In a Nutshell

Although some people consider “the Cloud” to be synonymous with “the Internet,” the term is often used in a more specific sense to refer to storage, applications, and other capabilities provided by distributed networks of servers and made available over the Internet as a replacement for similar products that would otherwise run on local devices.

When you use services in the Cloud (via a Web browser or another app), the hardware maintenance, software upgrades, storage, and other details are someone else’s problem. As long as you have a reliable Internet connection, your cloud-based tools are always available.

Cloud Storage

Services that let you store files in the Cloud fall into three main categories:

- **Syncing**: Sync files from your computer to the Cloud as well as to your other devices.
- **Sharing**: Give other people access to your files & folders in the Cloud.
- **Backup**: Store multiple versions of files, and deleted files, in the Cloud.

Cloud Syncing

Calendars, contacts, email, tasks, notes, bookmarks, passwords, and other small pieces of data can sync almost instantly among your devices thanks to push updates.

Most providers use one or more of the following industry standard protocols: IMAP (email), CalDAV (calendars & tasks), CardDAV (contacts), and Exchange (all of the above).

Cloud Apps

The Cloud can do the heavy lifting for other kinds of apps, too, such as:

- **Productivity**: Online text and image editors, spreadsheets, project management, and so on
- **Entertainment**: Streaming video, music, and online games

Privacy & Security

You should assume that anything you store in the Cloud is not completely private. You can secure your data by encrypting it, thus increasing the probability that it will remain private. But if the cloud service provider holds the encryption key, it can decrypt your data—which means there’s no guarantee of privacy.

Backups

Providers like Backblaze, CrashPlan, and DollyDrive let you back up data from your computers to the Cloud, so it’s stored safely offsite and accessible from anywhere. Cloud backups are a good complement to local backups.

However, you should also take steps to back up the email, documents, and other data that exists only in the Cloud (for example, things you create in a Web browser and store online).

Choosing Providers

Cloud providers and services change all the time. Keep these tips in mind:

- Evaluate each capability separately.
- Look for major players first.
- Base decisions on today’s features and today’s prices.
- Revisit your choices annually.

The Personal Cloud

A personal cloud is what you get when you own and control the hardware you use for online services. It improves privacy but requires more work and expense. Examples of personal cloud products include:

- macOS Server running on a Mac that you own
- Lima Ultra storage devices and numerous NAS devices
- Tonido Desktop software

Personal cloud hardware may be housed in your home or office, at a friend’s, or at a colocation data center.

All this and more in…