

A decode guide for the informal **idioms and metaphors** that recur in these docs (and in the working chat around them). Nothing here is being replaced — the phrasing is deliberate and, in a few cases, deliberately colorful. This page just says, in plain English, what each term means, so a reader who trips on one has somewhere to look.

This is NOT the domain glossary. Technical terms that carry precise meaning — `RAG` , `RLS` , `embedding` , `HNSW` , `OCC` , `DENORM` , `MoA` / `MoE` , keyset pagination, blinding, `nudge` , Matryoshka / `MRL` , prompt cascade, `JWT` , `CDC` , `temperature` — are not idioms. They are defined inline on first use in the documents themselves. Collecting those into a separate domain glossary is a possible follow-on; this page is only the figures of speech.

The **Where** column tags where a term actually shows up: `docs` = a published/reader-facing document (schema ERDs, scenarios, datasheets, architecture doc); `notes` = working design notes and brainstorms; `chat` = my conversational shorthand, which shows up in messages more than in the written docs.

Idioms & Metaphors That Appear in the ChatMaestro Docs

Term	Plain-English meaning	Where
at scale	once data volumes grow large enough to matter	notes
bake in / baked-in	build a value or rule into the structure permanently so it cannot drift later (e.g. an author's email baked into <code>created_by_email</code>)	docs
blast radius	how much would be affected if this changed or broke ("the blast radius is contained")	notes
carve out / carve-out	a deliberate exception to an otherwise-general rule (e.g. a privacy carve-out for <code>profile.notes</code>)	docs
chatty	producing a high volume of items — an enrollee who sends many rounds, or an API that makes many calls	docs
come-and-go	a leave-and-return usage pattern (an enrollee who disconnects and reconnects, continuing the same session)	docs
contaminate / non-contaminating	let something unrelated leak into a measurement and spoil it (routing overhead must not contaminate the generation cost it is read against)	docs
dangling (reference)	a foreign key pointing at a row that no longer exists ("so it never dangles")	docs
degenerate (to)	collapse into a simpler case when a general mechanism is handed trivial input (with one generator, the peer-broadcast loop degenerates to plain refinement)	docs
drift	slowly diverge from what it should match, with no single moment where it broke (documentation drifting from the schema; a rewrite drifting from the request)	docs
dud	a consistently poor performer — a model that keeps scoring low; "the dud signal" is the indicator that flags it	docs

Term	Plain-English meaning	Where
escape hatch	an intentional way around a constraint, for edge cases	notes
fan-out / fan out	one source producing many downstream rows or calls (one <code>message_recipient</code> row per reader is a fan-out)	docs
fast path / slow path	the cheap common route through a decision, versus the expensive route taken only when the cheap one cannot settle it	docs
first-class	treated as a full, native concept in the model, not bolted on as an afterthought	notes
for free / near-free / near-zero	at no cost, or negligible cost ("near-zero cost for a local model")	docs
good-enough (bar)	a threshold that, once met, means "stop trying to improve" (this is what <code>score_target</code> is)	docs
Goodhart's law	once a measure becomes a target it stops being a good measure, because effort goes to the metric rather than to the thing the metric stood for	docs
gotcha	a non-obvious catch that can bite you; a caveat	docs
guardrail	a constraint that prevents a whole class of mistakes before they happen	notes
hang(s) off	is attached to, and depends on, a parent — a child row keyed to (and deleted with) its parent (" <code>run_result</code> hangs off <code>experiment_run</code> ")	docs
hangs together	how the pieces fit and work as a coherent whole ("how it all hangs together")	docs
knob(s)	an adjustable setting or configuration control	docs
lean toward	incline toward as a preference — a recommendation, not a firm decision	notes
load-bearing	carries real weight in the design; remove it and something breaks. A load-bearing column or rule is essential, not decorative	docs
orphan / orphaned	a row whose owner or parent was deleted, leaving it unowned (an orphaned row becomes admin-managed)	docs
plumbing	the internal machinery that makes something work but is not the feature itself ("the sidecar's own plumbing")	docs
quietly / silently	happening with no signal or record; undetected ("silently overwrite," "quietly re-score")	docs
round-trip	one full request-and-response cycle to the database or network ("cut round-trips")	docs
short-circuit	skip the rest of a process once an early condition already settles the outcome (<code>combine_method = single</code> short-circuits the ensemble)	docs
sidecar	a companion subsystem that runs alongside the main app and adds a capability — here, the embedding/search subsystem; from the cloud "sidecar pattern"	docs
source of truth	the one authoritative record that everything else derives from (<code>schema.dbml</code> is the source of truth)	docs

Term	Plain-English meaning	Where
swamp (verb)	overwhelm by sheer volume so the real signal is lost ("would swamp the index")	docs
sycophantic (tone)	flattering, deferential phrasing in a prompt — one end of the tone axis in the objective-benchmark study, opposite "threatening". Distinct from the model behavior of the same name, where a model agrees with whatever it is shown instead of judging it	notes
tear down / teardown	shut down and remove — an instance, or an entire schema (<code>DROP SCHEMA ... CASCADE</code>)	docs
two-hop (join)	a query that has to pass through an intermediate table to connect two others ("the two-hop join through <code>run_enrollment</code> ")	docs
under the hood	internally; the implementation beneath the surface	docs
wire up / wiring	connect components so they work together ("wire the trigger into the pipeline")	notes
worker / faceless worker	an enrollee in a run, seen as an anonymous unit of participation (kept faceless for blinding). Distinct from the background "reconciler worker," which is a real process	docs

Chat Shorthand (My Conversational Register)

You will see these in my messages more than in the written docs. Listed because you asked what they mean — including the two that started this: `footgun` and `boil the ocean` .

