Free career resource · Learning and certifications

Free cyber security courses, and which certifications are worth paying for

You can learn the foundations of cyber security without paying anything. The Open University, Cisco, Microsoft and PortSwigger all run free beginner courses, and adults in England can join a free Skills Bootcamp. Certifications are optional at the start: learn first, then pay for an exam only when it matches the jobs you're applying for.

By the Cyberend team · Published and updated 22 November 2026

THE SHORT ANSWER

- **Start free:** the Open University's introductory course takes about 24 hours and gives you a free statement of participation OpenLearn.
- **Free bootcamps:** adults aged 19 or over in England can take a free Skills Bootcamp of up to 16 weeks, ending with a guaranteed job interview Skills for Careers.
- **Certifications can wait:** they help you get past CV filters, but they don't guarantee a job. Projects you can talk about matter just as much.
- **If you pay for one:** CompTIA Security+ is the entry-level certification UK SOC adverts mention most, in 15% of them IT Jobs Watch.

Free courses to start with

These are free, made by organisations with a reputation to protect, and suitable for complete beginners. Pick one to start with rather than signing up to all of them.

Free certificate

Introduction to cyber security (Open University)

Eight weeks of short lessons on threats, passwords, malware, networks and encryption. About 24 hours in total OpenLearn.

Go to OpenLearn →

Free

Introduction to Cybersecurity (Cisco Networking Academy)

A gentle first course on how attacks work and how organisations defend against them.

Go to Cisco Networking Academy →

Free

Security learning paths (Microsoft Learn)

Self-paced modules on identity, cloud security and compliance. They follow the SC-900 exam, but the learning itself is free Microsoft Learn.

Go to Microsoft Learn →

Free labs

Web Security Academy (PortSwigger)

Free lessons and hands-on labs on how websites are attacked and fixed. Best once you know the basics, and essential if you're interested in testing.

Go to the Web Security Academy →

Free Skills Bootcamps

If you're 19 or over and live in England, Skills Bootcamps are free government-funded courses of up to 16 weeks. They're designed with employers and end with a guaranteed job interview Skills for Careers. Several cover cyber security, often part-time or online, so you can fit one around work.

Before you pay for a private bootcamp

Some private bootcamps cost thousands of pounds. Check whether a free Skills Bootcamp covers the same ground first, ask what proportion of past students got a security job (and how they measure it), and be wary of anyone who promises a job at the end.

In Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, ask your national careers service about funded training near you.

Free hands-on practice

Courses teach you the ideas. Practice is what makes them stick, and gives you something to talk about in interviews. These are all free and legal to use, because they're built to be attacked or investigated.

OverTheWire: Bandit

A step-by-step game that teaches the Linux command line, which almost every security role uses.

Play Bandit →

picoCTF

Beginner-friendly capture-the-flag puzzles from Carnegie Mellon University, with a practice area open all year.

Try picoCTF →

Wireshark

Free software for looking at network traffic. Capture your own browsing and work out what each part is doing.

Get Wireshark →

For project ideas that turn this practice into evidence for your CV, see our guide to **portfolio projects for beginners**.

Which certifications are worth paying for

A certification is an exam that proves you know a defined set of topics. For a first job, one well-chosen certification can help your CV get past automated filters. It won't replace practical evidence, and none of them guarantees a job.

ISC2 Certified in Cybersecurity (CC)

WHAT IT SHOWS

A broad overview of security principles, access control, networks and operations.

COST

The free course and exam offer closed to new people on 20 May 2026. Free codes already issued work until 31 December 2026 ISC2.

WORTH IT WHEN

You want a structured first overview and already have a free code.

CompTIA Security+

WHAT IT SHOWS

Core security knowledge across threats, architecture and operations CompTIA.

COST

Paid exam. Check CompTIA for the current price.

WORTH IT WHEN

You're applying for SOC or analyst roles: it's named in 15% of UK SOC analyst adverts IT Jobs Watch.

