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If you're considering getting a commercial driver's license (CDL), we're here to explain what a CDL is, how to find the right kind of CDL training, what to expect from your CDL training program, and more.

What Is a CDL (Commercial Driver's License)?

A commercial driver's license (CDL) allows someone to legally drive many large trucks and other vehicles that [require](#) specialized skills, knowledge, and physical abilities to operate. Vehicles that require a CDL driver include tractor trailers, hazardous materials vehicles, buses, livestock trailers, and many other transport or work vehicles.

Not all work vehicles necessarily require CDLs to drive. This includes, but isn't limited to, fire trucks and law enforcement vehicles, farm vehicles, or standard USPS mail delivery trucks. However, requirements are different based on your state and specific vehicle used.

Types of Jobs You Can Do With CDL Training

There are three primary types of CDLs, all of which allow you to drive different

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vehicle types: CDL Class A, CDL Class B, and CDL Class C.

While the exact definitions [vary by state](#)—and some states offer additional types of licenses—the following are typical definitions of Class A, B, and C commercial driver’s licenses.

CDL A Truck Driving License

[Class A CDLs](#) are the most flexible or universal type of CDL. With a Class A CDL, you can drive most types of vehicles covered by CDLs B and C, and you’re also able to drive vehicles with two or more axles. With a CDL A, you can drive vehicles that tow a weight of over 10,000 pounds and have a combined gross vehicle weight rating (GVWR) of 26,001 pounds or more. Vehicles covered under CDL A include:

- ✓ Tractor-trailers (semis, big rigs, and 18-wheelers)
- ✓ Truck and trailer combinations
- ✓ Flatbed trucks
- ✓ Large dump trucks
- ✓ Livestock carriers
- ✓ Tankers (note that hauling certain types of materials in a tanker will require [endorsements to your CDL A](#))

CDL B Truck Driving License

CDL B licenses allow you to drive smaller vehicles—those weighing less than 26,000 pounds combined and towing less than 10,000 pounds. You can also operate most vehicles in Class C, but not Class A. Vehicles allowed under CDL B include:

- ✓ Straight trucks
- ✓ Delivery/box trucks
- ✓ School, city, tourist, and other similar buses
- ✓ Smaller dump trucks

CDL C Truck Driving License

CDL C licenses allow you to drive the smallest vehicles that require CDLs, including any that transport 16 or more passengers (including the driver)—such as passenger vans—and hazardous materials vehicles, with the proper endorsements on your license.

Adding Endorsements to Your CDL

Specific CDL trucking endorsement requirements and availability vary by state. You can generally declare your intended endorsement when you begin your training, though you can also add one through additional training and exams later. Some of the most [common endorsements](#) include:

- ✓ **H:** Hazardous materials vehicles

Montana
Nebraska
Nevada
New Hampshire
New Jersey
New Mexico
New York
North Carolina
North Dakota
Ohio
Oklahoma
Oregon
Pennsylvania
Rhode Island
South Carolina
South Dakota
Tennessee
Texas
Utah
Vermont
Virginia
Washington
Washington D.C.
West Virginia
Wisconsin
Wyoming

- ✓ **N:** Tank vehicles transporting liquids
- ✓ **P:** Passenger vehicles with a specific number of passengers allowed
- ✓ **S:** School buses
- ✓ **T:** Double or triple trailers (semis with multiple trailers attached)
- ✓ **X:** Hazardous materials transported in tanks

Requirements for Entering a CDL Training Program

Before applying for a CDL training program, you need to make sure you're able to earn your licensure in the first place. Requirements for licensure in most states include:

- ✓ Being at least 18 years old for intrastate transit and 21 for interstate transit
- ✓ Having a valid noncommercial driver's license (you'll also generally need a CDL learner's permit)
- ✓ Possessing a clean criminal and traffic record. You don't need a spotless record, but felonies, DUIs, and major traffic incidents may disqualify you. A human trafficking conviction is an automatic disqualifier. Discuss your history with your school of choice to see if you're eligible before enrollment—don't worry about being judged; they've likely heard it all.
- ✓ Willingness to be [drug tested](#)
- ✓ Completing and being granted clearance by a physical exam
- ✓ Having U.S. citizenship or permanent residency
- ✓ Providing a report about your previous 10 years as a driver

Medical Conditions and Getting a CDL

There are many [medical conditions](#) that may disqualify you from getting a CDL. Some of these are automatic disqualifications, while others can be overridden after a physical examination. A few are nationwide, while others vary by state.

