

Railroad Conductor

You are in charge of the train: the paperwork, the cars, the crew and every move it makes.

TYPICAL PAY

\$78,000

a year, full time

PAY RANGE

\$59k to \$110k

starting to experienced

TIME TO QUALIFY

1 to 2 years

after high school

DEMAND

Limited

job outlook

LICENCE NEEDED

Yes

regulated job

WHERE YOU WORK

Freight trains, rail yards, passenger trains, commuter railroads

How you get there

- 1 High school diploma** Grade 12
The formal requirement. You must be 18 or older, pass a background check, a drug test and a physical including vision and hearing.
- 2 Apply and wait** Weeks to a year
Openings come in waves. Big freight railroads and commuter agencies post them, and the hiring process takes months.
- 3 Conductor training program** 3 to 6 months
Classroom on operating rules, air brakes and paperwork, then weeks riding and switching with a qualified conductor.
- 4 Federal certification** End of training
The railroad must certify you before you can work as a conductor. That means a knowledge test, a hands-on skills check, a vision and hearing test and a review of your safety record.
- 5 The extra board** Years
New conductors have no seniority, so you are on call for whatever run needs filling until enough people retire ahead of you.

Pros and cons

- + Serious money with no degree and no debt
- + A federal railroad pension that beats Social Security
- + Union protection and a clear seniority ladder
- On call around the clock for your first years, with plans you cannot keep
- Nights away from home in hotels, regularly
- Outdoors in heat, snow and rain, climbing on heavy equipment

Good to know

The conductor outranks the engineer

The engineer drives the train, but the conductor is in charge of it. The cars, the paperwork, the crew and the decision to move all sit with the conductor. It is one of the few jobs where the person not operating t...

Rail workers have their own pension system

Railroad employees have been outside Social Security since the 1930s, paying instead into a separate federal system with its own retirement, disability, unemployment and sickness benefits run by th...

Optional boosts

Locomotive engineer. Yardmaster. Passenger railroads. Road foreman or manager.

Where these numbers come from

My Next Move: Railroad Conductors and Yardmasters (53-4031.00)
49 CFR Part 242: Qualification and Certification of Conductors
SMART Transportation Division, the largest rail operating union
Railroad Retirement Board

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/railroad-conductor>



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