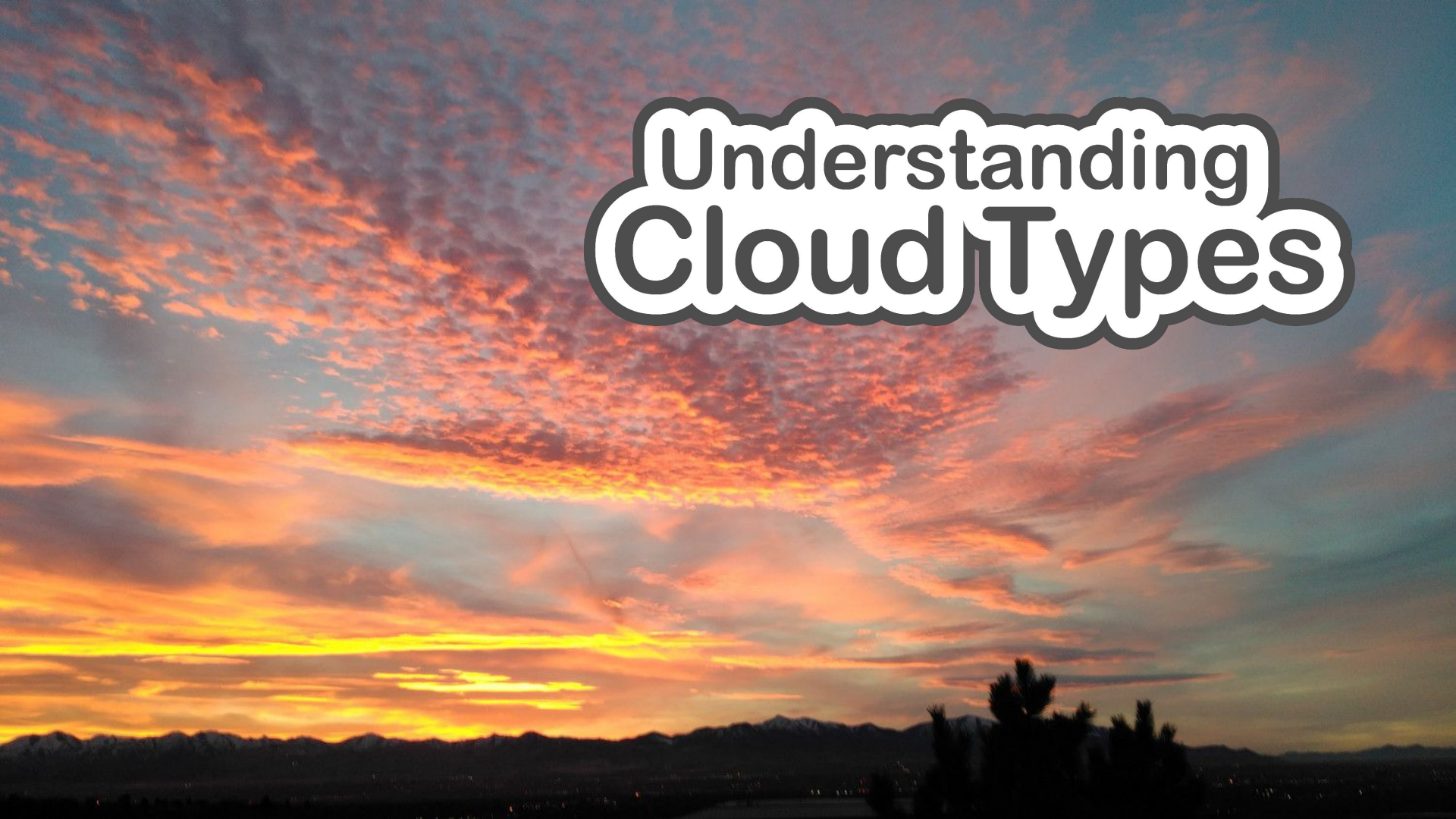
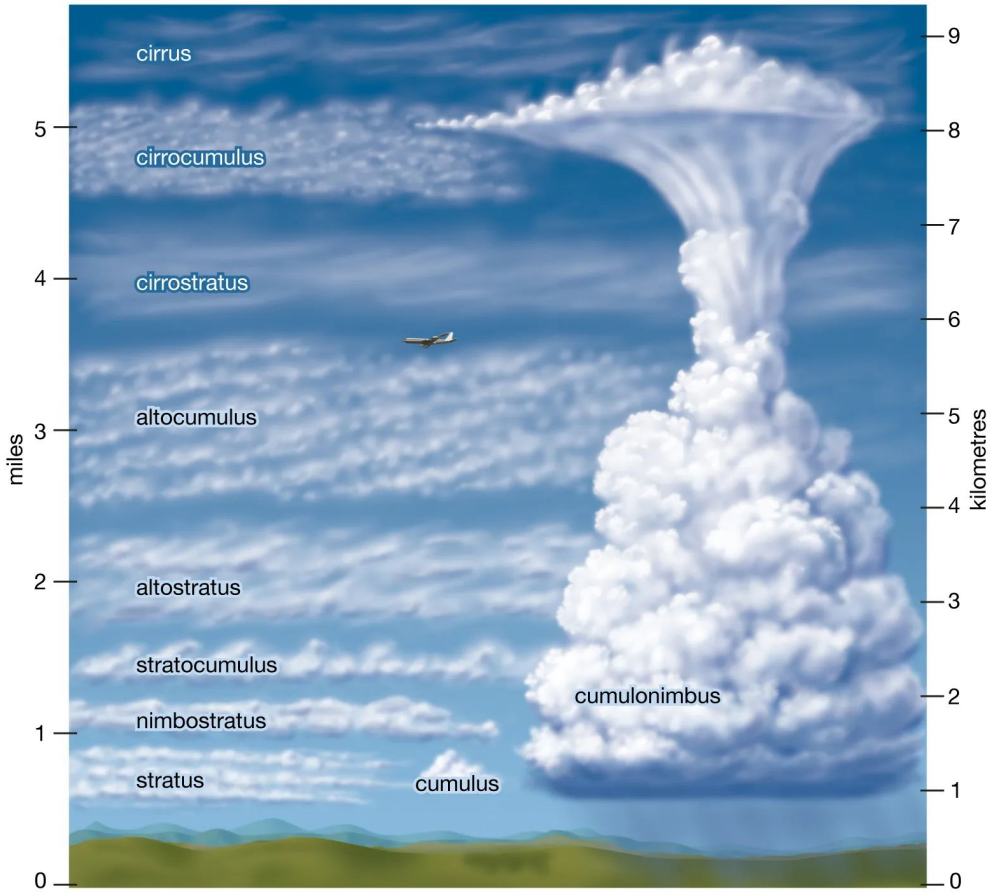

