

A vertical decorative border on the left side of the page, consisting of a series of triangles pointing right. The triangles are arranged in two columns: the left column contains light gray triangles, and the right column contains teal triangles. The triangles are of varying shades and are separated by a thin white vertical line.

getting started in auburn and opelika

**this resource has
been developed by**



Guide members are businesses and entities in Alabama who serve start-ups, entrepreneurs and small businesses.

[See a full list of members here.](#)

Note: This document contains interactive links to relevant web pages.

idea stage

1 ► conduct market research

Investigate if there is a market for your product or service, understand customers, monitor competition and mitigate risk in your business decisions. Learn more about what market research [here](#).

Here are a few options for researching your market:

- ▶ **Customer Interviewing:** Seek out people you know who are your ideal customer and interview them to learn their needs, lifestyles, and feedback on your product/service.
- ▶ **Focus Groups:** You can conduct in-person or virtual focus groups with a small group of people to better understand them as an audience and to gain feedback.
- ▶ **Google and Social Media Searches:** Use google and social media to search keywords and phrases for your industry, product/service, business type, etc. You will gain insight on competitors and market landscape. If you are struggling to identify strong keywords, use [Wordstream](#).
- ▶ **SEMrush:** This is an advanced and more costly technology that will enable you to analyze all aspects of your market and competitors.

2 ► develop rough plans

At this stage, you don't have to jump into writing a formal business plan. Instead, you could do a [1-page Business Model Canvas](#) to get a high level sense of how the business will function and to spot any potential gaps. It would also be good to use a spreadsheet to calculate your rough costs to startup and potential revenue streams. Over time, you'll continue to update and revise your business model and financial projections to make sure you're set up for success.

3 ► start to experiment / prototype

Break down your idea into the simplest version and start doing the work. From this you're trying to learn two things, do you enjoy doing the work and do others enjoy the work that you're doing.

For example, if you want to eventually launch a restaurant, you could start by making plates of food and getting feedback on your cooking. If you find that you hate to cook, or no one likes your recipes, then you may not be suited towards success in launching a restaurant. You should either keep revising and iterating on your cooking approach until you can get to a yes on both enjoying the work and others enjoying the output, or perhaps move on to a different business idea.

early stage

4 ► choose a business name

- ▶ **First Pass:** When choosing a name, consider if the name is easy to pronounce, spell, and align with what you offer so you can reduce confusion.
- ▶ **Existing Trademarks:** You'll want to ensure you're not infringing on the registered trademark of others. You can search for your desired name via the [USPTO Trademark Search](#). If you spot a business with the same or exceedingly similar name to the one you desire that is operating in the same industry and the trademark status is registered and live, then you may want to consider a different business name.
- ▶ **Online Availability:** You can use services such as [NameChk](#) or [namecheckr](#) to quickly check the availability of the domain name and social media handles. You'll want to strive for consistency in how you name and present your business across platforms, but you're likely to find the name already taken in one or more places. Therefore, you should place an emphasis on what's most relevant to your business.
 - ▶ For example, if teachers are your core target audience and they're most likely to use Pinterest, you'll want to make sure that your name/handle is available there, and you'd be less concerned if the name is already taken on Snapchat.
 - ▶ It's unfortunate if your desired name is already registered or widely unavailable on the most important social handles, but it's much better to find that out at this early stage so you can move forward with the business using a name that will be available.
- ▶ **LLC Availability:** If you already know that you will be an LLC, you can also search available business names for an LLC or Corporation via the [Alabama Secretary of State Business Entity Records](#).
- ▶ **Reserve Handles:** Once you have found a name that is available, you can create business profiles on the key social platforms (Instagram, Facebook, LinkedIn, Pinterest) so that the name/handle doesn't get taken by someone else. You do not have to post anything, just secure the pages with the same name/handle.

For more help naming your business, explore this [Naming Resource](#) from the SBDC.

5 ▶ start developing your brand

There are many parts to a brand because branding includes every avenue I can experience your business. You will build some aspects as you build the business. At this phase, you will need to create the design and message foundation.

▶ **Design assets and guidelines:**

- ▶ Main Logo, Alternate Logo, Sub Logo
- ▶ Color Palette with about 5 colors
- ▶ Two - Three Fonts
- ▶ Overall style and personality to the design (feminine southern vs modern youthful)

▶ **Brand Messaging:**

- ▶ Target audience(s)
- ▶ Their problem/want/need
- ▶ Your solution
- ▶ The success they experience by working with you
- ▶ Your “What you do” sentence

You’ll want to continue to refine and expand on your branding as your business grows. We recommend hiring a freelancer or branding firm such as [eloise design co.](#) to develop your brand with you.

6 ▶ choose a pricing model

How much do you plan to charge for your product and services? There are two aspects that will impact this decision:

- ▶ **Expenses:** Is the planned price point going to be enough to cover your expenses? The business won’t survive if you don’t have enough to cover expenses.
- ▶ **Target Audience:** Is the price point aligned with your target audience’s lifestyle, income, and spending habits?

