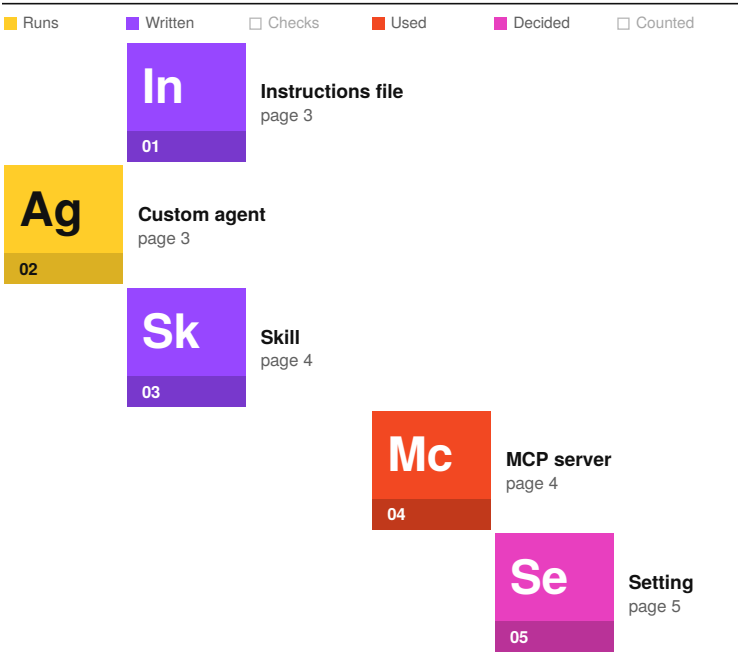
VS Code and Visual Studio

A pocket-sized guide to where GitHub Copilot's agent setup lives, as of October 2026.



My friend has a lot of questions.

What can you set up in VS Code?

You can set up five things for GitHub Copilot's agent in VS Code: instructions files, custom agents, skills, MCP servers and settings. Each can belong to a repo, to you or to your organization.

VS Code's default harness, the Copilot harness, reads `.github/` in the repo and `~/.copilot/` in your home folder. For the basics, see An Accidental Guide to: Agents, Harnesses, Skills, and Tools.

Instructions file	Rules the agent follows, always or for matching files.
Custom agent	A role with its own instructions, tools and model.
Skill	Steps the agent loads when a task needs them.
MCP server	A program that gives the agent more tools.
Setting	A switch or value that changes what VS Code does.

Instructions file

In
01

Identify by `copilot-instructions.md`, `AGENTS.md` or a `.instructions.md` file.

What **An instructions file is text Copilot adds to your requests.** See An Accidental Guide to: Agents, Harnesses, Skills, and Tools.

So what **Put rules you'd otherwise repeat in every chat here.** An applyTo pattern makes a file apply only to matching files.

Field marks

Loads	Cannot
When it applies.	**Settle a conflict.**

Confused with

Se **Setting**

An instructions file tells the agent how to work. A setting changes what VS Code does.

Custom agent

Ag
02

Identify by A `.agent.md` file, or a name in the Agent dropdown.

What **A custom agent is a saved role with its own instructions, tools and model.** See An Accidental Guide to: Agents, Harnesses, Skills, and Tools.

So what **Limiting a custom agent's tools limits what it can change.** Give each agent only the tools its job needs.

Field marks

Loads	Cannot
When picked or started.	**Replace instructions.**

Confused with

Chat mode

Chat mode is the old name for a custom agent, and a `.chatmode.md` file can be renamed to `.agent.md`.

Skill

Sk
03

Identify by A folder with a `SKILL.md` file whose name matches the folder.

What **A skill is a written procedure in a folder.** Type `/skill-name` to run one. See An Accidental Guide to: Agent Skills.

So what **A skill's steps take up no room until they're needed.** When a skill doesn't run, check its description first.

Field marks

Loads	Cannot
Description first.	**Add a tool.**

Confused with **Prompt file**
A prompt file (`.prompt.md`) is a saved prompt you run with `/name`. Only the Local harness runs them, so VS Code suggests a skill.

MCP server

Mc
04

Identify by An entry with a command or a URL in `.mcp.json` or `~/.copilot/mcp-config.json`.

What **An MCP server is a program that gives the agent more tools.** Search `@mcp` in Extensions to find one. See An Accidental Guide to: Model Context Protocol.

So what **A local MCP server runs code on your machine with your permissions.** Add only servers you trust.

