

reStructuredText vs Markdown: Quick Reference

A side-by-side syntax reference for both markup languages.

Inline Formatting	2
Italic [same]	2
Bold [same]	2
Bold Italic	2
Inline Code [similar]	2
Strikethrough	2
Headings	3
H1	3
H2	3
H3	3
Overline Variant	3
Lists	4
Unordered List [similar]	4
Ordered List [similar]	4
Nested List	4
Definition List	4
Links & Images	5
Inline Link [different]	5
Reference Link	5
Bare URL	5
Image	5
Internal Anchor	5
Code Blocks	6
Basic Code Block	6
Code Block with Language	6
Include External File	6
Block Elements	7
Blockquote	7
Horizontal Rule	7
Line Break	7
Note / Admonition	7
Tables	7
Simple Table	7
Grid Table (full)	8
Column Alignment	8
Advanced / Special	8
Comment	8
Footnote	9

Table of Contents	9
Substitution / Macro	9
Raw HTML	9
Math	9
Directive (Generic)	10
Key Differences Summary	10
Where RST is more powerful	10
Where Markdown is simpler or has wider support	10
The Markdown fragmentation caveat	10

Note

Tags marked **[same]** use identical or near-identical syntax in both languages. Tags marked **[different]** have meaningfully different syntax. Markdown notes apply primarily to CommonMark / GitHub Flavored Markdown (GFM) unless otherwise stated.

Inline Formatting

Italic [same]

reStructuredText	Markdown
<i>*italic*</i>	<i>*italic*</i> or <code>_italic_</code>

Bold [same]

reStructuredText	Markdown
bold	**bold** or <code>__bold__</code>

Bold Italic

reStructuredText	Markdown
Not supported natively	***bold italic***

Inline Code [similar]

reStructuredText	Markdown
<code>``code``</code>	<code>`code`</code>
Double backticks	Single backtick

Strikethrough

reStructuredText	Markdown
------------------	----------

Not natively; use role	~~text~~
or raw HTML	(GFM / extended)

Headings

H1

reStructuredText	Markdown
Title	# Title
=====	
Underline with = (length must match)	

H2

reStructuredText	Markdown
Section	## Section

Underline with - (or any punctuation character, used consistently)	

H3

reStructuredText	Markdown
Subsection	### Subsection
~~~~~	
Tilde or any new punctuation character	

### Overline Variant

reStructuredText	Markdown
=====	Not supported
Title	
=====	
Overline + underline for top level	

# Lists

## Unordered List [similar]

reStructuredText	Markdown
- item	- item
- item	- item
- item	- item
Also * or +	Also * or +

## Ordered List [similar]

reStructuredText	Markdown
1. first	1. first
2. second	2. second
3. third	3. third
Also #. for	
auto-numbering	

## Nested List

reStructuredText:

```
- item
  - nested
- item

Blank line + 2-space indent required.
```

Markdown:

```
- item
  - nested
- item

Indent with 2-4 spaces.
```

## Definition List

reStructuredText	Markdown
term	Not standard; use HTML
`` Definition text here.``	or an extension
Indented definition follows term	

# Links & Images

## Inline Link [different]

reStructuredText	Markdown
<code>`` Link text ``</code>	<code>[Link text](URL)</code>
Backtick, text, URL in angle	
brackets, trailing underscore	

## Reference Link

reStructuredText:

```
`Link text`_  
.. _Link text: URL
```

Markdown:

```
[Link text][id]  
[id]: URL
```

## Bare URL

reStructuredText	Markdown
<code>https://example.com</code>	<code>&lt;https://example.com&gt;</code>
Auto-linked	Angle brackets force link

## Image

reStructuredText:

```
.. image:: path/img.png  
   :alt: Alt text  
   :width: 400px
```

Markdown:

```
![Alt text](path/img.png)
```

## Internal Anchor

reStructuredText:

```
.. _my-label:  
:ref: `my-label`
```

Markdown:

```
[text](#heading-id)

Heading slugs only (GFM).
```

## Code Blocks

### Basic Code Block

reStructuredText:

```
::

    code here

``:`` at end of paragraph, indent 3+ spaces.
```

Markdown:

