

CAREER KIT

Air Traffic Controller Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become an Air Traffic Controller

2026-10 edition

Inside: at-a-glance summary · step-by-step path · costs & requirements · 90-day action plan · documents checklist · exams · interview questions · resume bullets · common mistakes · 13-week tracker · resources

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At a glance

To become an air traffic controller, you must be a U.S. citizen under 31 on the job announcement's closing date, meet the FAA's education or work-experience rule, pass the ATSA aptitude test, a medical exam and a security check, then complete paid training at the FAA Academy. Full certification at a facility usually takes 2 to 3 years after hire. The FAA path itself costs little, though an AT-CTI college degree adds tuition.

Timeline	2–4 years from application to fully certified controller
Typical cost	\$0–\$1,000 via the open FAA path; tuition if you choose an AT-CTI degree
Education	1 year of work experience, a bachelor's degree, or an AT-CTI program
License	FAA Certified Professional Controller (CPC) status
Median pay	\$148,080 per year
Job outlook	+2% (2025–35), slower than average

Step-by-step path

1. Check the age and citizenship rules

Time: 1 day

You must be a U.S. citizen and under 31 on the closing date of the FAA job announcement. Controllers must retire at 56, which is why the entry age cap exists. Some former military and prior civilian controllers can qualify past the age cap.

2. Meet the education or experience rule

Time: 0–4 years

The FAA accepts one year of general work experience, a four-year bachelor's degree, a mix of college and work, or specialized aviation experience. Graduates of an FAA Air Traffic Collegiate Training Initiative (AT-CTI) school apply in a separate pool. Pick the route that fits your age and budget.

3. Apply on USAJOBS when the FAA opens a window

Time: Watch for openings year-round

The FAA posts entry-level controller announcements on USAJOBS, often for only a short time. The 2026 announcement closed the same day after hitting its application cap. Create your USAJOBS profile and upload your resume and documents in advance.

4. Pass the ATSA

Time: About 1 day of testing

Qualified applicants are invited to take the Air Traffic Skills Assessment (ATSA), a computer-based aptitude test given at a testing center. It measures memory, spatial reasoning, multitasking and decision-making. You need a 'Best' or 'Well-Qualified' score to move forward.

5. Clear medical, psychological and security checks

Time: 2–6 months

After a tentative offer, you complete a comprehensive medical evaluation, a psychological assessment and a drug test. You also go through a background investigation for a Secret clearance. Be fully honest on every form.

6. Complete FAA Academy training

Time: Several weeks to about 3 months · Cost: Paid training

Most new hires train at the FAA Academy in Oklahoma City, with paid housing, food and travel allowances. Training lasts several weeks to a few months, depending on your track. Graduates of an Enhanced AT-CTI program can go straight to a facility instead.

7. Certify at your assigned facility

Time: 2–3 years

You must accept placement at any FAA facility in the country. There you train on the job as a developmental controller, position by position. Reaching Certified Professional Controller status usually takes 2 to 3 years, depending on the facility.

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
USAJOBS application	\$0	\$0	
Travel to ATSA testing center	\$0	\$500	You pay your own travel to testing
ATSA practice materials (optional)	\$0	\$150	
FAA Academy training	\$0	\$0	Paid training with housing, food and travel allowances
Relocation to your assigned facility	\$1,000	\$5,000	Entry-level announcements offer no relocation reimbursement
AT-CTI associate or bachelor's degree (optional)	\$8,000	\$120,000	Community college programs cost far less than four-year universities
Total	\$9,000	\$125,650	

Requirements

Age	Under 31 on the announcement closing date; mandatory retirement at 56. Limited exceptions apply for prior controllers.
Citizenship	U.S. citizen. Men born after December 31, 1959 must be registered with Selective Service.
Education or experience	One year of work experience, a four-year bachelor's degree, a combination, or specialized aviation experience. AT-CTI graduates apply in their own pool.
Aptitude test	Pass the Air Traffic Skills Assessment (ATSA) with a 'Best' or 'Well-Qualified' result.
Medical	Comprehensive FAA medical evaluation, psychological assessment and drug testing.
Security	Background investigation for a Secret clearance.
English	Speak English clearly enough to be understood over radios and intercoms.
Mobility	Willingness to work at any FAA facility and on rotating shifts, nights, weekends and holidays.

90-Day Action Plan

Tick each box as you finish the task. Do the phases in order; it is fine if a phase takes a little longer.

Days 1–30

Weeks 1–4

Goal: Confirm eligibility and get application-ready

- ☐ Calculate your age on likely announcement dates and confirm you are under 31
- ☐ Choose your route: work experience, bachelor's degree, AT-CTI or military
- ☐ Create a USAJOBS profile and save a search for Air Traffic Control Specialist
- ☐ Build a federal-style resume with hours per week and exact dates for every job
- ☐ Gather transcripts, DD-214 or certificates you may need
- ☐ Review medical history for anything that could need documentation
- ☐ Join FAA hiring update emails and controller applicant forums

Days 31–60

Weeks 5–8

Goal: Start ATSA preparation

- ☐ Practice mental math without a calculator 20 minutes a day
- ☐ Do daily memory and pattern recall drills
- ☐ Play multitasking and spatial reasoning practice games
- ☐ Learn the basics of airspace and the phonetic alphabet
- ☐ Visit a local control tower if tours are offered or listen to live ATC audio
- ☐ Research AT-CTI and Enhanced AT-CTI schools if you are considering one

Days 61–90

Weeks 9–13

Goal: Be ready to apply the day the window opens

- ☐ Have your resume and documents uploaded and final in USAJOBS
- ☐ Set phone and email alerts so you can apply within hours
- ☐ Prepare forms for the security background investigation
- ☐ Save money for testing travel and possible relocation
- ☐ Talk with family about moving to any FAA facility
- ☐ Keep up daily ATSA practice and track your scores
- ☐ Practice clear, concise speaking for radio communication

Documents checklist

Gather these early. Keep originals in one folder and scans in the cloud.

