

Career Clusters Explained

A guide for students & families — how the world of work is organized into related groups, and how to use them to turn interests into a real career path.

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A MAP FOR THE WHOLE WORLD OF WORK

There are thousands of jobs — an overwhelming list for any student. **Career clusters** organize them into a manageable set of related groups, so exploration starts with interests and narrows toward real pathways. This guide walks **ten steps** to use them well.

General guidance. Career frameworks and labor-market data change; this guide teaches how to explore. For current job outlook, pay, and requirements, always check live sources like the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics and CareerOneStop.

What Career Clusters Are

WHAT TO KNOW

Career clusters are a way of **organizing all careers into related groups** — the widely used framework has **16 clusters**, from Health Science to Information Technology to Skilled Trades. Each cluster contains many careers that share knowledge and skills.

BY THE NUMBERS

16 clusters

the national framework

Related careers

grouped by skills

A starting map

not a cage

HOW TO HELP

Use clusters as a **map**: find the neighborhood (cluster) that fits your interests before hunting for a specific street address (job title).

GOOD TO KNOW

The framework is periodically updated, but the idea holds — clusters turn a giant list of jobs into a few explorable groups.

Start With Interests, Not Job Titles

WHAT TO KNOW

The best starting point isn't "what job pays well?" but **what you enjoy and are good at**. Interests, subjects you like, and how you prefer to work point toward clusters that fit.

BY THE NUMBERS

Interests first

what energizes you

Strengths

what you do well

Work style

hands-on? people? ideas?

HOW TO HELP

Reflect on (or take a free interest inventory about) **what you enjoy, your strengths, and how you like to work** — then see which clusters match.

GOOD TO KNOW

Chasing a job title you've heard of skips the best part — clusters reveal careers you never knew existed.

Explore a Cluster That Fits

WHAT TO KNOW

Once a cluster catches your interest, **dig in**: read about the range of careers inside it, from entry-level to advanced, and notice which ones spark curiosity.

BY THE NUMBERS

Go wide

see the whole cluster

Entry to advanced

the full range

Follow curiosity

note what excites you

HOW TO HELP

Pick one or two clusters and **explore the careers inside them** using free tools like CareerOneStop and O*NET — you'll find far more options than you expected.

GOOD TO KNOW

Every cluster has jobs at **many levels and pay ranges** — don't rule out a cluster because one job in it needs a doctorate.

Understand the Pathways Within

WHAT TO KNOW

Each cluster contains **pathways** — more specific tracks — and careers within them require different levels of education, from a certificate to a graduate degree. Knowing this shapes your plan.

BY THE NUMBERS

Pathways

specific tracks

Varied education

certificate to degree

A ladder

entry to leadership

HOW TO HELP

Within a cluster you like, **trace a pathway** from entry-level to advanced roles, and note the education and credentials each step needs.

GOOD TO KNOW

Many careers have an **entry point that doesn't need a 4-year degree**, with room to grow later — a huge and often-missed option.

Match Education to the Career

WHAT TO KNOW

A key question for any career: **what training does it actually require?** Some need a certificate or apprenticeship, some an associate or bachelor's, some a graduate or professional degree — and the answer shapes cost and time.

BY THE NUMBERS

Check requirements

before you commit

Many routes

cert, 2-yr, 4-yr, grad

Cost & time

factor them in

HOW TO HELP

For any career you're drawn to, **look up the real education requirements** — and weigh the cost and time against the pay and demand.

GOOD TO KNOW

Don't assume every good career needs a bachelor's — plenty of well-paying paths run through trades, certificates, and 2-year degrees.

Try Before You Commit

WHAT TO KNOW

Reading about a career isn't the same as experiencing it. **Job shadowing, informational interviews, tours, part-time work, and hands-on courses** reveal what a career is really like.

BY THE NUMBERS

Job shadow

see a real day

Informational interview

ask someone in it

Hands-on

courses, clubs, jobs

HOW TO HELP

Get **real-world exposure** — shadow someone, ask a professional about their day, take a related course, or try a summer job — before betting years on a path.

GOOD TO KNOW

Fifteen minutes talking to someone *in* a career teaches more than hours of reading — most people are happy to share.



Check Real Demand & Outlook

WHAT TO KNOW

Interest matters most, but **job outlook and pay are worth knowing**. Some fields are growing fast; others are shrinking. Live data helps you plan with eyes open — just make sure it's current.

BY THE NUMBERS

Outlook

growing or shrinking?

Pay ranges

by region & level

Use live data

it changes yearly

HOW TO HELP

Check **current outlook and pay** at the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics ([bls.gov](https://www.bls.gov)) and CareerOneStop — numbers shift, so use the latest, not an old article.

WATCH OUT

Don't choose purely on salary lists — demand shifts, and the best career blends interest, aptitude, and opportunity.

Connect School to Career

WHAT TO KNOW

Clusters make school more purposeful. Relevant **courses, electives, CTE programs, clubs, and dual enrollment** build a head start on a pathway — and show colleges and employers real direction.

BY THE NUMBERS

Relevant courses

build the base

CTE programs

career-focused tracks

Clubs & projects

show initiative

HOW TO HELP

Line up **courses, electives, and CTE or dual-enrollment options** that connect to your cluster — it builds skills and a story for applications.

GOOD TO KNOW

A CTE pathway or a related elective can turn “I think I like this” into real skills, credits, and even credentials before graduation.

Keep It Flexible

WHAT TO KNOW

Exploring a cluster is a direction, **not a life sentence**. Interests evolve, careers change, and the skills you build transfer across many jobs. Staying flexible is smart, not indecisive.

BY THE NUMBERS

A direction

not a cage

Skills transfer

across careers

Change is normal

most people do

HOW TO HELP

Commit to **exploring and building transferable skills** rather than locking in one job forever — adaptability is a career superpower.

GOOD TO KNOW

Most people change careers several times — the goal is a strong direction and portable skills, not a permanent decision at 16.

Make a Plan to Explore

WHAT TO KNOW

Turn interest into action with a simple plan: **the next few steps** to explore your top clusters — a course to take, a person to talk to, a program to look into.

BY THE NUMBERS

Name 1–2 clusters

your top interests

List next steps

concrete & small

Set a date

actually do them

HOW TO HELP

Write down your **top clusters and three concrete next steps** — and put dates on them, so exploration actually happens.

GOOD TO KNOW

The plan doesn't have to be perfect — it just has to get you exploring. Adjust as you learn.

The 16 Career Clusters

The widely used national framework groups careers into these 16 clusters. (Frameworks are periodically updated, but these remain the common reference.) Each holds careers at many education levels.

Agriculture, Food & Natural Resources • Architecture & Construction

Growing, building, and managing the physical and natural world — farming, environmental science, skilled trades, and construction.

Arts, A/V & Communications • Marketing

Creating and sharing media, design, and messages — from design and film to advertising and sales.

Business, Finance & Management • Hospitality & Tourism

Running organizations and serving customers — management, accounting, finance, and travel/hospitality.

Health Science • Human Services

Caring for people's health and wellbeing — from nursing and medicine to counseling and social work.

Education • Government & Public Administration • Law, Public Safety & Security

Teaching, governing, and protecting — educators, public servants, and law/safety careers.

STEM • Information Technology • Manufacturing • Transportation & Logistics

Building, coding, making, and moving the modern world — engineering, tech, production, and logistics.

TURN INTERESTS INTO A PATH

Find Your Community.

Explore our Career Pathways, "What Can I Do With This Major?", and college guides — among **1,297 free resources** to help every student find their path.

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