7 ▶ choose a business structure

There are different types of business structures, such as, LLC, LP, LLP, sole proprietorship, etc. Although many small businesses start as sole proprietors, there can be some legal risks. LLC is a common structure that many businesses transition to, but you should consult an SBDC Advisor, accountant and/or attorney to determine the best option for your needs.

For more information on the variations between structure types, explore this [Entity Selection Resource](#) from the SBDC.

8 ▶ register your business name

Reserve your entity name prior to registering your business to receive your Certificate of Name Reservation:

Fee: approx. \$28

Check your name first before you register it. Do a business entity search at [Alabama Secretary of State](#).

9 ▶ create operating or partnership agreements (if applicable)

Draw up agreements to clarify operations, ownership, partnership or other stakeholder roles now. Consult an attorney. Various agreement templates can be found on [Template Lab](#) or via a general web search.

10 ▶ determine who will be your registered agent

Many entrepreneurs choose themselves, and others choose to utilize an outside service for this role. This designated agent will be specified on your filing paperwork.

11 ▶ get federal and state tax IDs

- ▶ **EIN:** Apply for your federal Employer Identification Number (EIN) online at this link. You will need this to open a business bank account and for payroll taxes.
- ▶ **State IDs:** Apply for your state tax IDs - Alabama Sales Tax Number, Alabama Income Tax Withholding Number. Learn more [here](#).

You may choose to do this step prior to forming the entity so that the ID number(s) can be included with your filing if needed.

12 ▶ form your entity

Form your entity (LLC, Corporation, etc.) with the state.

Fee: approx. \$200

Instructions as of February 2025.

- ▶ **LLC:**
 - ▶ Step will be taken via [Alabama Secretary of State Online Services](#).
 - ▶ You will reserve the name with the Non-Subscriber option. Make sure to save this form.

- ▶ Choose the option for Domestic Filing and Non Subscriber. To form an LLC you will need to file the Name Reservation and the Certificate of Formation. Most often the business owner chooses to be the registered agent.
- ▶ **S-Corporation, C-Corporation, or multi-member Limited Liability Company:** Seek advice from a tax accountant and contact an attorney for assistance in filing the required documents with the Alabama Secretary of State.

For assistance, reach out to your SBDC advisor or a business formation lawyer such as [Muncie, Mattson, & Gunter](#).

13 ▶ open a business bank account

Talk to local banks about business account options. Have this information ready: EIN, formation documents, ownership agreements

14 ▶ get business insurance

Business insurance makes sure that both your personal assets and your business assets are fully protected from unexpected catastrophes. Every business has different insurance needs.

Here are a couple common types:

- ▶ **Business and Liability Insurance:** This is not required but you should carry it. Contact your insurance agent for guidance.
- ▶ **Business Renter's Insurance and Inventory Coverage:** Contact your insurance agent for guidance.
- ▶ **Workers Compensation Insurance:** With some exceptions, private businesses with five or more employees must provide workers' compensation insurance for their employees. The term employee includes all full or part-time employees, officers of a corporation, or members of an LLC. Contact your insurance agent for guidance.

Learn more about insurance options at the [Alabama Department of Insurance](#) website.

15 ▶ apply for business licenses

There are city, county, and state business licenses. You do not need all the business licenses. Most local businesses have one city license. You will pick the city that you are operating your business and generating income.

Here are the details for each city as they do differ:

- ▶ **City of Auburn Business License:**
 - ▶ Complete [City of Auburn Business Registration Form](#). If your business will be located within the city limits, call these departments to arrange completion of form page 3:
 - » Call Planning Department (334-501-3040)
 - » Call Codes Department (334-501-3170)
 - ▶ Call the City of Auburn Revenue Office (334-501-7239) to determine what documentation is required to apply for licenses, permits and certificates. Requirements will vary by industry, state, location, nature of your work and other factors, which are outlined on the [City of Auburn Business Licenses page](#).
 - ▶ Apply for a business license and any necessary permits or certificates. Submit completed business registration form.
Fee: approx. \$105 | After July 1, prorated to approx. \$55
- ▶ **City of Opelika Business License:**
 - ▶ Apply for the City of Opelika business license [here](#).
 - ▶ Email the form to the City of Opelika Revenue Department or deliver personally to 204 South 7th Street Opelika, AL.
 - ▶ The Planning Department will reach out to you about your business location or your Home Occupancy Certificate.
 - ▶ Your application will then be sent back to the Revenue Department and they will inform you what you owe and how to pay.
- ▶ **Lee County Probate Office:**
 - ▶ Go to Lee County Probate Office (334-737-3670) at 215 S 9th St, Opelika, AL, 36801. Bring with you: business name, phone number, EIN, mailing and physical address.
 - ▶ Apply for a business license.
 - ▶ License fees vary by industry, location, and other factors.

16 ▶ **apply for local permits (state/county)**

To determine what permits or licenses are specific to your business contact the probate court or license commissioner in the city/county the business will operate. Depending on the nature of your business, you may need a license in more than one county.

