

Mastering Flutter

*Learn to develop Flutter apps for iOS,
Android, desktop and web*

Kevin Moore



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Dedicated to

My wife, two sons and two cats

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Preface

Flutter has become one of the most popular multi-platform frameworks available. While others have died out, Flutter continues to grow stronger and have a larger community. It has done so because it is easy to use and easy to create apps for every major platform. Instead of learning each platform and language, you can just learn one.

Comprising nineteen chapters, this book covers a wide range of topics essential for learning Flutter. From the Dart programming language needed to write Flutter apps, to the widget system provided by Flutter you will learn everything you need to start creating apps for every platform.

Chapter 1: Introduction to Flutter - Learn all about Flutter and why you should use it. Learn how to install Flutter and get started. You will also choose which IDE you will use to develop apps. You will learn about the Flutter architecture and the basics of how it is put together.

Chapter 2: Dart Essentials - Learn about the Dart programming language that is used to write Flutter apps. Dart is a modern programming language with a lot of great features. You will need to know this language if you are to write Flutter apps. You will learn about basic programming fundamentals like variables, control flow, functions, and classes, as well as some more advanced topics like null safety.

Chapter 3: Building the Movie App - Learn about the app you will build with this book. This is a beautiful app that showcases popular movies and allows users to learn all about the movie and the cast. You will start the app from scratch, learning how to create your own apps. You will also learn about the different types of widgets Flutter uses. Finally, you will learn about the amazing hot reload feature of Flutter that allows you to keep changing your app while it is running and not have to rebuild each time.

Chapter 4: Basic Widgets - Get started with learning some of the most important widgets that Flutter offers. Mastering these building block widgets will help you build screens.

Chapter 5: Themes, Colors and Fonts - An app is boring and ugly unless you have a good set of consistent colors and fonts. Learn how to create a theme that has the colors and fonts you need to build the movie app.

Chapter 6: State Management Fundamentals - How you manage the state of your data will either make your programming life difficult or easy. Learn some of the state management packages available to Flutter developers.

Chapter 7: Advanced Widgets - Now that you know the basic widgets, learn more advanced widgets like ListViews, Grids, Cards, and Slivers.

Chapter 8: Navigation and Routing - Learn an easy way to transition from one page to another. Learn how to push and pop pages with ease.

Chapter 9: Animations and Transitions - Let your app look professional with engaging animations.

Chapter 10: Futures and Async/Await - Prevent your UI from slowing down by performing background tasks asynchronously. Learn all about Dart's Futures.

Chapter 11: Networking - Learn how to retrieve data from the cloud. This is really important as there is a lot of great information out there to show your users.

Chapter 12: Local Storage and Databases - Learn how to save data for both simple and complex data needs. Learn about shared preferences for simple data and databases for more complex needs.

Chapter 13: Web and Desktop - Now that you have created mobile apps, learn how to develop for the desktop (both the Mac and Windows) and the web.

Chapter 14: Handling User Input and Gestures - Learn how to handle input from the user, from text fields, and gestures to focus management.

Chapter 15: Firebase - Learn how to use one of the most popular cloud databases to store your data remotely.

Chapter 16: Packages - Learn how to create your own Dart package. This is really useful to create shared code, either for yourself, your team, or others in the community.

Chapter 17: Platform Channels and Plugins - Learn about how you can write code that runs natively on each platform. This is useful if you cannot find a plugin that does what you need. You will build a plugin to save and retrieve native preferences.

Chapter 18: Testing and Performance - Learn about the different types of testing, from unit to widget and then to integration. This will allow you to feel confident in your code and will show you any problems that may crop up when you are changing your code. You will also learn about the tools available to measure your app's performance and find and fix those problems.

Chapter 19: Building and Publishing - In this final chapter you will learn how to build release versions of your app and publish them to both the Google Play Store and the Apple App Store. This will allow you to reach your users on both platforms.

