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Maxing out free tiers to validate infrastructure demand

What paid APIs, SDKs and clouds give a new product for \$0, where each allowance stops, and what it costs to leave.

COVERS

Cloud, backend, auth, maps, messaging, payments, IoT, analytics, AI

FOR

Founders and engineers choosing a pilot stack

PRICING AS OF

Vendor pages and trackers, Sept–Oct 2026, US list rates

Five findings

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- 01 Automatic free compute has shrunk; the money moved to applications.** AWS accounts opened from 15 July 2025 get at most \$200 in credits on a plan that ends after six months.¹ The large money, \$150,000 to \$350,000, now sits in startup programs that require an application and, at the top tiers, an investor or accelerator referral.²
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- 02 Headline quotas are rarely what ends a pilot.** Daily caps (Resend's 100 emails, Firestore's 50,000 reads), inactivity pauses (Supabase after one week) and licence terms (Vercel Hobby is non-commercial) usually arrive first.^{9,10,16,8}
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- 03 Free allowances are now scoped per unit.** Google Maps replaced its pooled \$200 monthly credit with a separate cap per SKU in March 2025.¹⁴ A product that leans hard on one API pays sooner than one that touches four lightly.
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- 04 Exit cost is decided while things are still free.** One analysis prices moving 200 TB out of S3 once at about \$13,800 in transfer fees, against \$0 on Cloudflare R2 or Backblaze B2.²
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- 05 Published figures drift and disagree.** Oracle halved its Always Free Arm allowance in June 2026 without an announcement.²⁴ Clerk's free tier is quoted at 10,000 or 50,000 users depending on when the source was written.¹² Check the vendor page before you commit.
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SCOPE AND METHOD

Figures come from vendor pricing pages and docs where reachable, and otherwise from dated third-party pricing trackers. Each source is numbered on page 8. All prices are US list rates. A *free tier* here is a recurring no-charge allowance; a *credit* is a dollar balance that expires. Cost curves are our arithmetic from published rates. Where the report gives a judgement rather than a sourced fact, it says so.

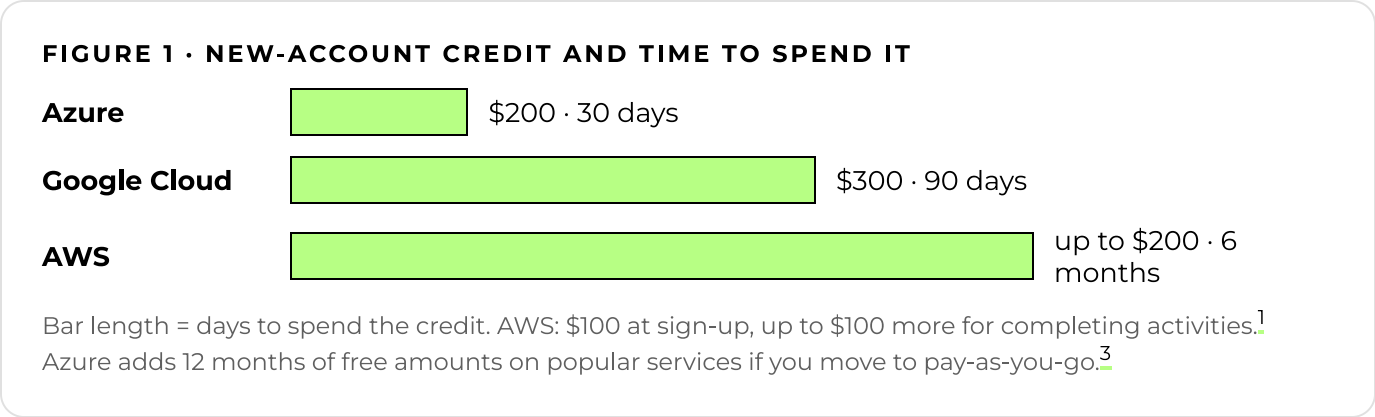
The \$0 stack

One well-documented free option per category, with what happens when you reach the limit. These are examples, not endorsements; most categories have several alternatives.

