CAREER KIT

Occupational Therapy Assistant Career Kit: 90-Day Action Plan

How to Become an Occupational Therapy Assistant

2026-11 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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SECTION 1

At a glance

To become an occupational therapy assistant (OTA) you complete an accredited associate degree program, finish supervised fieldwork, pass the NBCOT COTA exam, and get a state license. That takes about two to two and a half years, and tuition at a community college often runs $10,000 to $40,000. OTAs earned a median of $72,300 in May 2025 (BLS), and jobs are projected to grow 21% from 2025 to 2035.

Timeline	About 2–2.5 years (associate degree, fieldwork, exam and licensing)
Typical cost	$12,000–$45,000 (mostly tuition) plus about $700–$1,000 in exam and license fees
Education	Associate degree from an ACOTE-accredited OTA program
License	State license (NBCOT COTA certification is required in most states)
Median pay	$72,300 per year (BLS, May 2025)
Job outlook	+21% (2025–35), much faster than average

SECTION 2

Step-by-step path

1. Learn what OTAs do and check the prerequisites

Time: 1–3 months

OTAs work under the supervision of occupational therapists to help patients rebuild everyday skills such as dressing, eating, writing and using adaptive equipment. Most programs ask for a high school diploma or GED and prerequisite courses such as anatomy and physiology, psychology and medical terminology. Shadow an OTA for a day if you can; many programs ask for observation hours.

2. Choose an ACOTE-accredited OTA program

Time: 1–2 months of research

Accreditation from ACOTE (the Accreditation Council for Occupational Therapy Education) is what makes you eligible for the NBCOT exam and state licensure. Most programs are two-year associate degrees at community colleges; a few bachelor's programs exist. Compare cost, NBCOT pass rate and how the school arranges fieldwork placements. Some programs are hybrid, but labs and fieldwork happen in person.

3. Complete the associate degree coursework

Time: 18–24 months · Cost: $10,000–$40,000

Expect about 60 to 75 credits in anatomy, kinesiology, development across the lifespan, therapeutic activities and clinical conditions. Programs are cohort-based, so you start with a group and follow a fixed sequence. Keep your GPA up; admission to many programs is competitive.

4. Finish Level II fieldwork

Time: 16+ weeks · Cost: $0–$1,500 (travel, scrubs, background checks)

Accredited programs include supervised clinical fieldwork. Level II fieldwork is typically at least 16 weeks of full-time work in settings such as hospitals, skilled nursing facilities, schools and outpatient clinics. This is where you apply skills with real patients, and it's often unpaid, so plan your finances.

5. Pass the NBCOT COTA exam

Time: 2–3 months of study · Cost: $540 (initial application fee, verify)

After graduating you apply to NBCOT to sit for the Certified Occupational Therapy Assistant (COTA) exam, delivered at Pearson VUE test centers. The exam has 190 multiple-choice and multi-select questions in four hours. NBCOT's fee page lists $540 for an online initial exam application and $430 for an online retake (paper applications cost $595 and $485); fees can change, so confirm on nbcot.org/fees.

6. Apply for your state license

Time: 2–6 weeks · Cost: $75–$300

BLS says OTAs usually need a state-issued license, which requires an accredited program, fieldwork and passing the exam; some states also run a background check. Submit your NBCOT score, transcript and fee to your state occupational therapy board. Processing can take a few weeks.

7. Apply for jobs and choose a setting

Time: 1–3 months

Home health, nursing care facilities, outpatient therapy offices, hospitals and schools all hire OTAs, and median pay differs by setting: BLS reports $77,310 in home health and $76,780 in nursing care facilities versus $60,920 in educational services. Per-diem or contract work can pay more but offers less stability.

SECTION 3

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
Associate degree tuition	$10,000	$40,000	Community colleges are cheapest; private OTA schools can cost much more.
Prerequisite courses (if needed)	$0	$3,000	
NBCOT COTA exam application	$500	$600	Online application fee is around $540 per NBCOT; paper applications cost more.
State license application	$75	$300	Varies by state.
Fieldwork costs (travel, scrubs, background check, health screening)	$200	$1,500	
Textbooks and study materials	$300	$1,500	
CPR certification	$30	$100	
Total	**$11,105**	**$47,000**	

Requirements

Education	An associate degree from an ACOTE-accredited OTA program, the typical entry-level education according to BLS.
Fieldwork	Supervised Level II fieldwork, generally at least 16 weeks of full-time clinical experience, completed as part of the program.
NBCOT certification	Passing the COTA exam is required for licensure in most states. Applicants must have a clear criminal history review; NBCOT offers a Character Review for those with prior offenses.
State license	Required in nearly every state. Rules differ in fees, continuing education and background checks.
Background check and immunizations	Clinical sites typically require fingerprinting, drug screening, TB tests and proof of vaccinations before fieldwork.
CPR certification	Most programs and employers require current CPR or BLS for healthcare providers.
Physical ability	The job involves lifting, transferring and assisting patients; programs usually list technical standards for admission.
Continuing education	Required to renew your NBCOT certification and state license, usually every two years.

