries

Both are read as context, like a
briefing note. Neither runs
anything or enforces anything by
itself.

05

What it cannot do

It cannot stop an action the way a
permission rule can, and it is not
encrypted, so secrets never
belong in it.

06

Keeping it current

Revisit both files when your role
or workstreams genuinely
change. A stale manual misleads
more than an absent one.