If you have one or more of these medical conditions (or any other medical concern that may impact your ability to drive), discuss the issue with your truck driving school before enrolling:

- ✓ Anything that can result in loss of consciousness
- ✓ Diabetes
- ✓ Epilepsy or seizure disorders
- ✓ Hearing loss
- ✓ High blood pressure
- ✓ Marijuana use, including CBD oil, even with a prescription
- ✓ Proteinuria
- ✓ Respiratory conditions

- ✓ Some heart conditions

- ✓ Vertigo or balance disorders or diseases
- ✓ Vision loss (must be at least 20/40 with or without corrective lenses)

Types of CDL Training Programs

There are several types of commercial driver's license training programs. CDL training programs vary based on accreditation/licensure/certification and who pays for training, as well as the details that change based on location or individual instructors.

Accredited, Certified, and Licensed CDL Training Programs

CDL training programs fall into three basic categories: accredited, certified, and licensed.

Accredited CDL programs are those offered by educational institutions that meet the requirements for quality education set by certain national or regional accrediting organizations approved by the U.S. Department of Education. These institutions are also considered Title IV schools. For trucking, such programs are usually offered through community colleges. To earn accreditation, a school has undergone rigorous inspections and proven its standards to the accrediting agency. It's worth noting that accredited truck driving programs aren't common, and a program not being offered by an accredited institution isn't something to worry about unless you're hoping to get federal financial aid.

Certified CDL programs are licensed by the state and have been inspected by third parties, then granted certification by the [Professional Truck Driver Institute \(PTDI\)](#). Schools aren't required to be certified, and those that don't have certification aren't necessarily bad schools.

Licensed CDL truck driving programs have met the state minimum requirements for curriculum, staff, and training. You may sometimes see these erroneously called "state-accredited," so be sure to clarify before enrolling or applying for financial aid.

All of this becomes simpler beginning February 2022, when new federal regulations about [entry-level driver training](#) go into effect. All new CDL A applicants, new CDL B applicants, those upgrading from a CDL B to a CDL A, and those pursuing specific endorsements will need to obtain training from a CDL training provider or school that meets certain standards. Qualifying CDL training programs will be listed on a federal registry.

Independent vs. Company-Paid CDL Training

Independent CDL training programs usually cost money upfront, but they are often more well-rounded and likelier to exist near your home than the company-paid options. Many of these schools offer financial aid, including special rates for veterans, so don't let the upfront costs deter you. We get more into the cost in the

next section. Not all independent trucking programs cost money, even though many

hiring companies still refer to them as "paid training programs."

Company-paid CDL training is a pre-hire model where a company hires you upfront, providing you complete your training successfully. While the training is free, this is often a barebones experience. You may even need to move to a regional training facility and sleep in a barracks-type location with other trainees for the duration of your training. You'll also be obligated to work for the company you were trained by for a set amount of time after completion, and since they paid for your training, your salary may be lower than average for the first year or so. Additionally, if you don't fulfill your contract requirements, you'll likely have to repay them for training.

Learn more about [company-paid CDL training](#) and when they may be a good fit over independent trucking schools.

How Do I Choose a CDL Truck Driver Training Program?

There are several things to consider before choosing a CDL training program:

- ✓ **Accreditation, Certification, and Licensure:** At the very least, you want to ensure your school meets state standards. For federal financial aid, you need an accredited school.
- ✓ **Communication:** If you have questions, do they give you straightforward and relatively prompt answers when you contact them? Will they allow you to visit?
- ✓ **Cost:** Can you afford the tuition after any financial aid options?
- ✓ **Independent vs. Company Paid:** Are you comfortable with the type of training and commitment required by company-paid programs, or would an independent program be more your speed?
- ✓ **Job Placement Rates:** How many graduates find work soon after program completion?
- ✓ **Reputation:** Investigate the school's reputation. Online reviews are a good place to start but remember: they can be faked. It's best to look for schools that have been around for a good while.
- ✓ **Time:** Do you have a flexible schedule, or do you need to take classes on evenings or weekends only? Can you spend a few weeks at a training program if opting for company-paid training?