SECTION 4

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.

Phase 1: Explore and qualify

Days 1–30

Goal: Confirm OTA is right for you and find the prerequisites you need.

- ☐ Shadow an OTA or OT for at least one full day.
- ☐ List ACOTE-accredited OTA programs within reach and note their prerequisites and deadlines.
- ☐ Check your state occupational therapy board's licensure page.
- ☐ Review your transcripts for completed prerequisites.
- ☐ Register for any missing prerequisite course.

Phase 2: Apply to programs

Days 31–60

Goal: Submit strong applications.

- ☐ Complete observation hours and get signed verification.
- ☐ Write a personal statement connecting your motivation to a specific experience.
- ☐ Request references from a supervisor or professor.
- ☐ Apply to at least three programs.
- ☐ File FAFSA and apply for local scholarships.

Phase 3: Prepare to start

Days 61–90

Goal: Get ready for coursework and clinical requirements.

- ☐ Get CPR certification.
- ☐ Schedule physical exam, TB test and immunization records.
- ☐ Complete the background check requested by the program.
- ☐ Build a budget for tuition, fieldwork and the NBCOT fee.
- ☐ Plan childcare and work schedules around fieldwork.

SECTION 5

Documents checklist

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

- [ ] High school diploma or GED
- [ ] College transcripts
- [ ] Observation hours verification form
- [ ] Immunization and TB records
- [ ] CPR card
- [ ] Background check consent forms

SECTION 6

Exams & how to prepare

NBCOT COTA exam

What it is: A computer-based exam of 190 multiple-choice and multi-select items over four hours, reported as a scaled score; check NBCOT's candidate handbook for the current passing score. It is delivered at Pearson testing centers.

How to prepare: Use the NBCOT content outline, take timed practice exams and review your program's weakest domains. Start 8–12 weeks before your exam date.

State jurisprudence exam (some states)

What it is: A short test on the state's occupational therapy practice act and rules.

How to prepare: Read the state board's practice act and rules.

Fieldwork performance evaluation

What it is: Your supervisor scores your clinical competence at the end of Level II fieldwork. Not an exam, but you must pass it to graduate.

How to prepare: Ask for feedback weekly and set learning goals with your supervisor.

SECTION 7

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to be an OTA?

Tip: Share a personal or observed example of therapy helping someone regain independence.

2. What does an OTA do compared to an OT?

Tip: Show you understand the supervisory relationship.

3. How would you motivate a patient who refuses therapy?

Tip: Find what matters to the patient and tie activities to it.

4. How do you handle physically demanding work?

Tip: Mention body mechanics and teamwork.

5. Describe a time you worked with someone with a disability.

Tip: Focus on respect and adaptation.

6. How do you document care?

Tip: Stress timely, objective notes.

7. How do you handle feedback from a supervising OT?

Tip: Demonstrate openness.

8. What settings interest you?

Tip: Show awareness of home health, skilled nursing, schools and clinics.

9. How do you stay calm with distressed patients?

Tip: Describe your approach.

10. Where do you see yourself in five years?

Tip: Mention continuing education or bridge to OT.

SECTION 8

Resume bullet examples

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

- Assisted 15 patients daily with feeding, dressing and transfers in a long-term care facility.
- Completed 40 observation hours in outpatient pediatric occupational therapy.
- Documented care in electronic records accurately and on time.
- Led activity groups for 8–10 residents to improve fine motor skills.
- Certified in CPR and first aid; trained in safe patient handling.
- Helped caregivers use adaptive equipment during home visits.

SECTION 9

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Enrolling in a program that is not ACOTE accredited.
2. Underestimating the unpaid 16-week fieldwork period.
3. Skipping NBCOT practice exams.
4. Waiting to start the state license application until after the exam.
5. Missing the program's application deadline.

SECTION 10

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			

SECTION 11

Resources, salary & disclaimer

Resources

- **BLS: Occupational Therapy Assistants and Aides**

https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/occupational-therapy-assistants-and-aides.htm

- **NBCOT**

https://www.nbcot.org/

- **ACOTE**

https://acoteonline.org/

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
$51,490	**$72,300 per year (occupational therapy assistants)**	$89,780

Outlook: BLS projects employment of occupational therapy assistants to grow 21% from 2025 to 2035, about 11,200 new jobs, as an aging population and more patients with chronic conditions need therapy. Median wages in May 2025 were $77,310 in home health care, $76,780 in nursing care facilities, $67,020 in hospitals and $60,920 in educational services.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, May 2025 data — https://www.bls.gov/ooh/healthcare/occupational-therapy-assistants-and-aides.htm

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