



Trades Career Paths: Roles, Pay & Experience

A free, skills-first guide to explore construction & skilled trades careers (U.S. data)

How to use this guide: Pick a trade, review the typical role ladder and pay, then choose your next step (training, certifications, or an apprenticeship). Salary figures are national medians from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) and can vary by region, union status, overtime, and specialty.

Want hands-on training? Tools Up Foundation offers construction education and pathways into the trades. Explore our programs.

Typical path across many trades

Stage	Typical title(s)	Experience range	What you're building
1. Explore / Entry	Construction Laborer, Helper	0–1 year	Basics: safety, tools, jobsite habits
2. Train	Pre-apprentice / Trainee	Weeks–months	Trade fundamentals + employability skills
3. Apprentice	Apprentice Electrician/Plumber/etc.	1–5 years	Earn while you learn + classroom instruction
4. Journeyman	Journeyman / Mechanic	4–7+ years	Independent work + complex installs/repairs
5. Lead	Foreman / Lead Tech	6–10+ years	Crew leadership, quality, production



Career Paths by Trade

Use these ladders to visualize growth from entry-level to leadership and management.

Electrician

Pay (U.S. median): \$62,350 — Median annual wage (May 2024) (BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook)

Role	Typical years	What you do
Helper / Trainee	0–1	Jobsite basics, tool handling, safety
Apprentice Electrician	1–5	Wiring, conduit, troubleshooting under supervision
Journeyman Electrician	4–7+	Independent installs/repairs, code compliance
Foreman / Lead Electrician	6–10+	Crew leadership, productivity, QA/QC
Estimator / PM / Contractor	8–15+	Bids, schedules, client management, business growth

Next steps: Look for a Registered Apprenticeship (earn while you learn) • Build core skills: electrical theory, safety, hand/power tools, basic math • Ask about licensing requirements in your state/municipality

Plumber / Pipefitter / Steamfitter

Pay (U.S. median): \$62,970 — Median annual wage (May 2024) (BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook)

Role	Typical years	What you do
Helper / Trainee	0–1	Material handling, prep, safety
Apprentice	1–5	Rough-in, fittings, basic diagnostics
Journeyman	4–7+	Complex installs/repairs; codes & inspections
Foreman / Service Lead	6–10+	Crew leadership, customer comms
Estimator / PM / Owner	8–15+	Bids, scheduling, client relationships

Next steps: Explore union or contractor apprenticeships and licensing pathways • Learn blueprint reading + basic hydronics/gas systems fundamentals • Document your hours and training (helpful for licensing)

Carpenter

Pay (U.S. median): \$59,310 — Median annual wage (May 2024) (BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook)

Role	Typical years	What you do
Laborer / Helper	0–1	Site setup, material staging, safety
Apprentice Carpenter	1–4	Framing, forms, finish basics
Journeyman Carpenter	3–7+	Precision installs, layouts, leadership-ready skills
Lead / Foreman	5–10+	Crew leadership, production planning
Superintendent / PM / Owner	8–15+	Site management, schedules, subs, budgets

Next steps: Start with safety + measurement fundamentals (tape, square, levels) • Practice blueprint reading and layout • Explore pathways into finish carpentry, concrete forms, or commercial framing

HVAC (Heating, Air Conditioning & Refrigeration) Technician

Pay (U.S. median): \$59,810—Median annual wage (May 2024) (BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook)

Role	Typical years	What you do
Installer Helper	0–1	Tools, materials, basic installs
Apprentice / Junior Tech	1–3	Maintenance, troubleshooting with supervision
Service Technician	2–6+	Diagnostics, repairs, customer service
Lead Tech / Field Supervisor	5–10+	Team leadership, quality checks
Estimator / PM / Service Manager	8–15+	Operations, bidding, schedules, growth

Next steps: Ask about required certifications (e.g., EPA Section 608 for refrigerants) • Build troubleshooting skills: electrical basics + airflow fundamentals • Consider a Registered Apprenticeship or employer-sponsored training

Welder / Fabricator

Pay (U.S.median): \$51,000— Median annual wage (May 2024) (BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook)

Role	Typical years	What you do
Trainee / Shop Helper	0–1	Prep, safety, basic tools
Entry Welder	0–2	Basic MIG/TIG, simple welds, inspection basics
Certified Welder / Fabricator	2–6+	Blueprints, complex welds, fit-up
Lead Welder / Welding Inspector	5–10+	Quality, training others, documentation
Foreman / Shop Manager / Owner	8–15+	Production, scheduling, customers

Next steps: Pick a pathway: structural, pipe, fabrication, or manufacturing • Aim for certifications required by employers/industries • Build a portfolio: photos of projects, documented procedures

Construction Equipment Operator

Pay (U.S.median): \$58,320— Median annual wage (May 2024) (BLS Occupational Outlook Handbook)

Role	Typical years	What you do
Laborer / Spotter	0–1	Site safety, signals, ground support
Operator Trainee	0–2	Basic equipment operation + maintenance
Equipment Operator	2–6+	Excavators, dozers, loaders; grading & trenching
Lead Operator / Foreman	5–10+	Crew coordination, productivity, safety
Superintendent / Owner-Operator	8–15+	Scheduling, bidding, equipment planning

Next steps: Ask about training programs and on-site progression requirements • Build safety habits and communication (hand signals, radio protocol) • Track seat time and the machines you're qualified to run