There are [training programs](#) that can meet all of your needs—it just takes some digging to find them.

CDL Training Scams: Red Flags to Watch For

Unfortunately, not all CDL truck driving programs are ethical. There are some red flags to look out for when choosing a school:

- ✓ [Pressuring you to get a high-interest loan](#) through a partnering financial institution

- ✓ A trucking company offering training but not being transparent that they're requiring an employment or tuition repayment contract with them up front
- ✓ Craigslist ads for training that give you very little information—possibly not even including the school name
- ✓ Demanding money before you have made a decision to enroll

How Much Does CDL Training Cost?

Costs of CDL training vary by type and length of the program and the specific license and endorsements you're going for. Some programs can be free, though it's important to ensure they meet all standards and you're comfortable with whatever they require in return.

The U.S. Department of Education [College Affordability and Transparency List](#) looked at several ground transportation schools across the country, all of which included CDL training. Tuition ranged from \$1,039 to \$12,333 in 2018-2019. However, this was a small sample of only 25 schools, with several branches of the same institutions reporting—and many of them were from higher-priced areas of the country. Nationwide, costs are typically \$3,000 to \$7,000.

What to Expect in CDL Training

The U.S. Department of Transportation [Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration \(FMCSA\)](#) sets forth nationwide training standards for CDL programs. However, your state may have waived the national CDL skills test, meaning these exact requirements may not fit. You can find state-by-state CDL training requirements via this [downloadable Word document](#) from FMCSA.

Below is what you can generally expect from CDL training programs.

What Should I Expect During CDL Classroom Training?

Classroom CDL training hours may include the use of simulators, lectures, and other instructional methods. Note that "classroom" doesn't necessarily mean meeting in a schoolroom—it could also be outside working on trucks themselves, but without driving or riding along with other drivers. Topics to expect may include:

- ✓ Basic and advanced vehicle operation
- ✓ Driving theory
- ✓ Driving-related laws
- ✓ Insurance issues
- ✓ Non-driving activities, like handling cargo
- ✓ Safety
- ✓ Use of AV and other equipment
- ✓ Vehicle maintenance and inspection
- ✓ Weather considerations

What Does Behind-the-Wheel CDL Training Involve?

When you get behind the wheel during your CDL training, you could be driving or observing experienced drivers. Your training will likely include:

- ✓ Backing up
- ✓ Defensive driving
- ✓ Parking
- ✓ Practice in cities and on highways
- ✓ Shifting gears
- ✓ Starting and stopping
- ✓ Steering
- ✓ Turning, including three-point turns
- ✓ Potentially experience in both automatic and manual transmissions

Can You Take CDL Training Classes Online?

This varies by school, but some places allow you to take CDL courses that would normally occur in a classroom online. Continuing education for existing CDL holders can also be delivered online. Of course, training that must happen in a truck can't be taken online.

How Long Does CDL Truck Driving Training Take?

According to the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), CDL training programs generally last between three and six months.

Hours spent in CDL training vary by state. For instance, Illinois requires 160 total hours, Nebraska mandates 12 hours, and Ohio requires 80 hours for CDL A and 40 hours for CDL B. Some states focus more on the quality of the training and experience of the instructors than on the hours spent. Check your state's requirements in the downloadable Word document above for specifics.

What Should I Expect After Finishing My CDL Truck Driver Training?

Once you've completed your CDL training, you're not quite done—you need to take CDL exams. The [written test](#) is similar to a standard driving test but geared toward CDL holders. You can expect questions about law, safety, driving skills and norms, and more. There will also be a skills exam, showing your behind-the-wheel abilities. Depending on the state, the written test and skills test will be offered by the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV), though the skills test may also be offered by state-approved testing locations. Some CDL schools have certain instructors who are certified by the DMV to administer skills tests.

After you've earned your CDL, it's time to start [searching for jobs](#). The [interview](#)

[process](#) may involve a phone or in-person interview, drug test, road test, MVR (background check on your driving history), and other background checks.

You also need to stay on top of your state's CDL licensure renewal requirements—you usually need to renew every five to eight years—and make sure you're driving safely so you can continue your new career as a CDL driver.

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