CATEGORY	OPTION	FREE ALLOWANCE	AT THE LIMIT
Functions	Cloudflare Workers	100,000 requests/day, 10 ms CPU per request ¹¹	Requests fail until 00:00 UTC; nothing billed
Web hosting	Vercel Hobby	1M function invocations/mo; personal, non-commercial use only ¹⁰	Feature usually paused until the 30-day window resets
Postgres + auth	Supabase Free	500 MB DB, 50,000 MAU, 5 GB egress, 2 active projects ⁸	Paused after 1 week inactive; restricted on quota overrun
Document DB	Firebase Spark	1 GiB stored, 50,000 reads and 20,000 writes per day ⁹	Operations fail until about midnight Pacific
Auth	Clerk Hobby	50,000 monthly retained users per app; no MFA ¹²	Hard cap; upgrade to Pro (\$25/mo) required
Maps	Google Maps Platform	10,000 events/SKU/mo (Essentials), 5,000 (Pro), 1,000 (Enterprise); mobile SDK and Embed unlimited ^{14,15}	Bills per SKU; Dynamic Maps \$7 per 1,000
Email	Resend Free	3,000 emails/mo, capped at 100/day ¹⁶	Hard daily cap; no overage on Free
SMS	Twilio	One-time trial credit; no recurring free tier ¹⁸	Pay as you go
Payments	Stripe	No free tier; no monthly fee, 2.9% + 30¢ per US card charge ¹⁹	Cost starts with the first charge
IoT messaging	HiveMQ Cloud Serverless	100 connections, 10 GB traffic/mo; no uptime SLA ²⁰	Starter from \$0.34/hr + \$0.80 per 1M messages
Analytics	PostHog	1M events, 5,000 session replays, 100,000 exceptions/mo ²²	Usage stops unless billing is added
Error tracking	Sentry Developer	5,000 errors, 1 user ²¹	Not checked for this report
LLM API	Groq / Gemini (AI Studio)	Groq: about 1,000 requests/day on most models. Gemini: free tier, limits shown only after login ²³	Rate-limited; Gemini free inputs used to improve Google products

Free compute now comes on a **clock**

The hyperscalers' sign-up offers are short credit windows over a thin always-free layer. Google Cloud's permanent compute is one e2-micro VM in three US regions.² Oracle is the exception: it still offers 2 Arm cores, 12 GB of memory and 10 TB of monthly egress, after cutting the core allowance in half on 15 June 2026.²⁴



When the clock runs out the providers behave differently. Google Cloud stops trial resources and deletes them after a 30-day grace period; AWS closes Free-plan accounts at six months with 90 days to reopen by upgrading; Azure disables the subscription.² Trial accounts also exclude GPUs.

