

Drone Pilot

A federal certificate you can earn at 16. The certificate is easy, the paid work is the hard part.

TYPICAL PAY

\$123,220

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$59k to \$267k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

up to 1 year

after high school

DEMAND

Good

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

Construction sites, farms, film sets, utilities, police and fire agencies

How you get there

- 1 Be 16 and able to read and speak English** Now
 That is the whole eligibility list for the certificate. No degree, no flight hours, no medical exam.
- 2 Study the rules** 2 to 6 weeks
 Airspace, weather, charts, loading, emergency procedures and the operating limits. Free federal study material covers all of it.
- 3 Pass the knowledge test** 1 day
 A multiple choice aeronautical knowledge exam taken at an approved testing center, about \$175.
- 4 Security vetting and certificate** Days to weeks
 You apply through the federal airman registry, clear a Transportation Security Administration check, and the remote pilot certificate is issued.
- 5 Build something worth hiring** 1 to 3 years
 Flight hours, a reel or a portfolio of maps and inspection reports, plus insurance. This is the step most people skip and then wonder why nobody calls.

Pros and cons

- + You can hold a federal certificate at 16 for a couple of hundred dollars
- + No degree, no medical exam, no flight hours required
- + It bolts onto almost any other career and makes you more valuable
- There is no national wage figure for drone-only work, and it pays far less than the pilot numbers suggest
- Full time drone-only jobs are still rare, and freelance income is uneven
- Thousands of certificate holders compete for the same easy jobs

Optional boosts

Photogrammetry and mapping. Thermal imaging. Surveying knowledge. Cinematography.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Commercial Pilots (53-2012.00)

O*NET OnLine: Commercial Pilots, tasks and wages

FAA Safety Team: free online remote pilot recurrent training

Association for Uncrewed Vehicle Systems International

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/drone-pilot>

Good to know

The ceiling is 400 feet

Under the standard federal rules you stay at or below 400 feet above the ground and keep the aircraft in sight. Flying higher, at night over people, or beyond your line of sight all need a specific waiver.

You can be certificated before you can drive alone

The minimum age for a remote pilot certificate is 16, and there is no medical exam and no flight hour requirement. It is one of the few federal aviation credentials a high school student can simply go and...



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