

Windows 11 qualifying operating system requirements

Licensing guidance

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Summary

This licensing guide explains the qualifying operating system license requirements for Windows 11 upgrade licenses when purchased through Commercial Licensing programs. Windows 11 upgrade licenses available through Commercial Licensing programs include:

- Windows 11 Pro
- Windows 11 Enterprise E3/E5/per device
- Windows 11 Education A3/A5/E3/E5
- Windows VDA per device
- Windows VDA E3/E5

Details

Qualifying operating systems for Windows local use

If you're looking to get Windows 11 through a Microsoft Commercial Licensing program, keep in mind that these are upgrade licenses only. This means you can't buy a full Windows operating system license for your desktop PC through these programs.

To be eligible for a Windows 11 upgrade license, your device must already have a qualifying operating system installed.

If you need a full Windows operating system license, here are your options:

1. Buy a new PC with Windows preinstalled from the manufacturer (OEM).
2. Purchase a Full Packaged Product (FPP) license (retail) and install it on your desktop PC. This will serve as the qualifying license.

Windows 11 upgrade licenses acquired through a Commercial Licensing agreement may only be installed or activated on devices licensed to run one of the Qualifying Operating Systems below:

Qualifying operating system for per user licenses and Virtual Desktop Access (VDA) per device/user licenses

Qualifying Operating Systems	Enterprise Agreement, Microsoft Products and Services Agreement, Select, Select Plus	Microsoft Cloud Agreement and Microsoft Customer Agreement
Windows 10/11		
Enterprise, IoT Enterprise, Pro, Pro for Workstations	✓	✓
Education, Home		✓ (Academic licenses only)
Windows 8/8.1		
Enterprise, Pro, Professional	✓	

Qualifying operating system for per device licenses (excluding VDA licenses)

Qualifying Operating Systems	New Enterprise Agreement (EA)/Open Value Company Wide (OV-OW) ^[1]	Existing Enterprise (EA)/Open Value Company Wide (OV-OW)	Microsoft Products and Services Agreement (MPSA)/Select Plus/Open	Microsoft Cloud Agreement and Microsoft Customer Agreement	Academic and Charity
Windows 10/11					
Enterprise, Pro, Pro for Workstations	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Education, Home				✓ (Academic licenses only)	✓
Windows 8/8.1					
Enterprise, Pro	✓	✓	✓		✓
Windows 8/8.1					✓
Apple					
macOS ^[2]	✓		✓		✓
Windows Embedded operating systems					
Windows 10/11 IoT Enterprise	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes:

[1] Also applicable to Qualified Devices acquired through merger or acquisition.

[2] macOS must be preinstalled by the authorized manufacturer prior to the initial sale of the device.

Qualifying operating systems when virtualizing Windows

If you're using Windows VDA licenses solely for remote virtualization, you don't need to have a device with a qualifying operating system.

However, if you plan to use a Windows VDA license to run Windows locally—whether directly on the device or through local virtualization—a qualifying operating system is required.

For all other Windows 11 licenses obtained through Microsoft Commercial Licensing programs, a qualifying operating system is still needed for remote virtualization scenarios.

For additional details about virtualizing Windows 11, please see the licensing brief, [Windows 11 licensing for Virtual Desktops](#).

Frequently asked questions

1. Can I access Windows 365 Frontline and Enterprise using my Windows CPC OS devices?

Yes. Notwithstanding the Qualifying OS requirement, users with Windows CPC OS devices can access Windows 365 Frontline and Enterprise. However, any user accessing Windows 365 must be licensed with each of the following: Windows 10/11 Enterprise/Education, Intune, and Microsoft Entra ID P1/P2. In addition to being available independently, all these licenses are also included in Microsoft 365 F3/E3/G3/E5/G5/A3/A5/Business Premium/Student Use Benefit.

2. Can a Commercial Licensing customer buy new devices without an operating system preinstalled and license Windows 11 through a Microsoft Volume Licensing program?

No, new devices should be purchased with a Qualifying Operating System preinstalled by the device's original equipment manufacturer (OEM). Microsoft Volume Licensing programs do not provide full licenses for Windows 11. Instead, they offer only upgrade licenses for Windows 11. However, there is an exception: customers can acquire a Windows VDA (Virtual Desktop Access) license to remotely access Windows 11 running in a virtual environment, even if the user's device does not have a Qualifying Operating System.

3. A customer has a device that originally came with Windows 10 Pro but was later upgraded to Windows 11 Pro using a license from their Volume Licensing program. If the customer wants to donate this device to a charity, can they uninstall Windows 11 Pro from the donated device and use that license on another device in their organization?

Customers can reassign Windows 11 per device licenses only if the license includes active Software Assurance. Without Software Assurance, licenses acquired through Commercial Licensing cannot be reassigned to another device.

4. Does a device with a Windows VDA license need a Qualifying Operating System if it's only used to access Windows 11 virtually and doesn't have the software installed locally?

No, a device with a Windows VDA license doesn't require a Qualifying Operating System if the software isn't installed locally. The license allows the device to remotely access a virtualized Windows 11 instance without needing an OS installed.

5. Can a Commercial Licensing customer install Windows 11 Enterprise in a virtual machine on an Apple device that comes with macOS??

Yes, Commercial Licensing customers can run Windows 11 in a virtual machine on a macOS device using approved solutions. However, in most cases, they will need to purchase a Full Packaged Product (FPP – retail) Windows 11 Pro license for each device to ensure it has a Qualifying Operating System. For exceptions to this requirement, refer to the table titled “Qualifying Operating System for per device licenses (excluding VDA licenses)” or consult your volume licensing reseller for guidance.

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