

CAREER KIT

Truck Driver Career Kit: 90-Day CDL Action Plan

How to Become a Truck Driver

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 a truck driver, you need a commercial driver's license (CDL): pass a DOT physical, get a commercial learner's permit, finish FMCSA entry-level driver training, and pass the CDL skills test. Most people do it in 1–3 months through a CDL school that costs about \$3,000–\$10,000, or through company-paid training. Heavy truck drivers earn a median of \$58,640 a year.

Timeline	1–3 months (full-time CDL school)
Typical cost	\$0–\$10,000 (company-paid training or private CDL school)
Education	High school diploma or GED preferred; CDL training required
License	Class A CDL (Class B for straight trucks)
Median pay	\$58,640 per year
Job outlook	+4% (2025–35), about as fast as average

Step-by-step path

1. Check that you meet the basic requirements

Time: 1 day · Cost: \$5–\$25 for a driving record

You must be at least 18 to drive a commercial truck within your state and 21 to drive across state lines or haul hazmat. You need a valid regular driver's license and a driving record without recent serious violations. Pull your motor vehicle record from your state DMV so you know what employers will see.

2. Pass a DOT physical and get your medical card

Time: 1 day · Cost: \$75–\$150

Book a DOT physical with an examiner listed on the FMCSA National Registry of Certified Medical Examiners. The exam checks vision, hearing, blood pressure and conditions like sleep apnea or diabetes. If you pass, you get a medical examiner's certificate, valid for up to 24 months, which you submit to your state DMV.

3. Get your commercial learner's permit (CLP)

Time: 1–3 weeks of study · Cost: \$25–\$150 in state fees

Study your state's CDL manual and pass the knowledge tests at the DMV. For a Class A CDL you take General Knowledge, Air Brakes and Combination Vehicles. Add endorsement tests (tanker, doubles/triples) now if you want them. You must hold the CLP for at least 14 days before you can take the skills test.

4. Complete entry-level driver training (ELDT)

Time: 3–8 weeks · Cost: \$0–\$10,000

Since February 2022, first-time Class A and Class B applicants must finish ELDT from a provider listed on the FMCSA Training Provider Registry. Training has a theory part, where you must score at least 80%, and behind-the-wheel practice on a range and public roads. Your provider reports completion to the registry, and the state checks it before your skills test.

5. Pass the CDL skills test

Time: 1 day · Cost: \$0–\$350 depending on state and test site

The skills test has three parts: vehicle inspection (pre-trip), basic control skills such as backing, and an on-road driving test. You usually take it in the truck you trained in, often at the school or a state-approved third-party site. Practice your pre-trip out loud until you can do it without notes, because many people fail there first.

6. Get hired and finish company onboarding

Time: 2–6 weeks · Cost: Usually paid by the employer

Apply to carriers that hire new CDL holders, including large fleets with finishing programs. Expect a DOT drug test, a query of the FMCSA Drug and Alcohol Clearinghouse, and a road test with the company. Many new drivers spend 2–6 weeks driving with a trainer before running solo.

7. Build your first year of safe miles

Time: 6–12 months · Cost: \$0–\$200 per endorsement

Your first 6–12 months matter most. A clean record with no accidents or log violations opens better-paying jobs, such as local, dedicated or tanker routes. Add endorsements like hazmat (requires a TSA background check) when you are ready to earn more.

Costs & requirements

Estimated costs (USD)

Item	Low	High	Note
CDL school (ELDT theory + behind-the-wheel)	\$3,000	\$10,000	Community college and private schools; company-sponsored training can be \$0 with a work contract.
DOT physical	\$75	\$150	
CLP knowledge test and permit fees	\$25	\$150	Varies by state.
CDL skills test	\$0	\$350	Third-party testers often charge more than the DMV.
CDL license issuance	\$30	\$150	Varies by state.
Hazmat endorsement (TSA threat assessment)	\$85	\$150	Optional.
Total	\$3,215	\$10,950	

