

FREE FIELD GUIDE

TRADE JOB STARTER PLAYBOOK

How to pick a high-paying trade, find real openings near you, and get seen by the people who actually hire.

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START HERE

THE QUESTIONS I GET ASKED MOST

Almost every message and comment I get boils down to the same few questions. This guide answers them in order, with links to official sources so you are not guessing.

1 WHAT JOBS ACTUALLY PAY WELL?

Real pay and training numbers for five trades. Page 3.

2 HOW DO I GET IN WITH NO EXPERIENCE?

Three ways in, and exactly how to apply. Pages 4–5.

3 WHERE DO I FIND OPENINGS NEAR ME?

Step-by-step search using official sites. Pages 6–9.

4 HOW DO I GET MY APPLICATION SEEN?

The direct route most people skip. Page 10.

5 WHAT DO I DO THIS WEEK?

A 7-day action plan. Page 15.

6 CAN I REALLY DO THIS? (AGE, EXPERIENCE, RECORD, THE JOB ITSELF)

Straight answers. Pages 11–14.

QUICK DEFINITION: A **TRADE** is a skilled hands-on career you learn by working, usually through a paid **APPRENTICESHIP** (a job where you earn while you train, with classroom hours on the side).

PICK A TRADE

Pay below is the **median** (the middle paycheck, half earn more, half less) from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, May 2025. Apprentices start lower and rise as they train.

TRADE	MEDIAN PAY	TRAINING
ELEVATOR INSTALLER / REPAIRER	\$109,910	4-year paid apprenticeship
ELECTRICAL POWER- LINE WORKER	\$95,320	Paid on-the-job training; apprenticeships up to 3 years. Projected growth 10% (2025–35)
TELECOM TECHNICIAN	\$66,200	Varies by employer; check the BLS page
ELECTRICIAN	\$63,190	4–5 year apprenticeship. About 72,700 openings a year. Growth 9% (2025–35)

Source: BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook. Pay varies by state, union contract and overtime. Entry requirement for all of these is typically a high school diploma or GED.

RAILROAD SIGNAL WORK

This is my trade: keeping train signals and crossing gates working. Railroads hire for signal and electrical trainee roles, and you learn on the job. I leave out pay figures here because they depend on the railroad and your location. Check each railroad's posting.

HOW TO CHOOSE

- **Want the highest pay path?** Elevator or power-line.
- **Want the most openings in every town?** Electrician.
- **Want to travel and work outdoors?** Power-line or railroad.
- **Don't like heights or weather?** Electrician or elevator, mostly indoors.

THREE WAYS IN

A. UNION APPRENTICESHIP

A joint program run by a union and its employers. You are paid while you train, and the program places you with contractors. Examples: **IBEW/NECA** for electricians and linemen, **IUEC** for elevators. Usually involves an application, an aptitude test and an interview.

B. DIRECT HIRE

You apply straight to a utility, railroad or contractor, which trains you in-house. This is how many linemen and railroad signal people get started.

C. PRE-TRAINING FIRST

If you need a boost before applying: a community college lineworker or electrical program, or Job Corps, a free federal program for ages 16–24 that covers training, housing, meals and basic medical care.

EXAMPLE, ELEVATOR APPRENTICESHIP (NEIEP): be at least 17 to apply (18 to be registered), have a high school diploma or GED at hire, and be authorized to work in the U.S. After you apply you take the Elevator Industry Aptitude Test and an interview.

WHAT MOST PROGRAMS ASK FOR

- High school diploma or GED
- Minimum age (often 18)
- Government ID and work authorization
- Basic math and reading (the aptitude test)
- Many utility jobs also ask for a valid driver's license, sometimes a CDL

Requirements vary by program and local. Always confirm on the program's own page.

HOW TO APPLY

"How do I apply?" is the question I get most. Every path runs the same six steps.

1 GATHER YOUR DOCUMENTS

Proof of diploma or GED, government ID, valid driver's license, proof you can work in the U.S. Put them in one folder, phone and paper.

2 CHECK THE MINIMUMS

See the table below. If a number is off, the program's own page wins.

3 SUBMIT THE APPLICATION

Union programs: through your local training center (JATC) or the elevator program's recruitment page. Railroads and utilities: create an account on their careers site and apply to one posting at a time.

4 TAKE THE APTITUDE TEST

Most apprenticeships test math and reading. The electrical program asks for one year of high school algebra and posts sample test questions on its site.

5 DO THE INTERVIEW

Show up early, dress clean, bring your folder. Expect: why this trade, can you work outside in bad weather, will you show up on time, will you take a call-out.

