What Is Precipitation?

When you see rain or snow fall from above, you’re watching precipitation in action! Where does precipitation come from and why does it fall in different forms?

Liquid or Solid
Precipitation happens when water falls to Earth's surface. This water might be in a liquid or solid state.

- Rain = liquid
- Hail = solid

Part of the Water Cycle
The water cycle is what moves Earth’s water around the planet to places where plants, animals, and humans can use it. Precipitation is one of four main parts of the water cycle.

- Condensation: Water vapor in the air turns into liquid water or ice.
- Transpiration: Water from plants turns to gas.
- Evaporation: Liquid turns to gas.
- Precipitation: Water falls in a liquid or solid state.
- Freezing Rain: Freezing rain falls like rain, but as soon as it touches the ground, it freezes! It starts as ice crystals. The ice crystals melt and turn into water droplets as they go through a layer of above-freezing air. If the temperature in a thin layer of air at the surface is below freezing, the water droplets freeze when they land.
- Graupel: Graupel is a fancy kind of snow. It forms in below-freezing temperatures when snow crystals in the cloud collide with very cold water droplets. The water droplets freeze and stick onto the snow, giving graupel a fuzzy texture.
- Snow: Snow falls when all the air between the cloud and Earth's surface is below freezing. If you look at snowflakes closely, you can see their unique and beautiful shapes.