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Table of Contents

1. Introduction to Flutter.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Structure.....	1
Objectives	2
Overview of Flutter	2
<i>History</i>	2
Flutter architecture	2
Benefits of Flutter	4
Flutter’s language: Dart.....	4
Installing Flutter SDK	5
<i>Windows</i>	5
<i>macOS</i>	5
<i>CocoaPods</i>	6
<i>Flutter Doctor</i>	6
Development application.....	6
Conclusion.....	10
 2. Dart Essentials	 11
Introduction.....	11
Structure.....	12
Objectives	12
Variables.....	12
<i>Built-in types</i>	12
<i>Null safety</i>	15
Control flow	15
<i>Branches</i>	16
<i>If</i>	16
<i>Switch</i>	16
<i>Loops</i>	17
Functions	18

<i>Main function</i>	18
<i>Anonymous functions</i>	18
Comments	19
<i>Single line comments</i>	19
<i>Multi-line comments</i>	19
<i>Documentation comments</i>	19
Imports	19
Classes	20
<i>Constructors</i>	21
<i>Mixins</i>	22
Enums	24
Extensions	24
Concurrency	25
<i>Async/Await</i>	25
<i>Streams</i>	26
Exceptions	26
Conclusion	27
 3. Building the Movie App	29
Introduction	29
Structure	29
Objectives	30
Creating the movie app	30
<i>Visual Studio Code</i>	31
<i>Android Studio</i>	33
Widgets	40
Stateless and stateful widgets	40
Hot reload and debugging	41
Movie app UI	41
Movie architecture	44
<i>Clean architecture</i>	44
<i>SOLID</i>	45
<i>Folder structure</i>	46

First steps of the Movie app.....	46
Conclusion.....	48
4. Basic Widgets	49
Introduction.....	49
Structure.....	49
Objectives	50
Flutter project structure	50
<i>pubspec.yaml</i>	50
<i>Pubspec fields</i>	50
<i>Lints</i>	51
<i>lib folder</i>	52
<i>Folders</i>	52
Scaffold, AppBar, and NavigationBar	52
<i>Widgets</i>	52
<i>Scaffold</i>	52
<i>AppBar</i>	53
<i>BottomNavigationBar</i>	53
<i>Drawer</i>	53
<i>SnackBar</i>	53
Containers, rows, and columns.....	53
<i>Container</i>	53
<i>Column</i>	54
<i>Rows</i>	55
Text, images, and icons.....	56
<i>Text</i>	56
<i>Images</i>	57
<i>Icons</i>	58
Buttons and more	59
<i>Buttons</i>	59
<i>Selection</i>	59
<i>Chips</i>	59
<i>DatePicker</i>	60

<i>PopupMenuButton</i>	60
<i>Radio button</i>	61
<i>Slider</i>	62
<i>Switch</i>	62
<i>TimePicker</i>	62
<i>Text input</i>	62
Build movie app screens	64
<i>Movie row</i>	74
Conclusion	76
5. Themes, Colors and Fonts	77
Introduction	77
Structure	77
Objectives	78
Colors	78
Typography	79
Material Design	79
Google Fonts	79
Themes	83
<i>Fully customized theme</i>	83
<i>ColorScheme</i>	84
<i>Material Theme Builder</i>	84
<i>Light vs dark</i>	87
<i>Creating a theme</i>	88
<i>iOS</i>	90
<i>Xcode</i>	90
Conclusion	96
6. State Management Fundamentals	97
Introduction	97
Structure	97
Objectives	98
Understanding state in Flutter	98

Local versus app state.....	98
Built-in State.....	98
<i>InheritedWidget</i>	99
State management with packages.....	99
<i>Provider</i>	100
<i>BloC</i>	101
<i>GetIt</i>	101
<i>Redux</i>	101
<i>MobX</i>	102
Immutable state	102
Riverpod	102
Genre screen.....	105
<i>Genre section</i>	112
<i>Sorting</i>	117
<i>Movie list</i>	120
Conclusion.....	124
7. Advanced Widgets	125
Introduction.....	125
Structure.....	125
Objectives	126
ListView	126
Expanded.....	127
Stack	129
IndexedStack.....	130
LayoutBuilder	130
GridView	131
Table	133
Card.....	135
BottomSheets.....	136
Slivers	137
Movie trailers	141
Conclusion.....	144

8. Navigation and Routing	145
Introduction.....	145
Structure.....	145
Objectives	146
Navigator widget	146
<i>Navigator</i>	146
<i>Router</i>	147
<i>RouterDelegate</i>	148
<i>RouterInformationParser</i>	148
<i>RouteInformationProvider</i>	149
<i>MaterialApp</i>	149
Named routes.....	150
Deep linking.....	152
<i>Custom schemes</i>	153
<i>Android deep links</i>	153
<i>Verifying a domain</i>	154
<i>Testing Android</i>	154
<i>iOS deep links</i>	155
<i>iOS custom scheme</i>	156
<i>iOS verification</i>	159
Bottom navigation.....	160
GoRouter and AutoRoute	162
<i>GoRouter</i>	162
<i>AutoRoute</i>	164
Connecting the movie app	168
<i>DeepLink testing</i>	189
<i>Android</i>	189
<i>iOS</i>	189
Conclusion.....	190
 9. Animations and Transitions.....	 191
Introduction.....	191
Structure.....	191