6 PASS THE SCREENING

Expect a drug test, a background check and often a medical exam. Don't give them a reason to say no.

PATH	MINIMUMS (FROM THEIR OWN PAGES)
ELECTRICAL (IBEW / NECA)	Age 18, high school, one year algebra, qualifying aptitude score, drug free. Each local may add its own rules.
ELEVATOR (NEIEP)	Age 17 to apply (18 to register), diploma or GED, U.S. work authorization, aptitude test and interview.
RAILROAD SIGNAL (EXAMPLE POSTING)	Age 18, diploma or GED, valid license, work outdoors in all weather, pass a medical card. Pre-employment medical, drug test and background checks.

FIND OPENINGS NEAR YOU

Do these in order. It takes about an hour and gets you a real list of local options.

1 SEARCH THE FEDERAL APPRENTICESHIP FINDER

Enter your zip code and the trade. Turn on JavaScript or the search won't run.

apprenticeship.gov/apprenticeship-job-finder

2 FIND YOUR STATE APPRENTICESHIP OFFICE

Every state is listed as either a federal office or a State Apprenticeship Agency, and each links to local contacts.

apprenticeship.gov/about-us/state-offices

3 VISIT AN AMERICAN JOB CENTER

Free local career offices that help with applications and testing prep. Use the official locator.

careeronestop.org/LocalHelp/AmericanJobCenters

4 WRITE DOWN 5 LOCAL TARGETS

From steps 1–3, list five employers, locals or training centers within driving distance. Next pages show where to find the rest.

PRO TIP: If a site shows no openings, that is normal. Many apprenticeship programs only open applications a few times a year. Sign up for their alerts and check back.

UNION PROGRAMS

ELECTRICIANS & LINEMEN (IBEW / NECA)

- 1 Find your training center. The Electrical Training Alliance lists local JATC (joint apprenticeship) facilities.

electricaltrainingalliance.org/locateaTrainingCenter

Phone: 1-888-652-4007

- 2 Find the IBEW local for your area. The directory is organized by district, with states listed under each. Not sure which? IBEW headquarters can point you: (202) 833-7000.

ibew.org/local-union-directory

ELEVATORS (NEIEP / IUEC)

- 1 Open the NEIEP site, go to Opportunities, and pick an open recruitment. If none is open, use their email form and they will alert you when one starts.

neiep.org · Phone: (800) 228-8220

- 2 Find your IUEC local to ask about openings.

iuec.org/index.php/find-local-union

RAILROAD SIGNAL WORKERS (BRS)

The Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen is the union for signal workers. It is a good place to learn how the craft works.

brs.org

Call before you drive anywhere. Locals set their own application windows and hours.

DIRECT-HIRE EMPLOYERS

MAJOR RAILROADS

Each posts openings on its own careers site. Filter by your state and look for signal, electrical and maintenance trainee roles.

RAILROAD	WHERE TO LOOK
NORFOLK SOUTHERN	jobs.nscorp.com/search Categories include "Mechanical, Electrical & Other Trades"
CSX	csx.com/careers Use "Search Job Openings and Apply"
UNION PACIFIC	up.jobs
BNSF	bnsf.com/careers

ELECTRIC UTILITIES (LINEWORKER JOBS)

Search for the name of your local power company plus "careers." Look for **apprentice lineman**, **line trainee** or **groundman**. Co-ops and city utilities hire too. They often post on their own site or the city's job page.

CONTRACTORS

Electrical, elevator and telecom contractors hire helpers directly. Search "[trade] contractor near me", then check each company's own site.

WHY THE COMPANY'S OWN SITE? Big job boards repost listings late and bury them under hundreds of applicants. The employer's site is the source.

BUILD YOUR LOCAL LIST

Jobs are local. Spend 30 minutes and finish this page with five real names in your area.

SEARCH PHRASES TO COPY

- "[your state] registered apprenticeship electrician"
- "IBEW local [your city]" and "JATC [your city]"
- "[your power company] careers apprentice lineman"
- "[railroad name] careers [your state]"
- "elevator apprenticeship [your state]"

WHICH RAILROAD RUNS NEAR YOU?

Look at the locomotives or the blue sign at a nearby crossing. It usually shows the railroad's name and an emergency phone number. Then search that railroad's careers page (page 8).

YOUR FIVE LOCAL TARGETS

EMPLOYER OR PROGRAM	LINK OR PHONE	OPENS WHEN	DONE

OUT OF STATE OPTIONS: Some people move for the job. If your town has nothing, repeat this page for the nearest big city and state office (page 6).