Field marks

Loads	Cannot
When it connects.	**Act by itself.**

Confused with **Extension**
An extension adds features to VS Code itself. MCP servers install from the same view, for you or for the workspace.

Setting

Se
05

Identify by	A value in the Settings editor, your user settings or `.vscode/settings.json`.
What	**A setting is a switch or value that changes how VS Code behaves.** For example, `chat.useAgentSkills` turns skills on and off.
So what	**When something works for a teammate and not for you, compare your settings.** Your user settings apply in every repo.

Field marks

Loads	Cannot
From every scope.	**Guide the agent.**

Confused with	**Policy** A policy is a setting an administrator makes for your organization. It wins over your own settings.

Where things live

The Copilot harness reads these places. Use the repo for what the team shares and your home folder for what's only yours.

Thing	Scope	Location
In **Instructions file**	Repo	`.github/copilot-instructions.md`
		`AGENTS.md`, from the root down to the working folder
		`.github/instructions/*.instructions.md`
	You	`~/.copilot/copilot-instructions.md`
		`~/.copilot/instructions/*.instructions.md`
	Organization	Copilot settings in your GitHub organization
Ag **Custom agent**	Repo	`.github/agents/*.agent.md`
	You	`~/.copilot/agents/*.agent.md`
	Organization	`agents/` in the organization's .github-private repo
Sk **Skill**	Repo	`.github/skills/`
		`.agents/skills/`
	You	`~/.copilot/skills/`
		`~/.agents/skills/`
Mc **MCP server**	Repo	`.mcp.json`
	You	`~/.copilot/mcp-config.json`
	Organization	A registry of approved servers, set in GitHub
Se **Setting**	Repo	`.vscode/settings.json`
	You	Your user `settings.json`
	Organization	Policies set by an administrator

The Local harness also reads `.vscode/mcp.json`. The Claude harness reads `.claude/` and `~/.claude/` instead.

How scopes combine

Instructions add up, and settings override.

Thing	When more than one scope has one
In **Instructions file**	Every file that applies is added. None takes priority.
Ag **Custom agent**	The selected agent's instructions win a conflict.
Mc **MCP server**	Give each server its own name. Your organization can limit which ones run.
Se **Setting**	Default, then User, then Workspace, and the later one wins. An administrator's policy wins over all three.

Tip. When two instructions files disagree, change them so they agree. The load order won't settle it.

What's different in Visual Studio

Thing	In Visual Studio
In **Instructions file**	`.github/copilot-instructions.md` and `.github/instructions/*.instructions.md`. In Visual Studio 2026, personal instructions go in `%USERPROFILE%/copilot-instructions.md`.
Ag **Custom agent**	`.github/agents/*.agent.md`, or `%USERPROFILE%\.github\agents` for your own. Version 18.4 or later.
Sk **Skill**	The same folders as VS Code. Version 18.5 or later.
Mc **MCP server**	`%USERPROFILE%\.mcp.json`, then `.vs\mcp.json`, `.mcp.json`, `.vscode\mcp.json` and `.cursor\mcp.json` in the solution folder.
Se **Setting**	Tools › Options › GitHub › Copilot, where a checkbox turns instructions files on.

Visual Studio doesn't list `AGENTS.md` as supported, so put rules both editors need in `.github/copilot-instructions.md`.

Same thing elsewhere

Copilot CLI uses the same Copilot harness, so it reads the same `.github/` and `~/.copilot/` folders.

Thing	In the other tools
In **Instructions file**	Claude Code: `CLAUDE.md`. Codex: `AGENTS.md`. Claude Desktop: project instructions.
Ag **Custom agent**	Claude Code: `.claude/agents/`. Codex: `.codex/agents/`.
Sk **Skill**	Claude Code: `.claude/skills/`. Codex: `.agents/skills/`. Claude Desktop: Customize › Skills.
Mc **MCP server**	Claude Code: `.mcp.json`. Codex: `~/.codex/config.toml`. Claude Desktop: Customize › Connectors.
Se **Setting**	Claude Code: `.claude/settings.json`. Codex: `~/.codex/config.toml`.

Each has its own guide: An Accidental Guide to: Claude Code, An Accidental Guide to: Claude Desktop, An Accidental Guide to: GitHub Copilot CLI and An Accidental Guide to: OpenAI Codex.

Sources

These public pages were checked on 22 October 2026.

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An Accidental Guide to…

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A pocket-sized guide to where GitHub Copilot's agent setup lives, as of October 2026.
Written and reviewed by a person. AI does the grunt work. Set in TeX Gyre Heros and Newsreader.
Leave a star: `accidental.info/star`

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