



Getting started with **OpenRouter** in Claude Code

A beginner's guide. Get a key onto your computer safely, install one skill, and have Claude Code send a job to a free model and bring the answer back. Windows and Mac.

What you will have at the end

You use Claude Code a little. You have never made an API key. That is the reader this guide was written for. Set aside one sitting. Claude does most of the typing; you sign in, copy one key, and choose.

- ☐ An OpenRouter key with a credit limit you chose, stored on your computer and never pasted into a chat
- ☐ The openrouter skill in Claude Code, so Claude can send a job to any OpenRouter model and read the answer
- ☐ A live list of today's free models, with the ones that can use tools marked
- ☐ One answer from a free model you picked, and the request on your OpenRouter activity page
- ☐ If you want it later, a paid video job, with the price shown before anything is sent

The three reasons from the reel

3. Free

Some models cost nothing. A model whose id ends in **:free** is \$0 to call. They trail the top paid models, but plenty of everyday work does not need the top model. They are a minority of the catalog: 22 of 445 on 18 September 2026.

2. Direct

Cut out the middleman. If an app charges you for video or image generation built on a model OpenRouter lists, you can call that model yourself, with the price shown before you send anything.

1. Grow

AI is more than ChatGPT and Claude. Hundreds of models from more than 80 providers sit behind one key, and millions of people already use it. Learning it opens voice, image, video and more.

OpenRouter's own site says 500+ models. Its live catalog listed 445 on 18 September 2026. Free model limits: 20 requests a minute, and 50 a day until you have bought \$10 of credits, then 1,000 a day (OpenRouter's docs, 18 September 2026).

How it fits together

Claude Code runs only Claude models, and Anthropic does not support pointing it at other models through a gateway. So Claude stays in charge of your session, and the skill sends one job out on the side to the model you pick, then brings the reply back for Claude to read.

STEP 1

What an API key is

An API key is a password for programs. It works like a hotel key card: it opens your OpenRouter account to whatever holds it, and you can cap what it spends or cancel it in seconds.

Pressing **Create Key** on OpenRouter makes a new card, shows it to you, and bills its use to your account. Three things to know before you press it:

- **It is shown once.** Copy it before you close the page. If you lose it, delete it and make another. Making a new one costs nothing.
- **Set a credit limit.** The limit is the most that key can ever spend. OpenRouter recommends one on every key, because a key with no limit lets a leaked key or a runaway program spend your whole balance.
- **You can cancel it any time.** Delete it at openrouter.ai/settings/keys and every request made with it stops.

Optional: have Claude Code explain it. Paste into Claude Code.

Explain what an OpenRouter API key is in plain words, as if I have never used one. Tell me what happens when I press Create Key, what a credit limit on a key does, and what I should do if a key ever leaks. Do not open a browser or create anything yet.

Your part: nothing yet. Read the answer until the idea of a key and a credit limit makes sense.

STEP 2

Get the key

With Claude in Chrome set up, Claude Code opens the OpenRouter keys page and clicks through it for you. It stops at sign in and CAPTCHA, and it never reads the key. Claude in Chrome is optional; without it you do the same clicks yourself at openrouter.ai/settings/keys.

Paste into Claude Code

Help me get an OpenRouter API key using your browser tools.

1. Open <https://openrouter.ai/settings/keys> in a new tab.
2. If I am not signed in, stop and tell me to sign in myself in that tab, including any CAPTCHA or code. Never type my email, password, or a code. Wait until I say I am signed in.
3. Click Create Key and name it `claude-code`.
4. Ask me what credit limit I want. Type only the amount I give you.
5. When the key appears, tell me to copy it myself. Do not read it, repeat it, screenshot it, or save it anywhere. Wait until I say I have copied it, then close the tab.

Your part: sign in or make the account, solve any CAPTCHA, choose the credit limit, and copy the key the moment it appears. Copy it before you close the page, and if you lose it, delete it and make another.

