K12 ACADEMICS — CAREER EXPLORATION SERIES

Apprenticeships & the Skilled Trades

A guide for students & families — how to earn while you learn, build a debt-free career in high demand, and find your way into the trades and beyond.

K12 ACADEMICS

Find Your Community

2026 EDITION

ABOUT K12 ACADEMICS

The world's largest education resource.

Online since 2004, K12 Academics has helped millions of families, students and educators **find the right school, college, camp, business and program in their community** — for every kind of learner.

EARN WHILE YOU LEARN

An apprenticeship flips the usual model: instead of paying tuition, you **get paid to learn a skilled career on the job**, with classroom instruction and a nationally recognized credential at the end — and no student debt. This guide walks **ten steps** through apprenticeships and the trades.

General guidance. Programs, wages, and requirements vary by trade, region, and sponsor. This guide explains how apprenticeships work; for specific programs and current pay, check Apprenticeship.gov, local unions and employers, and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

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STEP 01 OF 10

What an Apprenticeship Is

WHAT TO KNOW

An apprenticeship is a **paid training program** that combines on-the-job learning under skilled mentors with related classroom instruction. You earn a wage the whole time and finish with a **recognized credential** in your trade or field.

BY THE NUMBERS

Paid from day one	On-the-job + class	Credential
earn while you learn	learn by doing	recognized nationwide

HOW TO HELP

Think of an apprenticeship as **getting paid to earn a career credential** — the opposite of paying tuition and hoping for a job after.

GOOD TO KNOW

A completed **registered apprenticeship** is a credential employers respect — portable across the country.

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STEP 02 OF 10

Understand Why They're Booming

WHAT TO KNOW

Apprenticeships are surging because they solve real problems: **no student debt, a paycheck from the start, high demand, and a clear path** to a well-paying, stable career.

BY THE NUMBERS

No debt	High demand	Clear path
get paid, not billed	employers need skills	training to journeyworker

HOW TO HELP

Weigh the appeal honestly: for the right person, an apprenticeship offers **earning, learning, and a career** without the cost and uncertainty of a degree.

GOOD TO KNOW

As skilled workers retire in large numbers, employers are **expanding apprenticeships** to build the next generation — good timing to enter.

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STEP 03 OF 10

Explore the Skilled Trades

WHAT TO KNOW

The classic apprenticeship fields are the **skilled trades**: electrician, plumber, HVAC technician, carpenter, welder, pipefitter, ironworker, and machinist — all in demand, well-paid, and hands-on.

BY THE NUMBERS

Construction trades	Industrial	In demand
electrical, plumbing, HVAC	welding, machining	and offshore-proof

HOW TO HELP

If you enjoy **hands-on, skilled problem-solving**, explore the trades — each has a clear apprenticeship path into a solid, respected career.

GOOD TO KNOW

Trades work is **skilled and cognitive**, not "unskilled labor" — it takes years of training and pays accordingly.

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STEP 04 OF 10

Know How Registered Apprenticeships Work

WHAT TO KNOW

A **Registered Apprenticeship** (registered with the government) has a set structure: a sponsor (employer, union, or association), required **on-the-job hours**, classroom instruction, and **rising wages** as you gain skill, ending at journeyworker level.

BY THE NUMBERS

A sponsor	Set hours	Rising wages
employer or union	+ classroom time	up to journeyworker

HOW TO HELP

Look specifically for **Registered Apprenticeships** — their structure, wage progression, and recognized credential protect you and prove your skills.

GOOD TO KNOW

Wages typically **rise on a schedule** as you advance — you're worth more as you learn more, and your pay reflects it.

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STEP 05 OF 10

Look Beyond the Trades

WHAT TO KNOW

Apprenticeships are **no longer just for the trades**. Registered apprenticeships now exist in **healthcare, IT, cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, finance, and more** — the earn-while-you-learn model is spreading fast.

BY THE NUMBERS

Not just trades	Growing fast	Same model
IT, health, finance	new fields added	paid + credential

HOW TO HELP

Don't assume apprenticeship means only construction — search current programs across **tech, healthcare, and business** too.