Term	Plain-English meaning
ablation	removing one component to measure how much it was actually contributing
back-of-the-envelope / napkin math	a rough calculation meant to show whether an idea is worth pursuing at all, not to be accurate
back-pressure	slowing a producer down when the consumer cannot keep up
belt and suspenders	redundant safeguards — two independent mechanisms for one guarantee
bikeshedding	over-focusing on a trivial detail while the important decision goes unexamined
boil the ocean	attempt something impossibly broad all at once, instead of scoping it down to something doable
bus factor	how many people would have to leave before a project stalls — a bus factor of one is a risk, not a compliment
cargo cult	copying the visible form of a practice without the reason behind it. The ancestor of wing-flapping error below, which names the same failure with a different image
clobber	overwrite existing data and thereby lose it

Term	Plain-English meaning
cold start	having no history to go on yet — a new model, a new topic, a first run — which is usually when you most want the estimate you cannot make
counterfactual	what would have happened under the choice you did not make; normally unobservable unless you deliberately pay to find out
defense in depth	layered safeguards, so a single failure is not catastrophic (a security idea)
dogfooding	using your own product to find its rough spots
earn its keep / earn its place	justify its existence against what it costs to have around
exhaust	useful data produced as a byproduct of doing something else, at no extra cost
fall off a cliff	degrade sharply past some point instead of gracefully
footgun	a feature or API that is easy to use in a way that hurts you — a gun pointed at your own foot; an easy-to-misuse sharp edge. (Example from this project: <code>string.Template</code> turning <code>\$\$</code> into <code>\$</code> and corrupting the triggers.)
greenfield / brownfield	building new from scratch / building constrained by what already exists
happy path / sad path	the normal, everything-works case / the error or edge case
headroom	how much improvement is still available before hitting the ceiling
heisenbug	a bug that disappears when you try to observe it, usually because observing it changed the timing
idempotent	safe to run more than once with the same net effect
in the weeds	deep in low-level detail
kick the can (down the road)	defer a problem rather than solve it now
LGTM	"looks good to me" — a review approval, sometimes carrying the wry sense that the reviewer did not look very hard
long tail	the many rare cases that each look negligible and together dominate
low-hanging fruit	the easy, high-value wins to take first
magic number	an unexplained literal sitting in code with nothing to say where it came from
nit	a trivial review comment, offered without insisting on it ("nit: ...")
noisy neighbor	one process or tenant degrading others by hogging shared resources
north star	the guiding goal that decisions align to
nuke / blow away	delete wholesale

Term	Plain-English meaning
oracle	the best answer that was achievable, known only because you paid to compute every option — the yardstick a cheaper method gets scored against
path-dependent	the outcome depends on the order of what came before, not only on the current inputs, so the same input can give different results
punt	defer a decision or task to later
race / race condition	two operations interleaving so the result depends on timing, usually wrongly
regret	how much worse your choice was than the best one available; the standard way to score a decision rule, from the bandit literature
rubber ducking	explaining a problem out loud — to a colleague or to an inanimate duck — and solving it in the telling
shadow mode	running a system alongside the real one and recording what it would have done, without letting it act on anything
sharp edge(s)	an error-prone part of a tool that is easy to cut yourself on
smell test / code smell	a quick intuition that something is off; a surface sign of a deeper problem
spaghetti code	code whose control flow is tangled enough that following one path means following all of them
spin up	start something — a server, an instance, a process
table stakes	the minimum baseline needed just to be in the running
tech debt	a shortcut taken now that costs more to live with later
thundering herd / cache stampede	many clients hitting the same resource at the same instant
WET	"write everything twice" — the deliberate opposite of DRY, tolerating duplication when the two copies are likely to diverge anyway
wing-flapping error	copying a mechanism when you only needed the principle behind it — aircraft fly without flapping. Coined in this project; not an established term
YAGNI / DRY / KISS	"you aren't gonna need it" / "don't repeat yourself" / "keep it simple"
yak-shaving	a chain of prerequisite side-tasks you have to finish before you can even start the real task

Maintenance: this is a hand-kept reference, not generated. When a new idiom creeps into the docs, add a row rather than assuming the reader shares the vocabulary. Keep both tables in case-insensitive alphabetical order, sorting a slash entry under its first alternative.