How to Install Windows on a Mac: Best Options for Running Windows

Needing Windows on a Mac used to mean partitioning your drive and rebooting every time you switched operating systems.

These days, you have several ways to run Windows alongside macOS, some free and some paid, and the right choice depends heavily on which Mac you own.

This guide covers every practical method, walks through the actual setup steps, and helps you figure out which route fits your situation.

First, Check Which Mac You Have

Before picking a method, confirm whether your Mac runs Apple Silicon (M1 through M5) or an older Intel chip, since this changes both your options and which version of Windows you'll be installing.

- **Apple Silicon Macs** (M1, M2, M3, M4, M5) use ARM architecture, so you need the Windows 11 ARM edition.
- You cannot run the standard x86 version of Windows directly on these machines, and Boot Camp is not available on Apple Silicon at all.
- Microsoft's Windows 11 ARM guidance confirms that Arm64 Windows images can be used to create virtual machines on Arm-based Apple Silicon Macs, although the available virtualization options and limitations depend on the setup.

You can check your chip by clicking the Apple menu, selecting **About This Mac**, and looking at the chip or processor listed near the top.

Method 1: Parallels Desktop (Best for Most People)

Parallels Desktop is the most polished way to run Windows on a Mac, and it's currently the only Microsoft-authorized virtualization solution for running Windows 11 ARM on Apple Silicon.

That official backing matters if you need guaranteed compatibility for work or school.

How to install Windows with Parallels Desktop:

1. Download and install Parallels Desktop from the official site.
2. Open the app. If you don't already have a virtual machine set up, Parallels will prompt you to install Windows automatically.

3. Choose to download and install Windows 11 automatically. Parallels handles fetching the correct ARM or x64 image depending on your Mac and installs it with minimal input from you.
4. Follow the on-screen setup, which typically finishes in under 15 minutes.
5. Once installed, you can switch between macOS and Windows instantly, use Coherence mode to run Windows apps alongside Mac apps without a separate desktop, and share files and folders between the two systems.

Parallels comes in Standard, Pro, and Business editions, with pricing that varies depending on whether you choose an annual subscription or a one-time perpetual license.

Before buying, it's worth checking the current Parallels pricing plans page, since seasonal promotions and student pricing can meaningfully lower the cost compared to the list price.

Best for: Anyone who wants the smoothest, most reliable setup and doesn't mind paying for it, especially if Windows access matters for work.

Method 2: VMware Fusion (Best Free Option for Most Users)

VMware Fusion is now free for both personal and commercial use, which makes it the strongest free alternative to Parallels.

On Apple Silicon Macs, it runs Windows 11 ARM in much the same way Parallels does, complete with Metal-accelerated graphics support.

How to install Windows with VMware Fusion:

1. Download VMware Fusion from the official site and create a free account if required.
2. Download the Windows 11 ARM ISO directly from Microsoft (Apple Silicon) or the standard Windows 11 ISO (Intel Macs).
3. Open VMware Fusion, choose to create a new virtual machine, and point it to the ISO file you downloaded.
4. Follow the setup wizard, allocate memory and storage for the virtual machine, and let Windows install.
5. Once running, install VMware Tools inside the Windows VM for better graphics performance and smoother integration with macOS.

Best for: Users who want a full, free virtual machine and are comfortable with slightly more manual setup than Parallels requires.

Method 3: UTM (Free and Open Source, Built for Apple Silicon)

UTM is a free, open-source app that uses Apple's own virtualization framework, making it a natural fit for M-series Macs.

It's a favorite among developers who want a no-cost option and don't mind extra configuration.

How to install Windows with UTM:

1. Download UTM from the official UTM website (the initial download is roughly 238 MB).
2. Move UTM to your Applications folder and open it.
3. Get the Windows 11 ARM ISO. Many guides recommend the CrystalFetch app from the Mac App Store, which simplifies fetching the correct Microsoft ISO, or you can download it directly from Microsoft's site.
4. In UTM, create a new virtual machine, select **Virtualize** to use Apple Silicon's native performance rather than the slower emulation option, and point it to your Windows ISO.
5. Configure your virtual machine's CPU, memory, and storage allocation, then start the installation and follow the on-screen Windows setup.