```
```
code here
```

Fenced with triple backticks.
```

### Code Block with Language

reStructuredText:

```
.. code-block:: python

    import sys
```

Markdown:

```
```python
import sys
```
```

### Include External File

reStructuredText:

```
.. literalinclude:: file.py
   :language: python
```

Markdown: Not supported natively.

# Block Elements

## Blockquote

| reStructuredText                        | Markdown                                                                 |
|-----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Indent with spaces <code>::``</code>    | <code>&gt; Quoted text here.</code><br><code>&gt; Continues here.</code> |
| Indented text becomes<br>a block quote. |                                                                          |

## Horizontal Rule

| reStructuredText    | Markdown                                           |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| <code>----</code>   | <code>---</code> or <code>***</code>               |
| Four or more dashes | Three or more <code>-/*/_</code> on their own line |

## Line Break

reStructuredText:

```
| line one  
| line two  
  
Line blocks using ``|`` prefix.
```

Markdown:

```
line one  
line two  
  
Two trailing spaces before the newline.
```

## Note / Admonition

reStructuredText:

```
.. note::  
  
    Content of the note.  
  
Also: ``warning::``, ``tip::``, ``caution::``
```

Markdown: No standard syntax; use raw HTML or a tooling-specific extension.

## Tables

### Simple Table

reStructuredText:

```
====  ===
A     B
====  ===
1     2
====  ===
```

```====``` delimiters.

Markdown (GFM pipe table):

```
A	B
1	2
```

## Grid Table (full)

reStructuredText:

```
+---+---+
| A | B |
+---+---+
| 1 | 2 |
+---+---+
```

Supports cell spans and multi-line cells.

Markdown: Not supported.

## Column Alignment

reStructuredText:

```
.. list-table::
   :widths: 25 75
   :header-rows: 1
```

Markdown:

```
L	C	R
```

Colon placement in the separator row controls alignment.

## Advanced / Special

### Comment

| reStructuredText                       | Markdown                   |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------|
| <code>.. This is a comment</code>      | No standard comment syntax |
| <code>.. with no directive name</code> |                            |

## Footnote

reStructuredText:

```
text [1]_
.. [1] Footnote text.
```

Markdown (GFM / Pandoc):

```
text [^1]
[^1]: Footnote text.
```

## Table of Contents

reStructuredText:

```
.. contents:: TOC Title
   :depth: 2
```

Markdown: Tooling-dependent (Pandoc, MkDocs, etc.).

## Substitution / Macro

reStructuredText:

```
|release|
.. |release| replace:: 5.0
```

Markdown: Not supported.

## Raw HTML

reStructuredText:

```
.. raw:: html
   <div>...</div>
```

Markdown:

```
<div>HTML inline</div>
Most renderers allow raw HTML directly.
```

## Math

reStructuredText:

```
.. math::  
  
E = mc^2
```

Markdown (extended / KaTeX / Pandoc):

```
$$E = mc^2$$
```

## Directive (Generic)

reStructuredText:

```
.. directive-name:: arg  
   :option: value  
  
Content block.
```

Markdown: No equivalent; use extensions or tooling-specific shortcodes.

## Key Differences Summary

### Where RST is more powerful

- **Headings:** flexible punctuation characters rather than # levels.
- **Tables:** full grid tables with cell spans and multi-line cells.
- **Admonitions:** `.. note::`, `.. warning::`, `.. tip::` etc. built in.
- **Directives:** a general extension mechanism for any block-level construct.
- **Substitutions / macros:** reusable text snippets.
- **Standardisation:** RST via Docutils/Sphinx is much more uniform than Markdown.

### Where Markdown is simpler or has wider support

- **Fenced code blocks:** triple backticks are more readable than `:: +` indentation.
- **Raw HTML:** allowed inline without a directive in most renderers.
- **Strikethrough** and **footnotes:** widely available in GFM.
- **Popularity:** GitHub, Stack Overflow, Reddit, and most wikis default to Markdown.

### The Markdown fragmentation caveat

There is no single Markdown standard. CommonMark is the closest thing to a specification, but GitHub Flavored Markdown (GFM), Pandoc, MkDocs, and Obsidian each add their own extensions. RST via Docutils/Sphinx is substantially more uniform across toolchains.