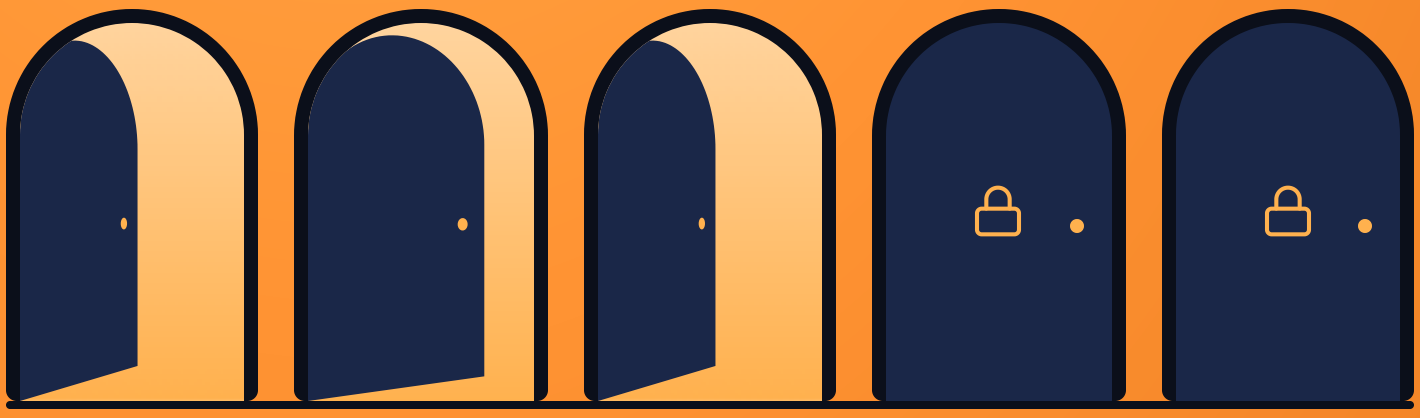
6 LEVERS AI
A FOUNDER'S GUIDE

Free AI for Your Business

Five companies will pay part of a young company's AI bill.
Three open the door for anyone with a website and a card.
Two want an investor to vouch for you first.

FIVE DOORS, TWO KEYS

Open to anyone Investor's key



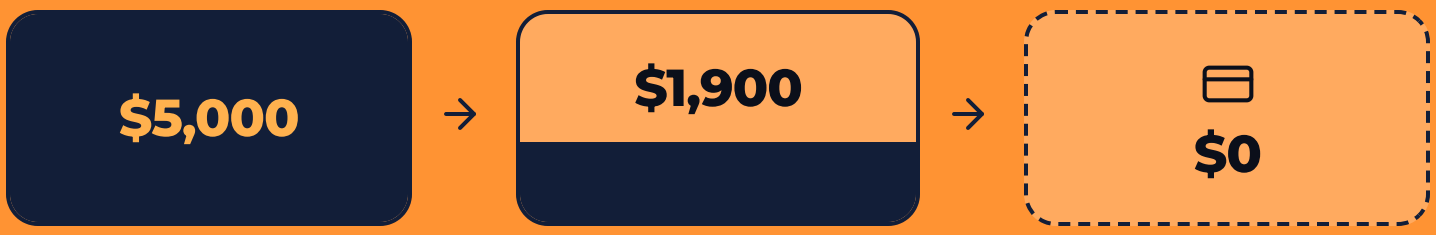
AWS Activate	**Google Cloud**	**Microsoft**	**Anthropic**	**OpenAI**
$1,000 to start	$2,000 if under 24 months	About $5,000 in stages	Credits with an investor	Credits with an investor

A 6 Levers AI handout. Figures checked against each company's official program pages on September 18, 2026. These programs change often, so confirm the numbers before you apply.

01 · THE BASICS

A Credit Is a Prepaid Tank

Your AI and cloud bills drain it first. It is not cash, it expires, and when it runs dry your card takes over.



Approved
The balance is loaded. Every AI and cloud bill comes out of it first.

Draining
It is not cash, and it expires, usually after one to two years, used or not.