- ▶ **Zoning:** Check with City Hall on zoning restrictions and business license requirements. Depending on the nature of your business, you may need a license in more than one municipality.
- ▶ **Signage:** Check with City Hall for signage permits, outdoor seating permits, and any other permits needed locally for your business.
- ▶ **Building:** If you are buying an existing building or building a new one, contact your city Building Inspector and Fire Marshall to make sure the building is up to code.

17 ► know your taxes

There are two types of experts that can help you decide which taxes will apply to your business type: an accountant and an SBDC Advisor. We recommend meeting with one or both. They will be able to tell you the steps you need to take.

You will need to register your tax accounts online. Your accountant can help with this step.

- ▶ **Register:** Visit the Department of Revenue's My Alabama Taxes website for the appropriate tax account(s).
- ▶ **Note for Sales Tax:** You will need to retain the sign-on ID and access code received in this process to register to file the monthly returns in My Alabama Taxes (MAT).

For more information:

- ▶ IRS forms and publications may be downloaded [here](#).
- ▶ Contact the [Alabama Department of Revenue's Taxpayer Service Center](#) in your area.

18 ► apply for federal licenses and permits

This step only applies if your business activities are regulated by a federal agency (agriculture, aviation, etc.).

▼ next stage ▼

start-up stage

19 ► refine your brand and develop a marketing plan

- ▶ **Brand Expansion:** In the early phase of your business, you should have created a foundation for your brand (design and message). Now that you are starting to market and sell your services or products, you will need to expand the branding guidelines to guide yourself, team members, or freelancers how to design for the brand. You will also want to design more assets (design files). Here are a couple examples:
 - ▶ Website
 - ▶ Business cards, flyers, brochures
 - ▶ Exterior and interior signage
 - ▶ Social media profile graphics + social media posts
 - ▶ Packaging
- ▶ **Rebrand:** You might also realize you need to refine the brand by refreshing or rebranding because you have realized the style needs to be stronger or different based on your target audience and industry.
- ▶ **Marketing:** Just because you build it, doesn't mean the customers will come. You will need to develop a marketing plan that is based on your brand, your business goals for the current year, your bandwidth of time, and your budget. Advisors from the SBDC and local marketing agencies can help you create a plan.

20 ► apply for trademarks/tradenames (optional)

Not all start-ups need to pay for a trademark on their business name or product name. It is usually not a necessary cost or use of time when starting out. We recommend talking to a trademark/tradename lawyer or your small business advisor if you have a business where the name can be monetized or easily duplicated across the USA. They can walk you through the process.

To verify that your trademark is available, search the [US Patent and Trademark Office \(USPTO\)](#).

21 ► find a location

Explore what space will work for you, your customers, and your employees. Does it meet your technical requirements? Can you afford the terms of the lease?

- ▶ **Zoning:** To check the zoning for a desired location, contact the City of Auburn Planning Department at 334-501-3040.

- ▶ **Tech Businesses:** If you are a tech startup looking for space, talk to the City of Auburn Economic Development office at 334-501-7272.

22 ▶ join the chambers of commerce

We are fortunate to have multiple strong Chambers of Commerce in our area. We recommend joining both the [Auburn Chamber of Commerce](#) and [Opelika Chamber of Commerce](#) if your business operates and serves audiences in Lee County. They are an incredible resource for professional connections, networking events, marketing opportunities, event space rental, community and business learning, and workforce development.

23 ▶ update your business plan

Consider writing a formal business plan. This can serve as a roadmap to run your company in broad operational terms as well as details such as budgeting and market planning. An impressive business plan may also help you get funding or business partners. Based on your progress and learnings in your entrepreneurial journey thus far, your business plan is likely to be more accurate than the rough plans you started with.

For business plan templates, we recommend tools such as [BPlans](#), [BizPlan](#), and [LivePlan](#).

24 ▶ determine financial feasibility (funding for your business)

Consult with the [Auburn location of the Small Business Development Center](#), Small Business Administration [funding programs](#), CDFI's, or local banks about how to finance your venture.

▼ next stage ▼

established stage

25 ► **conduct periodic strategic planning**

What are your upcoming goals (quarterly, annual, etc.) and what changes are needed in the business? It's common for entrepreneurs to get so stuck in running the day-to-day operations of the business, that they don't take the time to step back and work on the business as a whole. Taking some dedicated time for strategic planning can help the business be set up for longer term success.

26 ► **formalize/update policies and procedures**

Based on your learnings thus far, how would you like the business to operate? Who should handle which tasks, and specifically, how should those tasks be performed? Having formal policies and procedures can help the business operate more efficiently without things falling through the cracks.

▼ **next stage** ▼

27 ► plan for expansion

Now that your business is humming along successfully, you can explore how to grow the business, perhaps by adding staff, expanding to new locations or revenue lines. You'll want to create sound financial models and consult with advisors prior to expanding to ensure that you won't hamper the current stability in the business by trying to grow too soon.

You might also need to evaluate your customer again now that you have been selling for some time. Oftentimes the customer evolves as you sell and grow the business. This will impact your marketing and advertising.





This resource is a compilation of resources from the following entities:

[City of Auburn](#) | [City of Opelika](#)

[New Venure Accelerator](#)

[Auburn University](#) | [SBDC](#)

This resource was designed by

[eloise design co.](#)