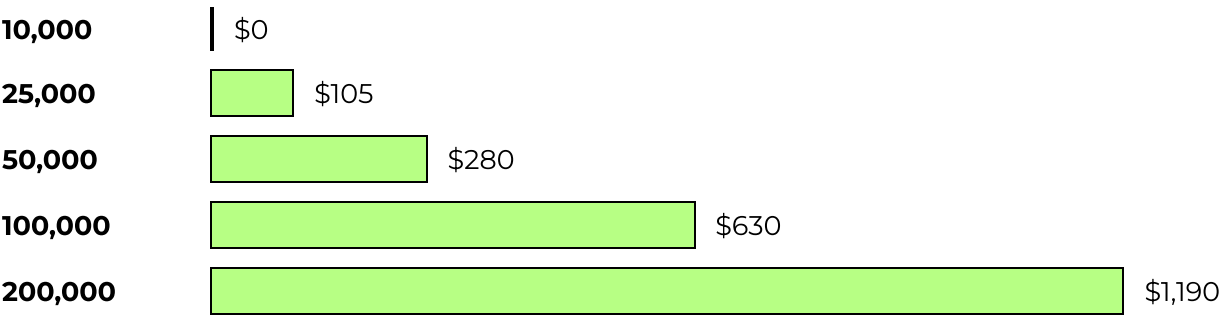
STARTUP PROGRAM	AMOUNT	GATE
AWS Activate ⁵	\$1,000 self-funded; up to \$200,000 (Portfolio)	Pre-Series B, under 10 years old, on the Paid plan; Portfolio needs an Activate Provider ID
Google for Startups Cloud ⁶	\$2,000 pre-funded; \$200,000 Seed-A; up to \$350,000 AI-first	Application; higher tiers by funding stage
Microsoft for Startups ⁷	Up to \$150,000 Azure	Larger tiers tied to investor referral or verified usage
Anthropic / OpenAI ²³	Amounts not published	Anthropic: public application, VC not required. OpenAI: through partner VCs

AWS Activate requires an account on the Paid plan, so you cannot hold the Free plan and startup credits on the same account.²

Where free ends

Maps is the clearest per-unit cliff. Each page view that loads an interactive map counts as one Dynamic Maps event. After the 10,000 free events, list price is \$7.00 per 1,000 up to 100,000, then \$5.60.¹⁵

FIGURE 2 · GOOGLE DYNAMIC MAPS, MONTHLY COST BY MAP LOADS



Our calculation from Google's published tiers.¹⁵ The 25,000 and 50,000 figures match an independent estimate.¹⁷ Native mobile Maps SDK loads are free without limit, so an app-first pilot avoids this cost.

Daily caps arrive first

Resend's 3,000 monthly emails average exactly 100 a day, which is also its daily cap, so any uneven day hits the cap.¹⁶ Firestore counts every document a query returns as one read against 50,000 a day.⁹

Some upgrades remove the ceiling

Firebase has no built-in spending cap. Linking any billing account to a Spark project, including one with Google Cloud trial credit, moves it to pay-as-you-go Blaze automatically.²⁵

AT THE LIMIT IT...	EXAMPLES
Stops	Cloudflare Workers, Resend Free, Firebase Spark, PostHog, Clerk Hobby
Pauses	Supabase (inactivity), Vercel Hobby (until window resets), Oracle (idle reclaim)
Bills	Google Maps, Firebase Blaze, Clerk Pro (\$0.02 per user from 50,001 to 100,000) ¹²

What free costs

Uptime

A paused Supabase project returns nothing until someone resumes it from the dashboard.⁸ Oracle reclaims Always Free instances idle for seven days.² HiveMQ's free broker has no uptime SLA.²⁰ For a pilot with irregular traffic, this is the most likely failure.

Licence terms

Vercel defines commercial use as any deployment that benefits anyone involved in building it financially, including a paid contractor. Taking payments or advertising a product is enough.²⁶ Cohere trial keys and ElevenLabs' free tier also bar commercial use.²³

Data use

Content sent to the Gemini API on the free tier is used to improve Google's products; paid-tier content is not.²³ Sending customer data during a pilot is a policy decision, not just a cost one.

Data gravity

AWS includes 100 GB of free outbound transfer a month, then charges from \$0.09/GB. Its exit waiver covers moving all your data off AWS within 60 days, not moving part of it.²

Terms that move

SendGrid moved new accounts to a 60-day trial in March 2025 and retired its existing free plans.¹³ Google can change Free Tier limits with 30 days' notice.² Oracle changed its limits with no notice.²⁴

GRAY AREA Multiplying allowances

Free tiers are scoped to an account, organisation, project or app: two active projects per Supabase organisation, Clerk's cap per application, Firestore's quota on one database per project.^{8,12,9} Anthropic's program excludes companies that have already had its credits.²³ *Our assessment, not checked clause by clause:* creating extra accounts or projects to multiply these limits is the tactic most likely to conflict with provider terms. It can lead to suspension at the point the pilot starts to work.