Empty
Your card is charged at full price, with no pause and no warning.

The clock starts on approval, not on first use. Microsoft's first $1,000 lasts 90 days. Apply when you are ready to build.

02 · ELIGIBILITY

Do You Qualify?

MOST PROGRAMS WANT

- ✓ A for-profit, privately owned company
- ✓ Your own software product
- ✓ A live website on your own domain
- ✓ No earlier credits from the same program
- ✓ Still early: AWS before Series B, Google before Series A, Microsoft up to Series C, Anthropic under four years old

TURNED AWAY

- ✗ Consultancies, agencies and dev shops. Google and Microsoft say so in writing. Own a product too? Apply as the product company.
- ✗ Nonprofits, schools and government bodies. Each company runs separate offers for them.
- ✗ Subsidiaries, acquired or public companies
- ✗ Crypto mining

What "funded" means

For Google's large tier and Anthropic's credits, funded means money from an institutional investor such as a venture fund. A SAFE counts with Google.

Angels, friends and family, crowdfunding, prize money and government grants do not count.

Do not qualify yet? Any new Google Cloud customer gets $300 in trial credit. Hackathons from Anthropic and OpenAI sometimes include credits. And a small local accelerator is often the quickest way to the codes that open the large tiers.

Five Programs at a Glance

What a website and a card get you, what an investor's key unlocks, and which models the credits actually pay for.

PROGRAM	NO INVESTOR	WITH INVESTOR	CLAUDE	OPENAI	GEMINI
AWS Activate Also pays for Meta, Mistral and Amazon models on Bedrock. The most flexible of the five.	**$1,000** Up to $5,000 for some	**$200,000** Up to, through an Activate Provider	●	●	○
Google for Startups Cloud Google's models only. Claude on Google Cloud is billed to your card.	**$2,000** Up to, if founded in the last 24 months	**$200,000** Up to, or $350,000 if AI is your core product	○	○	●
Microsoft for Startups OpenAI's models through Azure. Claude sits in the same Azure menu but is not covered.	**$5,000** About, released in stages	**$100,000** Most start here, up to $150,000	○	●	○
Anthropic, Claude for Startups Claude bought directly from Anthropic, not through a cloud.	**None** Community and events only	**Credits** Plus higher limits. Amount not published	●	○	○
OpenAI OpenAI's models bought directly. No open application.	**None** Events and guides only	**Credits** Through partner investors only	○	●	○

● Your credits pay for it ○ Billed to your card

The programs are independent. Founders commonly hold more than one at a time, and a small approval now never blocks a large one later.

OFFICIAL PAGES

AWS Activate aws.amazon.com/startups/credits **Google** cloud.google.com/startup/benefits

Microsoft startups.microsoft.com **Anthropic** claude.com/programs/startups **OpenAI** openai.com/startups

04 · PREPARE

Pack These First

Most applications take under 30 minutes with these on hand. None of them asks for a pitch deck.

Legal company name
Spelled exactly as on your formation documents. Use it everywhere.

Formation documents and EIN
In case you are asked to verify the business.

A live website on your own domain
Every program checks it.

Business email on that domain
AWS, Google, Anthropic and OpenAI all expect one.

Funding details
Stage, amount, date of your last round, investor names.

A personal Microsoft account
Outlook or similar. Microsoft rejects work and company-domain emails at sign-up.

An up-to-date LinkedIn profile
Microsoft uses it to verify you.

A credit or debit card
AWS, Google and Microsoft need one on file. Not charged while credits cover you.

Two or three sentences on your product
What you build, who it is for, how it uses AI. Specific beats vague.

Investor codes
AWS Organization ID, Microsoft and OpenAI referral codes, Anthropic partner status.

Make everything match. Company name, website, email domain and billing details should tell one story. Mismatches are the most common reason for delays.

05 · THE ORDER

The Route Without an Investor

1 **AWS Activate Founders**
Small, but it pays for the widest range of models.

2 **Microsoft for Startups**
Fastest approval. Best free route to OpenAI's models.

3 **Google Start tier**
If your company is under 24 months old.

4 **Anthropic community**
Join now. Apply for credits when you raise.

