

Locomotive Engineer

Drive freight and passenger trains. You start as a conductor and get promoted into the seat.

TYPICAL PAY

\$81,410

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$61k to \$109k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

2 to 5 years

after high school

DEMAND

Limited

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

Freight railroads, passenger lines, yards, terminals

How you get there

- 1 High school diploma** Grade 12
 That is the formal education requirement. What matters more is a clean driving record, no drug history, and being able to pass a physical.
- 2 Hire on as a conductor or switchman** Months of applying
 Apply directly to a freight railroad, a passenger railroad or a short line. Expect aptitude testing, panel interviews, a physical, a drug screen and a criminal background check.
- 3 Work train service** 2 to 5 years
 Learn the territory, the rulebook and the equipment while working real trains on an unpredictable schedule. This is the stage most people quit at.
- 4 Engineer training** About 6 months
 The railroad selects you, then puts you through classroom work, simulator time and supervised operating hours with a designated supervisor of locomotive engineers.
- 5 Get certified** At the end of training
 Pass a knowledge test and a skills ride. The railroad issues your certificate under a program the Federal Railroad Administration has approved.

Pros and cons

- + Well over the national median with no degree and no tuition
- + A federal pension system better than Social Security
- + Strong union contracts and real job protections
- On call around the clock, with no reliable schedule
- Nights away from home in hotels, missing birthdays and holidays
- Discipline is strict and a single rule violation can pull your certificate

Optional boosts

Qualifying on more territory. Passenger qualification. Designated supervisor of locomotive engineers. Road foreman or trainmaster.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Locomotive Engineers (53-4011.00)
 Federal rule 49 CFR Part 240: qualification and certification of locomotive engineers
 Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers and Trainmen
 Johnson County Community College

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/locomotive-engineer>

Good to know

The title is misleading

A locomotive engineer does not design anything and needs no engineering degree. The word survives from the 1800s, when the person who ran the engine was the engineer. Everywhere else in the...

Railroaders have their own pension

Rail workers do not pay into Social Security. They pay into Railroad Retirement, a separate federal system set up in the 1930s. It generally pays more than Social Security, and a long-service employee can dra...



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