- ☐ Proof of U.S. citizenship (passport or birth certificate)
- ☐ Government photo ID
- ☐ Federal-style resume with dates and hours
- ☐ College transcripts (if using education to qualify)
- ☐ AT-CTI letter of recommendation (if a CTI graduate)
- ☐ DD-214 and military ATC records (if a veteran)
- ☐ FAA or military certificates and training records
- ☐ SF-50 (if a prior federal employee)
- ☐ Selective Service registration proof (men born after 1959)
- ☐ Address and employment history for the background investigation
- ☐ Medical records for any significant conditions

Exams & how to prepare

Air Traffic Skills Assessment (ATSA)

What it is: FAA computer-based aptitude test measuring memory, math, spatial reasoning, multitasking, situational awareness and a work-style survey.

How to prepare: Practice mental math, memory and multitasking drills, and get good sleep before test day. Answer the personality section honestly and consistently.

FAA Academy performance verifications

What it is: Graded written tests and simulator problems during Academy training. You must pass to move to a facility.

How to prepare: Memorize phraseology and regulations early and practice scenarios with classmates every evening.

Facility certification checkouts

What it is: On-the-job evaluations for each position at your facility before you reach CPC status.

How to prepare: Study local procedures and maps, ask your trainers for honest feedback and review every session.

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to be an air traffic controller?

Tip: Talk about responsibility, focus and teamwork, not only the salary.

2. Are you willing to relocate anywhere in the U.S.?

Tip: Answer yes clearly; placement anywhere is a condition of the job.

3. Tell me about a time you made a fast decision under pressure.

Tip: Use STAR and show calm, structured thinking.

4. How do you handle criticism from a trainer?

Tip: Show you welcome feedback and apply it quickly.

5. Describe a time you managed several tasks at once.

Tip: Explain how you prioritized and what the result was.

6. How do you stay focused during long, quiet shifts?

Tip: Mention specific habits for staying alert and engaged.

7. Tell me about a mistake you made and how you fixed it.

Tip: Own it and focus on the system you put in place afterward.

8. How do you handle shift work and fatigue?

Tip: Show you understand rotating schedules and plan for sleep.

9. Describe a conflict with a coworker.

Tip: Show clear, respectful communication and a resolution.

10. What would you do if you were unsure of an instruction from a supervisor?

Tip: Say you would ask for clarification immediately; safety beats pride.

11. How would you handle not certifying at your first facility?

Tip: Show resilience and willingness to keep learning.

12. What do you know about the FAA's training process?

Tip: Show you know about the Academy, developmental status and CPC certification.

Resume bullet examples

Adapt these to what you actually did. Use numbers wherever you can.

- Coordinated dispatch of 12 delivery drivers daily, adjusting routes in real time to meet 98% on-time rate
- Monitored multiple radio channels as a security dispatcher during 12-hour rotating shifts
- Completed FAA AT-CTI associate degree with coursework in airspace, regulations and radar simulation
- Managed scheduling for a 40-person warehouse team across three shifts
- Earned FAA private pilot certificate and instrument rating
- Handled high-volume customer calls with calm, precise communication
- Served 4 years as a U.S. Air Force air traffic controller with tower certification
- Trained 5 new employees on safety procedures and standard phraseology

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Missing the age cutoff by waiting too long to apply
2. Not having a USAJOBS profile ready when a short window opens
3. Taking the ATSA without preparing, since the most recent score is used
4. Leaving out hours per week and dates on a federal resume
5. Assuming an AT-CTI degree guarantees a job
6. Being unwilling to relocate to any facility
7. Hiding medical or background information that later surfaces

13-week progress tracker

Fill this in by hand each week.

Week	Focus	Done?	Notes
1			
2			
3			
4			
5			
6			
7			
8			
9			
10			
11			
12			
13			

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **USAJOBS**

<https://www.usajobs.gov>

- **FAA: Air Traffic Controllers career page**

https://www.faa.gov/jobs/career_fields/aviation_careers/atc

- **FAA AT-CTI schools**

<https://www.faa.gov/jobs/students/schools>

- **FAA Air Traffic Control order (JO 7110.65)**

https://www.faa.gov/air_traffic/publications

- **BLS: Air Traffic Controllers**

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/transportation-and-material-moving/air-traffic-controllers.htm>

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Under \$78,420	\$148,080 per year	Over \$215,610

Outlook: Employment of air traffic controllers is projected to grow 2% from 2025 to 2035, slower than average, with about 2,100 openings each year, mostly to replace retiring controllers.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, May 2025 data —

<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/transportation-and-material-moving/air-traffic-controllers.htm>

Disclaimer. Requirements vary by state and change over time. Verify with the official sources listed. This guide is not legal or career advice.