Understanding
Cloud Types

Clouds are categorized by two characteristics: **height** (low, middle, or high) and **shape** (nimbus, stratus, cumulus, or cirrus). Cloud types are named using combinations of height and shape characteristics and provide information about how clouds form and behave.

Cirrus clouds are wispy streaks of ice crystals high in the atmosphere.

Cumulus clouds are fluffy individual clouds low in the atmosphere.



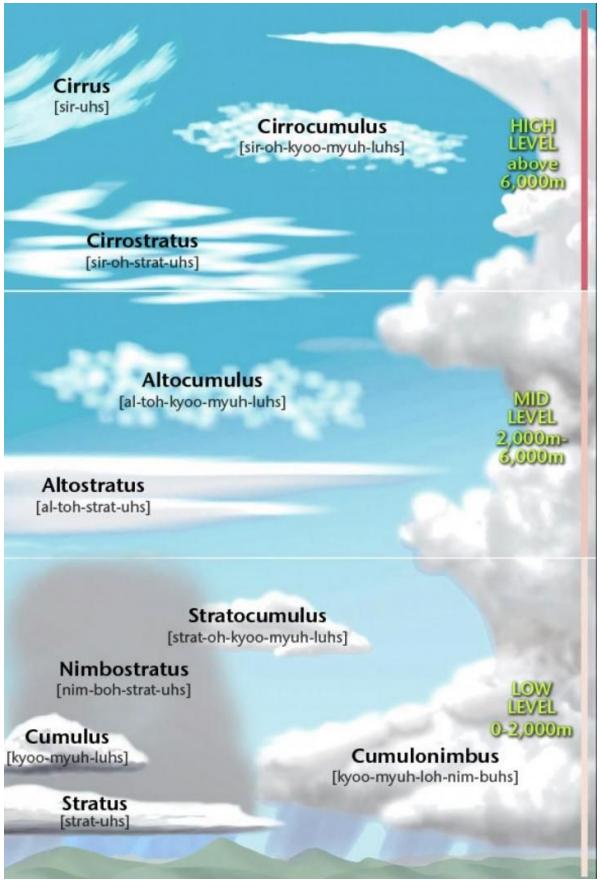
The **height** at which a cloud forms influences its temperature and appearance, while its **shape** indicates atmospheric conditions like how fast the air is moving and how much water is building up, which can help forecast the weather.

