

# Airline Pilot

Expensive to train, slow to start, and then one of the best-paid jobs in the country.

## TYPICAL PAY

**\$232,140**

a year, full time

## PAY RANGE

**\$107k to \$464k**

starting to experienced

## TIME TO QUALIFY

**4 to 7 years**

after high school

## DEMAND

**Good**

job outlook

## LICENCE NEEDED

**Yes**

regulated job

## WHERE YOU WORK

**Airline flight decks, regional and major carriers, cargo operators**

## How you get there

- 1 High school diploma** Grade 12  
 No specific subjects are required, but you need to pass a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) first-class medical exam eventually, so know your health early.
- 2 Private pilot certificate** 6 to 12 months  
 A written knowledge test, a minimum of 40 flight hours by law, and a practical test with an examiner. Most people need 60 to 75 hours in reality.
- 3 Instrument rating and commercial certificate** 1 to 2 years  
 Flying by instruments in cloud, then the certificate that lets you be paid to fly. Around 250 total flight hours.
- 4 Build hours** 1 to 2 years  
 Almost everyone instructs. You need roughly 1,500 hours for an Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) certificate, less if you graduated from an approved aviation degree program.
- 5 Regional airline, then a major** 3 to 10 years  
 Start as a first officer at a regional carrier, upgrade to captain, then move to a major airline and start again at the bottom of its seniority list.

## Pros and cons

- + Very high pay once you reach a major airline
- + Long stretches of days off, often 12 to 15 a month
- + Free travel for you and your family
- A six-figure training bill before you earn anything real
- Years of low pay and commuting while you build hours
- Nights, holidays and hotel rooms away from home

## Good to know

### The 1,500-hour rule came from one crash

After the 2009 Colgan Air accident near Buffalo, Congress raised the experience required to fly for an airline. That law is why new pilots spend years instructing before they can be hired.

### A degree can buy you 500 hours

Graduates of approved four-year aviation degree programs can get an Airline Transport Pilot (ATP) certificate at 1,000 hours instead of 1,500. Approved two-year programs qualify at 1,250. Military pilots q...

## Optional boosts

Certified Flight Instructor (CFI). Multi-engine rating. Type rating. Airline cadet programs.

### Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Airline Pilots, Copilots and Flight Engineers (53-2011.00)  
 Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association: Learn to Fly  
 University of North Dakota, Odegard School of Aerospace Sciences  
 Experimental Aircraft Association: Learn to Fly

Numbers checked September 2026. Pay figures are typical full-time annual amounts in United States dollars, based on Bureau of Labor Statistics wage data and published pay scales. They vary by state, employer and experience. Tuition is for in-state students at public schools unless the card says otherwise. Sources, links and the click-through version: <https://career.help/us/careers/airline-pilot>



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