Objectives	192
Basic animation concepts	192
<i>Implicit animations</i>	192
<i>Tween animations</i>	194
Advanced animation techniques	195
<i>Explicit animations</i>	195
<i>AnimationController</i>	195
<i>Animation</i>	197
<i>Curves</i>	197
<i>AnimatedBuilder</i>	198
<i>Staggered animations</i>	198
Animation widgets	203
<i>Hero animations</i>	204
Custom animations	210
Animation libraries and tools	212
<i>Animation packages</i>	213
Movie app	213
<i>Flutter animate</i>	217
<i>Custom routes</i>	218
Conclusion	219
10. Futures and Async/Await	221
Introduction	221
Structure	221
Objectives	222
Concurrency in Flutter	222
Futures	222
Async/await	223
Event loop	224
FutureBuilder	224
Streams	242
StreamBuilder	243

Isolates.....	254
Conclusion.....	255
11. Networking	257
Introduction.....	257
Structure.....	257
Objectives	258
Networking	258
TMDB	258
JSON and serialization	264
Data models	268
Networking packages	271
Dio package.....	271
<i>API Security</i>	274
<i>Trending movies</i>	275
<i>Logging</i>	276
<i>ViewModel</i>	277
<i>Fixing errors</i>	278
<i>Movie details</i>	282
<i>Trailers and cast</i>	287
<i>Home screen image</i>	293
<i>Final APIs</i>	295
<i>Genres</i>	297
Conclusion.....	298
12. Local Storage and Databases.....	299
Introduction.....	299
Structure.....	299
Objectives	299
SharedPreferences	300
Saving genres	304
Databases.....	313
<i>SQLite</i>	313

<i>Floor</i>	313
<i>Hive</i>	315
<i>Isar</i>	316
<i>Drift</i>	318
Movie configuration.....	319
<i>Images</i>	320
<i>Database models</i>	321
<i>Movie view model</i>	330
<i>Cleanup</i>	333
Conclusion.....	336
13. Web and Desktop	337
Introduction.....	337
Structure.....	337
Objectives	338
MacOS	338
Menus.....	343
<i>Platforms</i>	347
<i>DesktopWindow</i>	348
AdaptiveScaffold.....	349
<i>AdaptiveLayout</i>	351
<i>Search dialog</i>	354
Windows.....	358
Web	362
Firebase Hosting.....	367
Conclusion.....	373
14. Handling User Input and Gestures	375
Introduction.....	375
Structure.....	375
Objectives	376
User input and event handling	376
GestureDetector	376
Focus management	377

Text	379
Ink widgets.....	380
<i>InkResponse</i>	381
KeyboardListener	382
Repositories	382
<i>Sources</i>	384
<i>Repository</i>	391
<i>MovieViewModel</i>	397
Movie listing	400
Conclusion.....	408
 15. Firebase	409
Introduction.....	409
Structure.....	409
Objectives	410
Introduction to Firebase	410
<i>Setting up Firebase</i>	410
Authentication	414
Cloud Firestore	416
Collections	416
Reading and writing data	417
<i>Firebase database</i>	418
<i>Firebase provider</i>	422
Crashlytics	424
Other services.....	425
Conclusion.....	426
 16. Packages	427
Introduction.....	427
Structure.....	427
Objectives	428
Introduction to packages.....	428
Creating a package.....	429

<i>Movie data project</i>	429
<i>Example app</i>	430
Refactoring code to package	430
<i>Movies project</i>	433
Publishing a package	435
<i>pubspec.yaml</i>	435
<i>Readme.md</i>	435
<i>Changelog.md</i>	436
<i>License file</i>	436
<i>Requirements</i>	436
<i>Verified publisher</i>	436
<i>Publishing</i>	438
Conclusion	439
17. Platform Channels and Plugins	441
Introduction	441
Structure	441
Objectives	441
Writing a plugin	442
Using third-party plugins	442
Platform channels	444
Building a plugin	446
<i>Creating the plugin</i>	446
<i>Building the plugin</i>	447
<i>Android plugin</i>	449
<i>Plugin files</i>	456
<i>Example plugin app</i>	460
<i>iOS plugin</i>	471
<i>Movies app</i>	475
Conclusion	478
18. Testing and Performance	479
Introduction	479