Microsoft SC-900

WHAT IT SHOWS

Security, compliance and identity basics in Microsoft's cloud Microsoft Learn.

COST

Paid exam, free learning paths.

WORTH IT WHEN

The employers you're targeting use Microsoft 365 or Azure.

CREST CPSA, then CRT

WHAT IT SHOWS

Practical penetration testing skills. CRT is the minimum standard for members of NCSC-approved CHECK testing teams CREST.

COST

Paid exams.

WORTH IT WHEN

You've already practised testing and want to move into it. Not a first step.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Learn for free first. Pay for a certification only when you know which kind of role you want, and check that the adverts for that role actually ask for it.

A sensible order to learn in

1 Get the big picture

Take one introductory course, such as the Open University or Cisco course above, so the main ideas and words make sense.

2 Learn networks and Linux

Most security work sits on top of these. Play OverTheWire Bandit and use Wireshark on your own traffic.

3 Choose a direction

Read our guide to **cyber security career paths** and pick the one or two that suit you.

4 Build two projects

Small, written-up projects matched to your chosen path give you something real to put on your CV and talk about.

5 Then consider a certification

If the adverts for your chosen role ask for one, book it now. You'll find it easier with the practice behind you.

Want this as a week-by-week plan?

The free Cyberend beginner roadmap turns these steps into a 12-week plan, with the free resources we'd use at each stage.

Get the free roadmap

Common questions

Are free course certificates worth putting on my CV?

Yes, briefly, in a training or education section. They show interest and effort. Employers will be more interested in what you did with the knowledge, so pair them with a project you can explain.

Do I need a certification to get my first cyber security job?

No. Many people are hired on the strength of projects, transferable experience and a good interview. A certification helps most when the adverts you're applying for list it, especially for SOC and analyst roles.

Which certification should I do first?

For most beginners aiming at SOC or analyst roles, CompTIA Security+ is the one UK adverts mention most. If the employers you want use Microsoft heavily, SC-900 is a cheaper, narrower start. Testing certifications like CREST CRT come later.

How long does it take to learn the basics?

It depends on how much time you have. The Open University course alone is about 24 hours of study **OpenLearn**. Getting job-ready usually takes months of steady practice, not weeks, so be wary of anything that promises otherwise.

Sources and method

Course details come from each provider's own course page. How often employers ask for CompTIA Security+ comes from IT Jobs Watch's analysis of UK SOC analyst adverts over the six months to 13 November 2026.

We don't take payment or referral fees from any course or certification provider. Exam prices change often, so we link to each provider rather than quoting a fee.

The Open University: Introduction to cyber security: stay safe online (free course)

Professional or certifying body

A free eight-week, 24-hour introductory course with a free statement of participation, developed with UK government support.

Department for Education: Skills Bootcamps Official guidance

Free government-funded courses of up to 16 weeks for adults aged 19 or over in England, ending with a guaranteed job interview.

Microsoft: Microsoft Certified: Security, Compliance, and Identity Fundamentals (SC-900)

Professional or certifying body

Microsoft's introductory security certification, with free self-paced learning paths.

ISC2: One Million Certified in Cybersecurity has concluded

Professional or certifying body

ISC2 stopped taking new people on its free Certified in Cybersecurity course and exam on 20 May 2026. Unexpired free exam codes can be used until 31 December 2026; after that the exam is paid.

CompTIA: CompTIA Security+

Professional or certifying body

The vendor-neutral entry-level security certification: what it covers and how the exam works.

CREST: CREST Registered Penetration Tester (CRT): FAQs

Professional or certifying body

The CRT exam, its CPSA prerequisite, its three-year validity and its role as the minimum standard for CHECK team members.

IT Jobs Watch: UK permanent job title salary statistics

Advertised pay

Salaries quoted in UK permanent IT job adverts in the six months to 13 November 2026, by job title. Licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0.

Every figure and link in this guide was checked against its source on 22 November 2026. Live job listings update every few hours.

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