STEP 3

Store the key safely

The key goes into an environment variable named **OPENROUTER_API_KEY**: a setting your computer hands to every program you start, Claude Code included. Commands then name the variable, and your computer fills in the value. Claude uses the key without ever reading it.

Do this in a separate terminal window, never inside Claude Code. The command asks you for the key, so the key never enters a chat or a file in your project.

Windows

Open a new PowerShell window, separate from Claude Code, and run this yourself.

Run in PowerShell yourself, not in Claude Code

```
[System.Environment]::SetEnvironmentVariable('OPENROUTER_API_KEY', (Read-Host 'Paste your OpenRouter key'), 'User')
```

Your part: paste the key when it asks and press Enter. Then close every terminal and start Claude Code again, because open windows keep the old settings. Inside VS Code, restart VS Code.

Mac

This stores the key in your Mac's Keychain and tells your terminal to load it from there. Open a new Terminal window, separate from Claude Code, and run these two lines yourself. The first asks for the key.

Run in Terminal yourself, not in Claude Code

```
security add-generic-password -U -a "$USER" -s openrouter -w  
echo 'export OPENROUTER_API_KEY="$(security find-generic-password -a "$USER" -s openrouter -w)"'  
>> ~/.zshrc
```

Your part: paste the key when it asks and press Enter. Then close every Terminal window and start Claude Code again. If **echo \$SHELL** prints bash, use `~/.bash_profile` in place of `~/.zshrc`.

Rules that keep the key safe

- **Never paste it into a chat.** None of the prompts in this guide ask you to. If anything ever does, say no, and delete the key if you already did.
- **Never put it in git.** Keep it out of project files, `.env` files you might commit, and screenshots. The environment variable lives outside every project folder.
- **Revoke and replace.** Key leaked, or not sure? Delete it at openrouter.ai/settings/keys, make a new one with a credit limit, and run the storage command again (on a Mac, the first line). That is how you rotate a key.

STEP 4

Install the openrouter skill

The skill is one folder with one file, SKILL.md. It teaches Claude Code how to list free models, send a job to the one you pick with curl, and handle paid video jobs, all while reading the key from your environment and never printing it.

Download it here: graniteai.co/downloads/openrouter-skill.zip

Then have Claude Code unzip it into your personal skills folder and confirm it can see the key without showing it.

Windows

The file ends up at `C:\Users\<me>\.claude\skills\openrouter\SKILL.md`

Paste into Claude Code

I downloaded openrouter-skill.zip to my Downloads folder. Unzip it into my personal Claude Code skills folder so the file ends up at `C:\Users\<me>\.claude\skills\openrouter\SKILL.md`. Create the skills folder if it does not exist.

Then check whether `OPENROUTER_API_KEY` is set in your environment. Answer only yes or no. Never print its value, never ask me to paste it here, and never write it to a file.

Mac

The file ends up at `~/.claude/skills/openrouter/SKILL.md`

Paste into Claude Code

I downloaded openrouter-skill.zip to my Downloads folder. Unzip it into my personal Claude Code skills folder so the file ends up at `~/.claude/skills/openrouter/SKILL.md`. Create the skills folder if it does not exist.

Then check whether `OPENROUTER_API_KEY` is set in your environment. Answer only yes or no. Never print its value, never ask me to paste it here, and never write it to a file.

Your part: approve the file commands when Claude Code asks. It picks up the skill without a restart, unless the skills folder is brand new; then restart it once. Type `/openrouter` to see it in the list. A no on the key means step 3 has not loaded yet: close the terminal and start again.

STEP 5

Find the free models

A model is free when its id ends in **:free**. The list changes week to week, so the skill reads it live from OpenRouter every time instead of trusting a list someone wrote down.

Paste into Claude Code

```
/openrouter List today's free models. Show each id, its context length, and whether it supports tools. Tell me how many there are. Do not pick one for me.
```

Your part: pick one. For jobs that need tools later, pick one marked as supporting them. Free models trail the top paid ones, and for plenty of everyday jobs that is enough.