Structure.....	479
Objectives	480
Testing	480
Unit testing.....	481
<i>Movie plugin unit test</i>	481
<i>Groups</i>	484
Widget testing	487
<i>First widget test</i>	488
Integration testing	490
Performance	493
<i>Widget tree</i>	493
<i>DevTools</i>	494
Conclusion.....	500
19. Building and Publishing	501
Introduction.....	501
Structure.....	501
Objectives	502
Google developer account.....	502
Apple developer account	503
Icons	510
<i>Android icons</i>	511
<i>iOS icons</i>	511
Android release.....	513
App store	514
<i>iOS release build</i>	518
Play Store	520
Conclusion.....	534
Index	535-541

CHAPTER 1

Introduction to Flutter

Introduction

In this chapter, you will take your first steps towards mastering Flutter, *Google's UI toolkit* for crafting beautiful, natively compiled applications for mobile, web, and desktop from a single codebase. You will learn about and install Flutter. You will also learn about the Movie application that you will be creating in this book.

Structure

The chapter covers the following topics:

- Overview of Flutter
- Flutter architecture
- Benefits of Flutter
- Flutter's language: Dart
- Installing Flutter SDK
- Development application

Objectives

By the end of this chapter, you will have an understanding of what Flutter is and the incredible possibilities it unlocks. You will be eager to dive into the next chapters and embark on your journey to become a Flutter master!

Overview of Flutter

Flutter is a UI toolkit developed by *Google*. It has the ability to run on mobile (both Android and iOS), desktop (macOS, Windows, and Linux), and the web. The Flutter toolkit uses a declarative UI built of Widgets. In fact, *Google* likes to say that everything is a widget. There are widgets for almost every task you need, and if not, you just need to create your own, by building a widget with other widgets inside or going all the way and creating a custom widget with its own rendering code. You will learn more in later chapters.

As mentioned above, Flutter works on almost every platform using almost the same code (some separate code needs to be written for platform-specific areas like menus). In fact, *Google* used Flutter on their Nest displays.

History

Flutter has an interesting history; the first version was introduced in 2015 and was known as **Sky**. It ran on Android. It used Dart as the development language. Then in 2018 Flutter 1.0 was released. In 2021, Flutter 2 was released at the *Flutter Engage event*. This version had a canvas-based engine for the web and early desktop support. This was a very important version as it introduced Dart 2.0 with null safety. This made development safer (but broke existing code). In 2021, Flutter 2.5 was released with Material Design support. In 2022 Flutter 3 was introduced with full desktop support and iOS Objective-C and Swift interop.

There have been many attempts at cross-platform frameworks, many of which have failed. Java was supposed to be the one language to rule them all but never quite achieved it. Since then, there have been other attempts such as React Native (by *Facebook*) and Xamarin (by *Microsoft*). React Native is still in use but Microsoft has ended support for Xamarin and now uses .Net MAUI. React Native uses HTML web pages and Xamarin uses C#.

Flutter architecture

The Flutter framework is made up of several layers. Each layer can be replaced if needed but does not have any special access to the layer below it. The top-level layer is the Framework. This is written in Dart. The entire Flutter framework looks like the following figure:

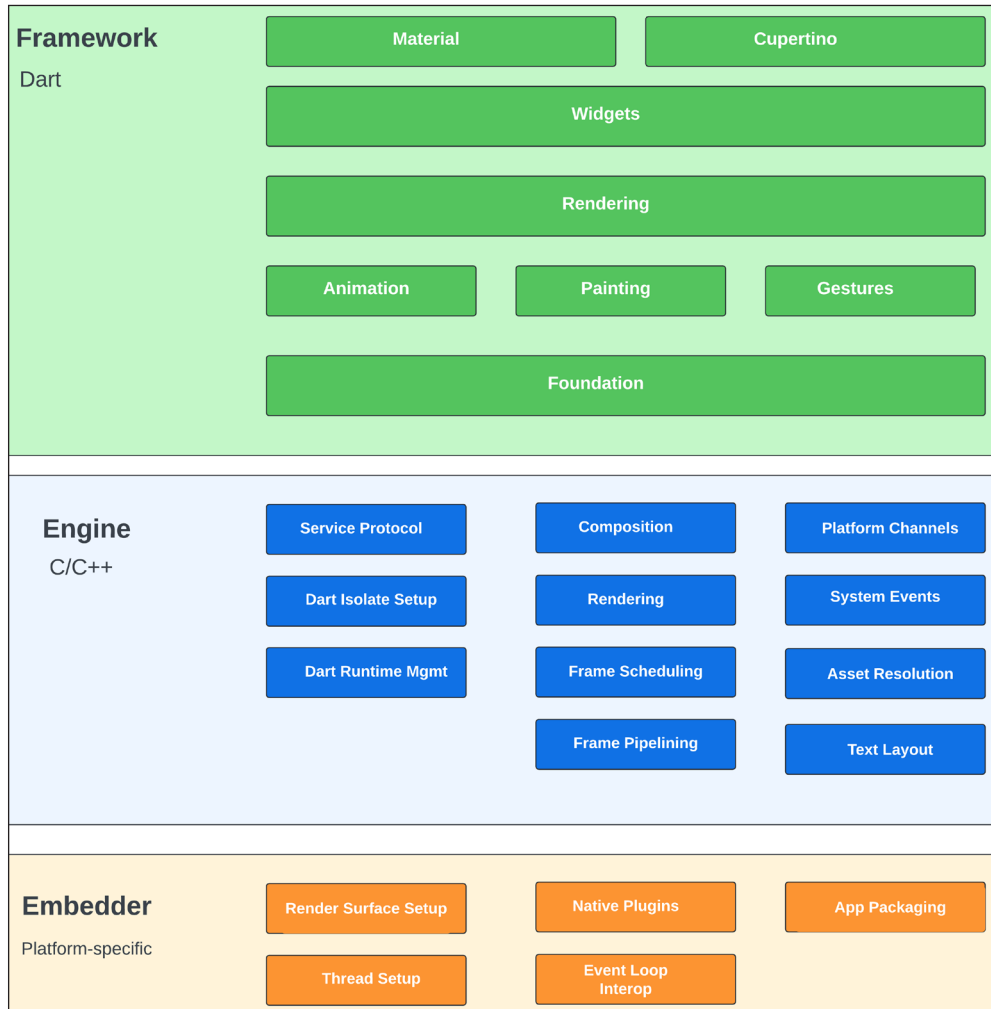


Figure 1.1: Flutter architecture

This layer contains the widgets you will be using / creating. The Framework layer contains many different common widgets that you will use as well as the rendering code needed to display those widgets. The **Material** and **Cupertino** libraries are for *Google* and *Apple's UI* look and feel. The **Rendering**, **Animation**, **Painting**, and **Foundation** are lower-level Dart codes that form the essential drawing framework.

The next layer is the Engine and is written in C/C++. This is not a layer you need to use. The final layer is the Embedder and is different for each platform. One of the nice features of Flutter is that each application is compiled into native code just like any other application on that platform. This means that applications run as fast as native applications (or faster).

Note: That there is a small overhead for the built-in Flutter code.

For the engine, Flutter was originally built using the Skia graphics drawing system. The Flutter team is moving this system to a newer version called **Impeller**. It has been written for both iOS and Android and will be coming to other platforms later.

If you do not find the functionality you need in the Flutter framework, you can use many third-party plugins and packages. Packages are code written in Dart that provide extra functionality. Plugins are built with lower-level code for each platform. For example, a plugin would need separate code for Android, iOS, macOS, Windows, and the web.

Benefits of Flutter

One of the main benefits of Flutter is its rapid development time. This happens in several different areas. The first one is the declarative UI that Flutter uses, which allows you to use widgets that contain other widgets and only update those that have changed. The killer feature of Flutter is its hot reload feature. This allows you to start the application on the platform you are working on and make almost any change. Click the **Hot reload** button, and your application will be updated. You can add new packages, add new screens, change your logic, and just have the application instantly update. Adding a new plugin will have you restart your program, but you can normally do most of your application development in one session.

Unlike many other cross-platform systems, Flutter has native performance as it is compiled into native code.

Flutter is also open source, so it can be examined and even improved. The entire source code is available to see how everything works.

More importantly, Flutter can build for any platform. This makes development faster as you only have one code base. It also reduces the number of engineers needed on a project. Flutter can also be developed for the web (although that is still a work in progress).

For the web, you can output your application using HTML, a canvas-based system, or **WebAssembly (Wasm)**. The canvas-based system is faster but makes it so that systems like *Google search* cannot index your web pages. This is bad for **search engine optimization (SEO)**. This means *Google* will not be able to find and index individual pages. This problem is currently being worked on.

