

Windows 11 Qualifying Operating Systems

Understanding Qualifying Operating Systems

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

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

Qualifying Operating System	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)

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 device licenses (excluding VDA licenses)

Qualifying Operating Systems	New Enterprise Agreement (EA)/Open Valude Company Wide (OV-OW) ^[1]	Existing Enterprise (EA)/Open Valude 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)	✓
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

When it comes to accessing virtualized Windows environments remotely, the requirement for a qualifying operating system (QOS) depends on the license type. Windows Enterprise and Education licenses are upgrade-only, which means they build on an existing Windows installation. To use their virtualization rights, the device must already have a QOS such as Windows Pro. This prerequisite ensures compliance because the Enterprise license is not a full license, it enhances an existing one.

In contrast, Windows VDA (Virtual Desktop Access) licenses do not require a QOS. They are designed for scenarios where users connect from non-Windows devices or thin clients, so the underlying operating system does not matter. Similarly, Microsoft 365 licenses remove the QOS requirement entirely. If a Microsoft 365 plan includes Windows Enterprise rights, such as Microsoft 365 E3, E5 and E7, users can access virtualized Windows without needing a qualifying OS on their device. This flexibility makes Microsoft 365 ideal for organizations with mixed-device environments or BYOD policies.

The key takeaway is simple: only standalone Windows Enterprise or Education licenses require a QOS for virtualization rights. Windows VDA and Microsoft 365 licenses allow remote access without that prerequisite, offering more flexibility for modern deployment scenarios.

License (any Commercial Licensing program)	Access virtualized Windows remotely
Windows Enterprise/Education	QOS required
Windows VDA	Not required
Microsoft 365	Not required

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

Frequently asked questions

See [FAQ page](#).

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