What "supports tools" means

Some models can ask to run a tool, like a search or a file read, as part of a job. Models without tool support still answer plain questions. When a job sends tools to a model that lacks them, OpenRouter drops the tools and returns an ordinary reply, which can look like the model ignored you. Pick a model marked for tools whenever the job needs them.

Free model limits

Credits you have bought	Per minute	Per day
Less than \$10	20 requests	50 requests
\$10 or more	20 requests	1,000 requests

Source: OpenRouter's docs, 18 September 2026. Free models cost \$0 even with no credits bought.

Where your prompts go

To the provider serving the model you picked. Some may keep or train on prompts. OpenRouter's privacy settings let you exclude those, separately for free models.

STEP 6

Send your first free job

Claude writes the request, the free model answers, and Claude brings the answer back with its own read on it.

Paste into Claude Code, with your model id swapped in

```
/openrouter Send this to <the model id I picked>: "In three sentences, explain what OpenRouter does for someone who has only used ChatGPT and Claude."
```

Show me its answer and the model id that answered. Then tell me in one line what you would change about the answer.

Your part: swap in the model id you picked. Then open openrouter.ai/activity to see the request, the model, and what it cost. A free model shows \$0.

STEP 7, OPTIONAL, AND IT COSTS MONEY

Make a video

OpenRouter lists video models from Veo, Kling, Runway and Seedance among others, on the same key. **No video model is free.** You need credits in your OpenRouter account, and your key's credit limit still caps its total spend.

A video job runs in the background. The skill submits it, checks back every so often until it finishes, and downloads the file. Before anything is sent, Claude shows you the price for the length and resolution you asked for, and waits for your yes.

Paste into Claude Code

```
/openrouter List the video models and what each would cost for a 5 second clip at 720p. Do not submit anything. I will tell you which one, if any, and you will show me the price again before you send the job.
```

Your part: decide whether to try it at all. If you do, say yes only to a job whose model and price you have read.

Why a skill, and not pointing Claude Code at OpenRouter

Some guides tell you to point Claude Code itself at OpenRouter so every request goes there. Anthropic's own documentation says it "doesn't support routing Claude Code to non-Claude models through any gateway." The skill takes the supported path: Claude Code keeps running on Claude, and one job at a time goes out to the model you chose over a plain web request. Claude reads the reply before you act on it.

When something goes wrong

What you see	What it means	The fix
401	The key did not load, or it was mistyped or deleted.	Close every terminal and start Claude Code again. Still 401? Make a new key at openrouter.ai/settings/keys and run the step 3 command again.
402	Out of credits. This can happen even on a free model if your account balance is negative.	Add credits in your OpenRouter account, or raise the key's credit limit if the limit is what stopped it.
429	You hit a free limit: 20 a minute, or the daily cap.	Wait and try again. Buying \$10 of credits raises the daily cap from 50 to 1,000. The per minute limit stays at 20.
Model ignores tools	The model you picked does not support tools, so the tools were dropped.	List the free models again and pick one marked as supporting tools.
Key committed to git, or pasted in a chat	Anyone who can see it can spend on your account, up to its credit limit.	Delete the key at openrouter.ai/settings/keys right away. Make a new one with a credit limit and store it again. Check openrouter.ai/activity for requests you did not make. Then remove the key from the project's git history.

To turn it all off: delete the key at openrouter.ai/settings/keys, and delete the openrouter folder from your skills folder to remove the skill.

KEEP GOING

The guide page

Every step, prompt and command in this PDF lives on the page too, with a Windows and a Mac track and the latest checked numbers: graniteai.co/tools/openrouter-claude-code

GraniteAI makes the Mica Social Media Analyzer and Mica Social. See both here: graniteai.co/tools/openrouter-claude-code#products