Flutter's language: Dart

Flutter uses the Dart language which was developed by *Google*. Since it was originally developed for the web, it is similar to JavaScript. The syntax is very similar with variables being defined with the `var` keyword and both having `async/await` keywords. *Google* has made a lot of improvements to the language, especially the 2.0 version with null safety. Null safety solves many inadvertent crashes. The language is object-oriented, uses classes, and is garbage-collected (which just means that it handles all allocation/disposal of classes in memory). The language was released in 2013 and Flutter 2.0 was released in 2018. They then introduced the `dart2native` tool to create native code. This means that you do not

have to have the Dart SDK installed on a machine to run applications (unlike Java, which needs a JDK or JRE to run). Dart 3.0 was released in May 2023 with null safety, records, patterns, and class modifiers. There is also work being done for Wasm, but it is not finished yet. Wasm is a binary instruction format designed to run code at near-native speed in web browsers, complementing JavaScript. It enables developers to compile high-performance applications written in various languages (like C++, Rust, or Go) and run them efficiently on the web, expanding the possibilities for web applications beyond what JavaScript alone could traditionally handle.

Flutter is a single-threaded toolkit with a main thread. Dart provides a way to create asynchronous methods using the `async` and `await` keywords. This is for running methods in a semi-asynchronous way (they are put in a queue to be run on the main thread). To get true multi-threading, you need to use Dart's isolates. This is the way to truly run things on another thread. They are called **isolates** because they are totally isolated from any other thread. You cannot share variables or anything in memory. You can pass data back and forth with send and receive ports, which are part of the Dart language. Isolates are pretty advanced. There are a few methods that will allow you to write simple isolates but to pass data back and forth is difficult.

Installing Flutter SDK

To get started with Flutter you will want to download the Flutter SDK.

1. Go to <https://docs.flutter.dev/get-started/install> and follow the instructions for the desktop platform you are on.
2. Find the Install the Flutter SDK section of the instructions and download the zip.
3. Unzip the files and put them in an easy-to-find location on your computer. Make sure the path is simple and does not contain any spaces or special characters. A good example is *flutter*. Next, you will need to add the flutter installation to your path.

Windows

For Windows, go to **Advanced System Settings | Advanced | Environment Variables**. In the **User variables** section edit the **Path** entry. Double-click on an empty row and type the path to Flutter. For example: **C:\flutter**. Click on the **OK** buttons until you are out of all dialogs.

macOS

For macOS, you will need to update your path by opening or creating a file called `~/.zshenv`. Add the following line:

```
export PATH=$HOME/flutter/bin:$PATH
```

When you have installed Flutter in a folder called **flutter** you can save the file.

CocoaPods

iOS and MacOS applications usually use CocoaPods for library management (although that is changing). This tool is used for managing iOS and MacOS libraries. For Flutter you will need this tool as it generates a library needed to run Flutter on these platforms. CocoaPods is located at: <https://cocoapods.org/>. There are two ways to install it. Since the Mac has several tools already installed (ruby and gems), you can simply install it from the command line with this line (**you will need your password for this**):

```
sudo gem install cocoapods
```

Another alternative is the Homebrew package manager. This is a very popular package manager that allows you to easily install other command line programs. This makes it very simple to install command line software on a Mac. You can find this at: <https://brew.sh/>. After installing it, use this:

```
brew install cocoapods
```

Flutter Doctor

A really good tool to use is Flutter itself. There are several flutter tools available. The most important one is Flutter doctor. This tool does a diagnostic on Flutter and will let you know if you need to install any additional tools or fix a problem. From a command line type:

```
flutter doctor
```

You should see something like this (refer to the following figure):

```
01. flutter doctor
02. Doctor summary (to see all details, run flutter doctor -v):
03. [✓] Flutter (Channel stable, 3.19.6, on macOS 14.2.1 23C71 darwin-arm64, locale en-US)
04. [✓] Android toolchain - develop for Android devices (Android SDK version 34.0.0)
05. [✓] Xcode - develop for iOS and macOS (Xcode 15.1)
06. [✓] Chrome - develop for the web
07. [✓] Android Studio (version 2022.3)
08. [✓] VS Code (version 1.88.1)
09. [✓] Connected device (4 available)
10. [✓] Network resources
11.
12.
```

Figure 1.2: Flutter doctor

If there are any errors, follow the directions for fixing them.

Development application

When developing a Flutter application, you can use any text editor you want, but if you want to be more productive, you can use an **integrated development environment (IDE)**. It will help you organize your code and make it easy to run and test. There are several IDEs that can run Flutter applications.