Requirements

Age	18+ for intrastate driving; 21+ for interstate driving and hazmat.
Driver's license	A valid non-commercial license from your home state, with no disqualifying offenses such as recent DUI.
DOT medical certificate	Pass a DOT physical from an examiner on the FMCSA National Registry; valid for up to 24 months.
Entry-level driver training	Required for first-time Class A or B CDL applicants; must come from a provider on the FMCSA Training Provider Registry.
Knowledge and skills tests	Pass the CLP knowledge tests, hold the permit 14+ days, then pass the three-part skills test.
English proficiency	Federal rules require drivers to read and speak English well enough to talk with officials and read road signs.
Drug and alcohol testing	Pass a DOT pre-employment drug test and clear an FMCSA Drug and Alcohol Clearinghouse query.

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: Qualify and get your permit

Days 1–30

Goal: Hold a valid DOT medical card and commercial learner's permit.

- ☐ Order your motor vehicle record and fix any unpaid tickets or suspensions.
- ☐ Decide on Class A (tractor-trailer) or Class B (straight truck, bus) based on local job ads.
- ☐ Book a DOT physical with an examiner on the FMCSA National Registry.
- ☐ Download your state CDL manual and study General Knowledge, Air Brakes and Combination Vehicles.
- ☐ Take at least five full practice tests per subject and aim for 90%+.
- ☐ Pass the knowledge tests at the DMV and get your CLP.
- ☐ Shortlist three CDL programs on the FMCSA Training Provider Registry and compare price, truck time and job placement.

Phase 2: Train and pass the skills test

Days 31–60

Goal: Complete ELDT and pass the CDL skills test.

- ☐ Enroll in your chosen school or company-sponsored program and confirm it reports ELDT to the registry.
- ☐ Finish the ELDT theory portion with a score of 80% or higher.
- ☐ Practice the pre-trip inspection daily, out loud, until you can do it from memory.
- ☐ Log behind-the-wheel hours on backing: straight-line, offset and alley dock.
- ☐ Drive in city traffic, on highways and through railroad crossings with your instructor.
- ☐ Schedule the skills test as soon as your 14-day CLP waiting period and training are done.
- ☐ Pass the skills test and get your CDL issued.

Phase 3: Get hired and start driving

Days 61–90

Goal: Land your first CDL job and finish company training.

- ☐ Register for the FMCSA Drug and Alcohol Clearinghouse so you can give employers consent.
- ☐ Apply to 10+ carriers that hire new CDL holders, comparing pay per mile, home time and training pay.
- ☐ Ask each recruiter about route type, equipment, benefits and any training contract terms.
- ☐ Pass the company drug test, road test and orientation.
- ☐ Complete your ride-along or finishing program with a trainer.
- ☐ Set up a simple log of miles, pay and expenses to track your weekly earnings.
- ☐ Pick one endorsement to add in your first year based on the jobs you want next.

Documents checklist

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

- ☐ Valid driver's license
- ☐ Proof of identity and U.S. citizenship or lawful presence (passport or birth certificate)
- ☐ Social Security card or proof of SSN
- ☐ Proof of state residency (two documents, per your DMV)
- ☐ DOT medical examiner's certificate
- ☐ Motor vehicle record (last 3–10 years, as required by employers)
- ☐ Commercial learner's permit
- ☐ ELDT completion record from your training provider
- ☐ Employment history for the last 3 years (10 years if you drove commercially)
- ☐ FMCSA Clearinghouse login
- ☐ TSA fingerprinting receipt (hazmat only)

Exams & how to prepare

CDL General Knowledge test (CLP)

What it is: Multiple-choice test on safe driving, cargo, inspections and emergencies. Required for every CDL class.

How to prepare: Read your state CDL manual sections 1–3 and take practice tests until you score 90%+.

Air Brakes and Combination Vehicles tests

What it is: Required for a Class A CDL without restrictions. Cover air brake systems, coupling and uncoupling, and handling tractor-trailers.

How to prepare: Study manual sections 5 and 6; learn the air brake check sequence word for word.

Endorsement knowledge tests

What it is: Tanker (N), Doubles/Triples (T), Hazmat (H), Passenger (P) and School Bus (S). Hazmat also needs a TSA background check and, for first-timers, ELDT theory.