Running a pilot at \$0

A sequence drawn from the findings above. Steps marked with a source follow published guidance; the rest are our recommendations.

- 1 Size the pilot in each vendor's unit.** Convert expected users into requests per day, reads per day, map loads and emails per day. For example, 1,000 daily visitors making 5 Worker calls each is 5,000 requests, 5% of the daily cap.¹¹
 - 2 Prefer tiers that stop at the limit.** Put the core path on tiers that fail closed. Add anything that bills without a cap only after budget alerts are in place.
 - 3 Plan for inactivity pauses.** Supabase's docs say a few database requests a day keep a project active.⁸ Real pilot traffic qualifies. A synthetic keep-alive ping is a common workaround, but it sits outside the plan's intent; treat it as a gray area.
 - 4 Pay where the licence requires it.** Anything that takes money or advertises a product on Vercel belongs on Pro (\$20 per seat per month) from the first day.²⁶
 - 5 Apply for credits in order of expiry, not size.** Map each grant's end date so two balances don't run down in the same quarter.² Note the gates: AWS Activate requires the Paid plan, and Anthropic credits work only on its own API, not on Bedrock or Vertex.²³
 - 6 Put durable data on zero-egress storage.** Cloudflare R2 includes 10 GB a month free and charges nothing for egress. Its S3-compatible API means application code doesn't change if you move.²
 - 7 Set budget alerts before the first resource.** Set a budget at 100% of expected monthly spend on every account, trial accounts included.²
 - 8 Write down the cliff before launch.** For each service, record the monthly price at ten times pilot volume. If the pilot shows demand, that number is the first cost of serving it.
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Numbered references

Vendor pages are marked **V**. Third-party sources give the date their figures were checked, where stated. All accessed October 2026.

1. **V** AWS. [Free Tier now offers \\$200 in credits and 6-month free plan](#), Jul 2025.
2. [DataStorage. The 2026 Guide to Cloud Free Tiers and Credits](#), 23 Sep 2026.
3. **V** Microsoft. [Avoid charges with your Azure free account](#).
4. **V** Google Cloud. [Free Google Cloud features and trial offer](#).
5. **V** AWS. [AWS Activate credits](#), via [2].
6. **V** Google. [Google for Startups Cloud Program](#), via [2].
7. **V** Microsoft. [Microsoft for Startups](#), via [2].
8. **V** Supabase. [Pricing](#); pause behaviour per [MyKavo](#), Oct 2026.
9. **V** Firebase. [Firestore usage and limits](#).
10. **V** Vercel. [Hobby plan](#).
11. **V** Cloudflare. [Workers limits](#); Easton, 2026.
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13. **V** Twilio SendGrid. [Pricing](#); free-plan retirement, 2025.
14. **V** Google. [Up to 10,000 monthly free calls per product](#), 6 Mar 2025.
15. **V** Google. [Maps Platform core services pricing list](#).
16. **V** Resend. [Pricing](#).
17. StoreRocket. [Google Maps API Pricing: 2026 Cost Breakdown](#), 2026.
18. **V** Twilio. [Free trial account](#).
19. **V** Stripe. [Pricing](#).
20. **V** HiveMQ. [HiveMQ Cloud pricing](#).
21. **V** Sentry. [Pricing](#).
22. **V** PostHog. [Pricing](#).
23. Fin (Intercom). [AI Credits for Startups in 2026](#), vendor-page review, verified Sep 2026.
24. InfoQ. [Oracle quietly halves free tier Ampere AI limits](#), Jul 2026.
25. **V** Firebase. [Pricing plans](#).
26. **V** Vercel. [Fair use guidelines](#).

Prices and allowances change often, and several sources here disagree with each other. Confirm current terms on each vendor's page before committing to a stack.