Names for Clouds

Most of our names for clouds come from Latin and are usually a combination of the following prefixes and suffixes:

- **Stratus/strato**: flat/layered and smooth
- **Cumulus/cumulo**: heaped up/puffy, like cauliflower
- **Cirrus/cirro**: high up/wispy
- **Alto**: medium level
- **Nimbus/Nimbo**: rain-bearing cloud

Where these names are combined, we can often build up an idea of that cloud's character. For example, if we combine *nimbus* and *stratus* we get 'nimbostratus' - a cloud which is flat and layered and has the potential for rain.



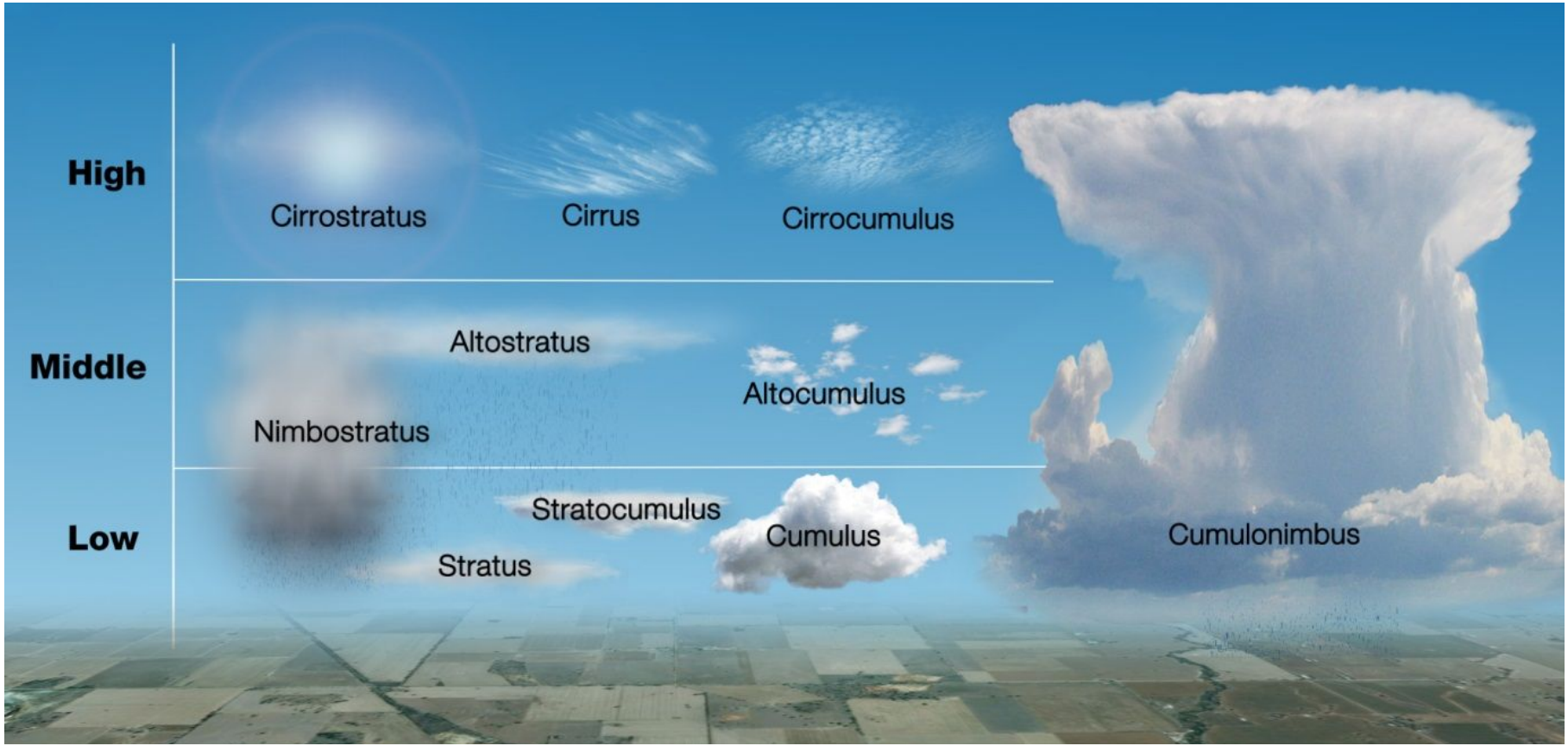
Stratus/Strato: flat/layered and smooth

Cumulus/Cumulo: heaped up/puffy

Cirrus/cirro: high up/wispy

Alto: medium level

Cumulo**nimbus** and **Nimbo**stratus are the cloud types that produce **rain** (precipitation).



Cumulonimbus are storm clouds and often show the most dramatic displays of lightning, thunder, tornadoes, and heavy rain.