GOOD TO KNOW

Modern apprenticeships in **tech and healthcare** offer the same debt-free, paid path into fast-growing fields.

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STEP 06 OF 10

Find an Apprenticeship

WHAT TO KNOW

Finding one is concrete: start with **Apprenticeship.gov**, local **trade unions** and their apprenticeship programs, **employers**, community colleges, and trade associations.

BY THE NUMBERS

Apprenticeship.gov	Unions	Employers & colleges
the official finder	strong programs	direct routes

HOW TO HELP

Search **Apprenticeship.gov** and contact local unions, employers, and community colleges — many programs recruit directly and welcome new applicants.

GOOD TO KNOW

Union apprenticeship programs are often **well-structured and well-paid** — worth investigating early where they operate.

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STEP 07 OF 10

Know What to Expect

WHAT TO KNOW

Apprenticeships are **real work**: often physical, sometimes early mornings and tough conditions, alongside study and testing. It's demanding — and it builds genuine, lasting skill.

BY THE NUMBERS

Real work	Study too	Demanding
physical & hands-on	classroom + tests	but rewarding

HOW TO HELP

Go in clear-eyed: expect **hard, hands-on work plus study** — and a real sense of mastery as your skills grow.

WATCH OUT

The work can be physically demanding and conditions vary — shadow or ask a tradesperson what a real day is like first.

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STEP 08 OF 10

Understand Pay & Progression

WHAT TO KNOW

You earn from the start, and **wages rise as you advance**. Completing an apprenticeship typically leads to **journeyworker** status and strong pay — with routes to master, supervisor, or running your own business.

BY THE NUMBERS

Paid to train	Wages rise	Then grow
from day one	with skill	journeyworker & beyond

HOW TO HELP

Understand the **wage ladder** of any program — from starting apprentice pay up to journeyworker — and the advancement routes beyond.

GOOD TO KNOW

Check **current journeyworker pay for your trade and region at BLS** — it's often higher than people assume.

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STEP 09 OF 10

Decide If It’s Right for You

WHAT TO KNOW

Apprenticeships suit people who **learn by doing, want to avoid debt, prefer earning to studying full-time, and like tangible, skilled work**. It’s a strength-based choice, not a fallback.

BY THE NUMBERS

Hands-on learner	Debt-averse	Tangible work
you like doing	earn, don't borrow	see what you build

HOW TO HELP

Reflect honestly on **how you like to learn and work** — for hands-on people who value earning early, an apprenticeship is often the *best* option, not a lesser one.

GOOD TO KNOW

An apprenticeship is a **smart, aspirational choice** for the right person — never a consolation prize.

10 STEP 10 OF 10

Get Started

WHAT TO KNOW

Turn interest into action: **research trades and programs, meet prerequisites (often a diploma/GED and being 18), prepare for any entry tests, and apply**. Many programs run on cycles, so timing matters.

BY THE NUMBERS

Pick a trade/field	Check prerequisites	Apply on cycle
that fits you	diploma, age, tests	timing matters

HOW TO HELP

Choose a field, **confirm the prerequisites, prep for any aptitude test, and apply** to programs — and line up a backup or next cycle if the first is full.

GOOD TO KNOW

Some programs are **competitive** — apply to several, prepare for entry tests, and don't be discouraged by a waitlist.

QUICK REFERENCE

Common Apprenticeship Trades & Fields

A sample of fields with established apprenticeship pathways. (Check current pay and program details at Apprenticeship.gov and BLS.)

Construction & building trades

Electrician, plumber, HVAC technician, carpenter, pipefitter, sheet-metal worker, ironworker, and mason.

Industrial & manufacturing

Welder, machinist, millwright, tool-and-die maker, and industrial-maintenance technician.

Mechanical & service

Automotive technician, diesel mechanic, and elevator installer/repairer.

Emerging fields

Healthcare support, IT and cybersecurity, advanced manufacturing, and finance — registered apprenticeships are expanding here.

How they end

Completion earns **journeyworker** status and a nationally recognized credential — portable and respected by employers.

GET PAID TO BUILD A CAREER

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