THE DIRECT ROUTE

This is the part almost nobody does. Applying online is step one. Then you make sure a human knows your name.

1 APPLY ON THE OFFICIAL SITE

Not through a repost. Save a screenshot of the confirmation.

2 FIND THE RIGHT PERSON

Look for the training coordinator, the apprenticeship director or the local's business manager. Phone numbers are on the pages in this guide.

3 SEND ONE SHORT MESSAGE

Email or call within a day of applying. Keep it to four sentences.

4 FOLLOW UP ONCE

Wait a week, then check in. Polite and brief. Then wait for their window.

Template

Hi [Name], my name is [Your name]. I just applied for the [apprentice / trainee] position in [city]. I'm [age], I have my [diploma / GED] and a valid license, and I'm ready to start on the next class. Is there anything else I can send to help my application? Thank you for your time. [Phone number]

If you're calling, say the same thing slower. Be on time and be respectful. Showing up reliably is what hiring managers in the trades value most.

WHAT THE JOB IS REALLY LIKE

Good money is real. So are the trade-offs. Know both before you apply.

THE GOOD

- Paid training. You earn while you learn.
- No four-year degree needed to start
- Pay rises with skill and seniority
- Skills nobody can outsource
- Overtime is available when you want it

THE TRADE-OFFS

- Outside in heat, cold and rain
- Often working alone in your own territory
- On call. Trains run 24/7, so problems don't wait for 8 a.m.
- Physical work: digging, climbing, lifting
- Drug testing and medical exams

ONE REAL POSTING, ONE REAL SCHEDULE

A current railroad signal maintainer posting I read lists a Monday through Friday schedule "subject to call," work outdoors in bad weather, digging and climbing, and a pre-employment medical and drug test. That matches my experience.

ABOUT "THE COMPANY DOESN'T CARE"

I've heard it. A big company runs on policy and seniority, not friendships. What protects you is the union contract, the safety rules and your own paperwork. Ask about all three in the interview.

ASK BEFORE YOU ACCEPT

- How often are call-outs, and how far do I drive?
- How is overtime assigned?
- How long is training before I'm on my own?
- Is this a union job, and what's the seniority system?

QUESTIONS I GET ASKED

WILL THEY HIRE ME OVER 45?

Federal law (the Age Discrimination in Employment Act) protects people 40 and older from age discrimination in hiring. It covers employers with 20 or more employees. The work is still physical, so you'll need to pass the same medical and screening as everyone. I didn't find a maximum age on any program page I checked, but confirm with each one.

I HAVE NO EXPERIENCE. CAN I STILL GET IN?

Yes, if you aim at the right level. Apprenticeships and trainee roles are built for beginners. Some experienced postings ask for prior knowledge, so look for words like **apprentice**, **trainee**, **helper** or **assistant**.

IS THIS A COURSE? DO I HAVE TO PAY?

The playbook is free and every link in it is free to use. Apply through the official pages only, and be careful with anyone who asks you to pay to apply.

CAN'T I JUST ASK CHATGPT OR GROK?

Use them to practice math or draft your message. But AI can be out of date on who is hiring and what the requirements are. Check every opening on the official page. That's what this guide points you to.

DO I NEED A CAR AND A LICENSE?

Most postings and programs ask for a valid driver's license, and field jobs usually mean driving. Check the posting.

I APPLIED AND HEARD NOTHING.

Normal. Follow the direct route on page 10: one message, one follow-up, then wait for the next window.

ALREADY WORKING IN A TRADE?

A lot of you already wire, fix or build for a living and want the better-paying, union or utility version. You're not starting from zero. Here's how to use what you have.

KNOW THE TWO TERMS

- **Apprentice:** a paid trainee who works and goes to class until fully qualified.
- **Journeyman:** fully qualified. Past the apprenticeship.

YOUR THREE MOVES

1 WRITE DOWN YOUR HOURS

Years, employers, what you actually did. Get old pay stubs, a reference from a boss, and any license or certificate.

2 ASK ABOUT CREDIT

Many training centers will ask what you've done. Some give credit for time or training. It depends on the local program, so ask them directly. Don't assume.

3 APPLY TWO WAYS

Apply to the apprenticeship (page 5) and to experienced or "journeyman" postings (page 6). Whichever answers first, you win.

Message to a training center:

Hi, my name is [name]. I've worked [number] years in [type of work] with [employer]. I'd like to apply to your program. Can you tell me how experience is reviewed and what documents you need? Thank you, [name, phone].

