

Composer

Write the music other people perform, stream or put behind a scene. Most of it is paid per job, not per hour.

TYPICAL PAY

\$73,710

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$40k to \$166k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

2 to 6 years

after high school

DEMAND

Limited

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

No

anyone can do it

WHERE YOU WORK

Home studios, scoring stages, churches, game and film compani...

How you get there

- 1 Play an instrument and read music** Ongoing
 You do not have to be a virtuoso, but you must be fluent on the page. Start in high school.
- 2 Write constantly and get it performed** High school onward
 School ensembles, friends' films, game jams. A recording of a real performance is worth more than a perfect file nobody played.
- 3 A music degree, or the self taught route** 4 years
 A bachelor of music in composition is the common path and gives you four years of ensembles who will play your work. Plenty of screen and game composers skipped it and built a reel instead.
- 4 Assist somebody** 1 to 3 years
 Orchestrating, copying parts or running sessions for a working composer is how most people learn the film and game side.
- 5 Your own commissions** Ongoing
 Small projects first, then bigger ones on the strength of what you already delivered on time.

Pros and cons

- + Work that is genuinely yours and carries your name
- + Royalties can pay you for decades after the job is done
- + You can start from a bedroom with a laptop
- Income is lumpy and the survey median hides how many earn far less
- A lot of early work is unpaid or badly paid
- The occupation is projected to grow slowly with few openings

Good to know

Streaming royalties have their own national clearing house

The Music Modernization Act created a single body to handle streaming and download royalties for songwriters and composers in the United States. It has paid out billions of dollars, it is free to join, a...

Your music is copyrighted the second you write it down

United States copyright protection is automatic when an original work is fixed in a tangible form, including a recording. You do not have to register to own it. You do have to register to sue somebody over it.

Optional boosts

Orchestration. Music production and mixing. Game audio and adaptive music. Conducting.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Music Directors and Composers (27-2041.00)
 United States Copyright Office: Music Modernization Act
 The Mechanical Licensing Collective
 Berklee College of Music: composition major

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/composer>



Scan for the full clicker