Have an investor or accelerator? Collect their codes first and apply for the large tiers from day one. Ask small accelerators, university programs and angel groups too. Microsoft does not publish its partner list, so asking is the only way to know.

Program by Program

AWS Activate

aws.amazon.com/startups/credits

$1,000 to $5,000
Founders tier, self-funded

Up to $200,000
Portfolio tier, via a provider

WHO QUALIFIES

Pre-Series B, founded in the last 10 years, with a working website. Large tier: last round within 12 months.

Email in one to two weeks

HOW TO APPLY

1. Create an AWS Builder ID with your business email.
2. Pick Founders (self-funded) or Portfolio (with a provider's Organization ID).
3. Link a paid-plan AWS account with a card and submit.

GOOD TO KNOW

- Providers: Brex, Carta, accelerators, angel groups.
- Start small, reapply later. AWS pays the difference.
- Credits last one to two years.

Google for Startups Cloud Program

cloud.google.com/startup/apply

Up to $2,000
Start tier, for one year

Up to $200,000
Scale tier; $350,000 if AI is your core product

WHO QUALIFIES

Start: founded in the last 24 months, with a working first version. Scale: institutional pre-seed or seed in the last five years, or a Series A in the last 12 months.

Three to five business days

HOW TO APPLY

1. Create a Google Cloud account and billing account with your business email. Copy the billing account ID.
2. Fill in the form. Google matches you to a tier.

WATCH OUT

- Email, website and billing domains must match.
- Year two of Scale covers only 20% of the bill.
- Claude and other outside models bill to your card.

Microsoft for Startups

startups.microsoft.com

$1,000, then $4,000
90 days to use, then 180 once verified

$100,000
With a referral code; grows to $150,000

WHO QUALIFIES

Private, for-profit, building software for business customers, not past Series C. No funding needed for the entry offer.

About three business days

HOW TO APPLY

1. Sign in with a personal Microsoft account that has never had Azure.
2. Enter your 10-character referral code, or continue without one.
3. Verify with LinkedIn, then create the Azure account with a card.

WATCH OUT

- Activate within 90 days of accepting, or reapply.
- Credits cannot move to another account later.
- Claude on Azure is not covered, with no warning.

Anthropic, Claude for Startups

claude.com/programs/startups

Community
Events and product news, for any early founder

Credits
Plus higher limits; amount not published

WHO QUALIFIES

For credits: institutional equity funding, founded within the last four years, no earlier Anthropic credits. Traction and how central Claude is also count.

The form takes about two minutes

HOW TO APPLY

1. Create a Claude Console account at platform.claude.com with your company email (the developer console, not the chat app).
2. Fill in the form and name your investor. Anthropic partners may unlock more.

WATCH OUT

- Credits work only when you buy Claude directly, not on AWS or Google Cloud.
- No institutional funding yet? AWS Activate pays for Claude through Bedrock.

OpenAI

openai.com/startups

None
No open application. Events and guides only

Credits
Plus higher limits, via partner investors

WHO QUALIFIES

Companies backed by an OpenAI partner investor such as Thrive Capital, Sequoia, a16z, Kleiner Perkins or Conviction.

HOW TO APPLY

1. Ask your investor for their OpenAI referral code.
2. Create an account at platform.openai.com. Find your Organization ID under Settings.
3. Apply with the code, a product description, contacts and funding details.

GOOD TO KNOW

- No partner? Microsoft credits pay for OpenAI models on Azure, AWS credits on Bedrock.
- Grove, a five-week program with $50,000 in credits, last ran in early 2026. Check for a new cohort.

07 · WATCH THE METER

Mistakes That Cost Real Money

Assuming credits cover every model
On Google and Microsoft they do not. Get written confirmation before anyone switches one on.

Forgetting the card on file
When credits run out, billing continues at full price. Set a spending alert on day one and a reminder 60 days before expiry.

Missing Google's year-two drop
Scale coverage falls from 100% to 20% in year two. Plan for the jump.

Using the wrong email
Business email for AWS, Google, Anthropic and OpenAI. Personal account for Microsoft.