

Penetration Tester

You break into computer systems on purpose, with written permission, and then explain exactly how you did it.

TYPICAL PAY

\$129,180

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$75k to \$200k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

1 to 4 years

after high school

DEMAND

Very high

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

No

anyone can do it

WHERE YOU WORK

Security consultancies, in-house security teams, banks, governme...

How you get there

- 1 High school** Grades 11 and 12
 Learn to program a little, build a home lab out of old machines or free virtual ones, and start breaking things you own.
- 2 Degree or certification, or both** 0 to 4 years
 A two-year or four-year cybersecurity or computer science degree is the common route. Self-taught people get in too, but they need a certification to prove it.
- 3 A first technical job** 1 to 3 years
 Help desk, systems administration, network support or a security operations center. You need to understand how systems are built before you can break them.
- 4 Get a hands-on certification** 3 to 12 months of study
 The Offensive Security Certified Professional (OSCP) exam is 24 hours of proctored practical hacking. The CompTIA PenTest+ exam runs 165 minutes with up to 90 questions.
- 5 Junior penetration tester** First role
 Join a consulting firm or an in-house red team. You learn the report writing and the client side on the job.

Pros and cons

- + Strong pay, with a median of \$129,180 and a bright federal outlook
- + No license and no mandatory degree, so the door is open to self-taught people
- + Heavily remote friendly
- Almost nobody gets hired into it directly, so expect a few years elsewhere first
- Report writing and client meetings are most of the job, not the hacking
- You have to keep learning forever or you are obsolete in 3 years

Optional boosts

Offensive Security Certified Professional (OSCP). CompTIA PenTest+. GIAC Penetration Tester (GPEN). Cloud security certifications.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Information Security Analysts (15-1212.00)

OffSec: the PEN-200 course and the Offensive Security Certified Professional exam

CompTIA: the PenTest+ certification

SANS Institute: enterprise penetration testing course

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/penetration-tester>

Good to know

The best known exam lasts 24 hours

The Offensive Security Certified Professional exam gives you a day inside a private network to compromise machines, watched by a proctor, then time afterwards to write the report. Plenty of people fail...

The paperwork is the difference

The same actions are either a paid engagement or a federal crime. The only thing that changes is a signed authorization naming what you are allowed to touch.



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