HONEST NOTE: Experience helps you stand out and may shorten what you need. It doesn't skip the test, the interview or the screening.

THE HARD QUESTIONS

I HAVE A RECORD. DO I HAVE A SHOT?

It depends on the program, the offense and how long ago it was. I can't promise a yes, and nobody honest can. What I can tell you: every program here runs a background check, so don't hide anything. Be upfront, bring proof you've changed (steady work, classes, references) and ask the program directly what disqualifies you. Ask before you spend months on the application.

CAN WOMEN DO THIS?

Yes. Federal law bans sex discrimination in hiring, and many programs actively recruit women. The work is physical and the crews are mostly men, so ask about the crew and the culture in your interview, same as anyone.

I'M NOT GOOD AT MATH.

The electrical program asks for one year of algebra and tests it. You can learn that. Free practice: [khanacademy.org/math/algebra](https://www.khanacademy.org/math/algebra). Spend 20 minutes a day for two weeks before your test.

DRUG TEST? WHAT ABOUT WEED?

Assume you will be tested before hire and again on the job. The programs I checked say drug free. Laws on weed in your state don't change that for most of these employers, especially on safety-sensitive work like railroads. If you can't pass, wait until you can.

CDL, TRAVEL AND HOME TIME

A commercial driver's license (CDL) is a special license for large trucks. Many lineman and utility jobs ask for one or expect you to get it during training. Some jobs travel for storm work or projects, others keep you in your own territory. Read the posting and ask in the interview.

WHAT ABOUT LAYOFFS?

No job is guaranteed. Railroads and utilities cut back in slow times. Construction runs in cycles. The union contract usually decides who goes first. Ask: "How has hiring and layoff looked here the last five years?"

YOUR 7-DAY PLAN

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- DAY 1** Pick your top two trades from page 3.
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- DAY 2** Gather ID, diploma or GED proof, driver's license, Social Security card. Put them in one folder.
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- DAY 3** Run the apprenticeship finder and find your state office (page 6).
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- DAY 4** Locate your IBEW local, JATC, or NEIEP recruitment (page 7). Sign up for alerts.
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- DAY 5** Check railroad and utility career pages (page 8). Apply to anything open.
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- DAY 6** Send your message using the template on page 10.
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- DAY 7** Build your local list (page 9). Practice basic math and reading for the aptitude test. Free practice is available at your local library or American Job Center.

REALITY CHECK: Most people do not get hired on the first try. Programs fill slowly and open rarely. Keep applying and keep following up. Persistence is what separates the people who get in.

QUESTIONS?

Reply to the email that brought you this guide and tell me which trade you're looking at. I read every reply.

WHERE THIS CAME FROM

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Occupational Outlook Handbook. Electricians (median pay \$63,190, May 2025): bls.gov/ooh/construction-and-extraction/electricians.htm

BLS, Electrical Power-Line Installers and Repairers (\$95,320): bls.gov/ooh/.../electrical-power-line-installers-and-repairers.htm

BLS, Elevator and Escalator Installers and Repairers (\$109,910): bls.gov/ooh/.../elevator-and-escalator-installers-and-repairers.htm

U.S. Dept. of Labor, Apprenticeship Finder: apprenticeship.gov/apprenticeship-job-finder

U.S. Dept. of Labor, State Apprenticeship Offices: apprenticeship.gov/about-us/state-offices

CareerOneStop, American Job Center Finder: careeronestop.org/LocalHelp/AmericanJobCenters

Electrical Training Alliance (IBEW and NECA): electricaltrainingalliance.org

IBEW Local Union Directory: ibew.org/local-union-directory

NEIEP, National Elevator Industry Educational Program: neiep.org

IUEC, International Union of Elevator Constructors: iuec.org

Brotherhood of Railroad Signalmen: brs.org

EEOC, Age Discrimination: eeoc.gov/age-discrimination

U.S. Dept. of Labor, Registered Apprenticeship: apprenticeship.gov/employers/registered-apprenticeship-program

Electrical Training Alliance, Apprenticeship Training:
electricaltrainingalliance.org/training/apprenticeshipTraining

Job Corps: jobcorps.gov

Norfolk Southern careers: jobs.nscorp.com/search · CSX: csx.com/careers · Union Pacific: up.jobs · BNSF: bnsf.com/careers

Links and requirements checked October 2026. A few government and railroad sites block automated checks, so if a link will not open, search the name. Programs change their rules and application windows, so confirm details on each official page before you act. This guide is general information, not a guarantee of any job. Pay figures are national medians and will differ where you live.