How to prepare: Take only the endorsements your target jobs need; each has its own manual section.

CDL skills test

What it is: Three parts: vehicle inspection, basic control skills (straight-line, offset and alley-dock backing, depending on state) and an on-road drive.

How to prepare: Memorize the pre-trip inspection script and practice each backing maneuver until you need no pull-ups.

Interview questions

1. Why do you want to drive for our company?

Tip: Name something specific: their routes, home time or equipment, not just pay.

2. Have you had any accidents or moving violations?

Tip: Be honest; they will see your MVR. Explain what you learned.

3. Are you OK with being away from home for weeks?

Tip: Answer truthfully and ask what home time looks like in practice.

4. Walk me through a pre-trip inspection.

Tip: Go in order and name each check; it shows you trained properly.

5. How do you plan your hours of service?

Tip: Mention the 11-hour driving and 14-hour on-duty limits and your 30-minute break.

6. What would you do if you were running late for a delivery?

Tip: Safety and communication first: call dispatch, never speed or break HOS rules.

7. How do you handle backing into a tight dock?

Tip: Say you get out and look (GOAL) and use pull-ups when needed.

8. What would you do in bad weather?

Tip: Slow down, add following distance, and shut down if it's unsafe.

9. Can you pass a DOT drug test today?

Tip: Only answer yes if true; a failed test follows you in the Clearinghouse.

10. How do you stay alert on long drives?

Tip: Talk about sleep, breaks, food and never pushing through fatigue.

11. Are you comfortable with an ELD and dispatch apps?

Tip: Say yes and mention any apps or devices you used in training.

12. Where do you see yourself in two years?

Tip: Show you plan to stay and grow, such as adding endorsements.

Resume bullet examples

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

- Earned Class A CDL with Air Brakes and Combination Vehicles; passed skills test on first attempt.
- Completed FMCSA entry-level driver training at a registered provider, including range and public road hours.
- Performed daily pre-trip and post-trip inspections and documented defects on DVIRs.
- Maintained a clean driving record with zero accidents or moving violations.
- Logged hours accurately on an electronic logging device in compliance with HOS rules.
- Hold a current DOT medical card and a clean Drug and Alcohol Clearinghouse record.
- Backed 53-foot trailers into docks using straight-line, offset and alley-dock maneuvers.
- Delivered on schedule by planning routes around traffic, weather and truck restrictions.

Common mistakes to avoid

1. Paying for a school that is not on the FMCSA Training Provider Registry.
2. Signing a company-paid training contract without reading the repayment terms.
3. Waiting to get the DOT physical until after paying for school, then failing it.
4. Memorizing practice test answers instead of reading the CDL manual.
5. Rushing the pre-trip inspection on test day and skipping items.
6. Taking the first job offer without comparing home time and pay structure.
7. Ignoring old tickets or a suspension until a recruiter finds them.

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

- **FMCSA Training Provider Registry**
<https://tpr.fmcsa.dot.gov/>
- **FMCSA: How to get a CDL**
<https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/registration/commercial-drivers-license/how-do-i-get-commercial-drivers-license>
- **FMCSA National Registry of Certified Medical Examiners**
<https://nationalregistry.fmcsa.dot.gov/>
- **FMCSA Drug and Alcohol Clearinghouse**
<https://clearinghouse.fmcsa.dot.gov/>
- **FMCSA Hours of Service rules**
<https://www.fmcsa.dot.gov/regulations/hours-of-service>
- **BLS: Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers**
<https://www.bls.gov/ooh/transportation-and-material-moving/heavy-and-tractor-trailer-truck-drivers.htm>

Salary

Bottom 10%	Median	Top 10%
Less than \$40,140	\$58,640 per year (\$28.19 per hour)	More than \$79,380

Outlook: Employment is projected to grow 4% from 2025 to 2035, with about 214,500 openings per year.

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook, Heavy and Tractor-Trailer Truck Drivers, May 2025 data — <https://www.bls.gov/ooh/transportation-and-material-moving/heavy-and-tractor-trailer-truck-drivers.htm>

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