

## Understanding Session Time Metrics

When Google switched from Universal Analytics to GA4, several new metrics arrived along with the new platform. One of these new metrics is how session duration is measured and reported.

### Average Session Duration in Universal Analytics

Formerly, the default time metric in pre-built reports was **Average Session Duration**, which was defined as the average length of a session over a specific period of time. This was calculated by taking the average duration in seconds divided by the total number of sessions. In other words, this metric measured the average amount of time a visitor spent on the site from when they entered to when they left.

In GA4, the default time metric is **Average Engagement Time per Session**, which has a different definition than **Average Session Duration** despite being in the same position in pre-built reports.

### Average Engagement Time per Session in GA4

**Average Engagement Time per Session** is defined as the average length of time a user actively uses your site or app, meaning it's the sole focus of their screen. This means that once a user arrives to your site, their time is only being counted if they are actively viewing your content on their screen, and the time will stop tracking once they move away from the site to a new tab, browser, or app.

### How Are These Metrics Different?

The biggest distinction between **Average Session Duration** (UA metric) and **Average Engagement Time per Session** (GA4 metric) is that **Average Session Duration** keeps counting regardless of what the user is doing, where **Average Engagement Time per Session** does not.

### Understanding Session Time Metrics

Generally, the new time metric has shown a smaller number than you might be used to seeing in Universal Analytics, but it's not necessarily a bad thing. When looking at different Channels and Sources of traffic, it's important to remember that each source of traffic will have a different shopping journey than the others.

#### **Examples:**

You may see a longer **Average Engagement Time per Session** coming from Direct or Organic sources, because these users are already aware of your brand and are coming to site to begin or resume their car shopping research. This means they will be actively browsing the site and starting from the homepage (usually), which means it takes more clicks/events to reach their destination on the site.

Other sources that drive traffic directly to the VIN on your site (CPC, social campaigns, etc.) might see a lower time metric due to them arriving directly to where they need to be.



Despite this new metric being the default, **Average Session Duration** does still exist in GA4, it's just not built into any pre-existing report. To get this metric, you will need to create a custom report or modify the existing pre-built ones.

## **Metric Definitions from Google**

**Average Session Duration:** The average duration (in seconds) of users' sessions. This was calculated by taking the average duration in seconds divided by the total number of sessions

**Average Engagement Time per Session:** The average time that your website was in focus in a user's browser or an app was in the foreground of a user's device

- **Average Engagement Time:** Total user engagement durations / Number of active users

[GA4 Analytics Dimensions and Metrics Glossary](#)