Best for: Developers, students, and anyone who wants Windows occasionally without paying anything, as long as you're willing to spend a bit more time on setup and tuning.

Method 4: VirtualBox (Mostly for Intel Macs)

VirtualBox is a long-standing free, open-source virtualization tool. Recent versions do support Arm64 guest systems, including Windows 11, on Apple Silicon, but it remains most reliable and best-tested on Intel Macs.

Best for: Intel Mac owners who want a completely free option, or Apple Silicon users comfortable troubleshooting a less mature setup.

Method 5: Boot Camp Assistant (Intel Macs Only, Legacy)

Boot Camp used to let Intel Mac owners install Windows directly on a separate partition, running natively with no virtualization overhead.

Apple's Boot Camp guidance confirms that Boot Camp is designed for Intel-based Macs, which is why Apple Silicon users need a different approach for running Windows.

Best for: Intel Mac owners who want native Windows performance and are fine rebooting between macOS and Windows rather than running both at once.

Treat this as a legacy option, since Apple is not actively developing it further.

Method 6: CrossOver (No Virtual Machine, Just Specific Apps)

If you don't actually need a full Windows desktop and only want to run one or two specific Windows programs, CrossOver skips the virtual machine step entirely.

It translates Windows API calls so certain Windows applications run directly on macOS, without installing Windows at all.

This approach is lighter on system resources than a full VM, but compatibility varies app by app, so it's worth checking CrossOver's compatibility list before relying on it for anything important.

If you're deciding between a full virtual machine and this lighter approach, a side-by-side Parallels vs CrossOver comparison can help clarify which one actually fits your use case before you commit to either.

Best for: Users who need specific Windows apps rather than a full Windows environment, and want to avoid managing an entire virtual machine.

Also Read: Complete Guide to Installing Windows on a Mac

Which Method Should You Actually Use?

- **Want the easiest setup with official support?** Go with Parallels Desktop.
- **Want a full virtual machine for free?** VMware Fusion is the strongest free option on both Apple Silicon and Intel Macs.
- **Comfortable with more manual setup and want a fully open-source tool?** UTM works well, especially on Apple Silicon.
- **Still on an Intel Mac and want native performance?** Boot Camp remains available, though it's a legacy option.
- **Only need a handful of Windows apps, not a whole desktop?** CrossOver saves you from managing a virtual machine at all.

A Few Things to Know Before You Start

Windows itself isn't included with any of these tools except in the free Windows 11 ARM download for personal virtual machine use.

Depending on the method and your intended use, you may still need a valid Windows license to unlock every feature long term.

Stick to official downloads from Microsoft's site rather than modified or unofficial installers, since those often introduce security risks or instability.

It's also worth knowing that Windows 10 is no longer supported for Apple Silicon virtual machines, since Microsoft has ended support for Windows 10 on ARM.

If you're setting up a new virtual machine on an M-series Mac, plan on Windows 11 rather than Windows 10.

According to Parallels' own technical documentation, most Windows applications run on ARM-based Windows 11 through Microsoft's Prism emulation layer, which automatically translates x86 and x64 apps so they work without modification, though performance for demanding software can vary.

A separate hands-on guide from Intego confirms that free tools like UTM work well for occasional or lightweight use, but recommends a paid option if you plan to run Windows regularly or need consistent performance for demanding tasks.

Frequently Asked Questions

Can I install the regular version of Windows 11 on an Apple Silicon Mac?

No. Apple Silicon Macs require the ARM version of Windows 11 rather than the standard x86/x64 version. The ARM version handles most everyday software fine through Microsoft's built-in emulation layer, but some specialized x86 software may not run properly.

Is Boot Camp still available on new Macs?

No. Boot Camp only works on Intel Macs. Apple Silicon Macs (M1 and later) have no Boot Camp option at all, so virtualization software is the only route on those machines.

Do I need to buy a Windows license separately?

In most cases, yes, if you want full long-term functionality. Microsoft does offer a free Windows 11 ARM download that works for testing and personal virtual machines, but a proper license is typically required to unlock everything and stay fully supported.

Which is faster, Parallels or a free tool like UTM?

Parallels generally offers smoother day-to-day performance out of the box, thanks to automatic optimization and official support. UTM and VMware Fusion can perform comparably well once properly configured, but usually take more manual tuning to get there.