Installing GrapheneOS: My Experience

This article is a follow-up to Android Alternatives: Escaping the Play Store Lockdown, where I explored why I wanted to move away from stock Android. Here, I document my real-world experience installing GrapheneOS on a Pixel phone.

Background

- I decided to investigate alternatives to Android based on Google's decision to allow only Play Store apps to be installed.
- I chose GrapheneOS for my needs and because I prefer (and already own) a Pixel phone.
- I purchased a used Pixel 8 from eBay before realizing the difference between an **unlocked** and **OEM Unlockable** phone.

For more details on these decisions, see Android Alternatives: Escaping the Play Store Lockdown.

Timeline

Once I had the phone in hand, I was able to get GrapheneOS up and running within a couple of hours. Here's a rough timeline:

Step	Time
Find and purchase test phone	1 week
Set up Google account on new phone	15 minutes
Place phone in Developer Mode & OEM Unlock	5 minutes
Reboot into special installation mode	5 minutes
Install GrapheneOS using web installer & reboot	30 minutes
Install F-Droid on new phone	10 minutes
Allow F-Droid to download catalog, install apps	30 minutes
Configure apps	30 minutes

Preparation

Before you begin, you need to have the following:

- A computer with a recent version of a Chromium based browser (Chrome, Chromium, Edge). This is required for the WebUSB plugin so the installer can update your phone for you.
- An Internet connection from the computer
- An Android phone that is OEM Unlocked
- A USB data cable from your computer to the cell phone.
    - Note: some cheaper USB cables are for charging only. You should see your computer detect your phone when you plug it in.
    - **Warning:** Be sure the USB cable you purchase comes from a reliable vendor. There are

> USB cables on the market now which are actually mini-computers designed for hacking or taking over a phone or computer. See Adam Savage's Tested (YouTube, around 3:00) for more information.

I have read reports that Linux will occasionally require additional drivers to make the necessary connection. I don't have an Apple computer at this time, so I used a Windows 10 laptop and installed the most recent version of Google Chrome for this project. When I plugged the phone into the laptop with the USB cable, it detected it. I will likely try it from a Chromebook next time since that is fully supported.

I reviewed the document at https://grapheneos.org/install/web

Actual Install

I'm not going to rewrite the official instructions—GrapheneOS provides an excellent, step-by-step installer with detailed guidance. Just open the web installer in your browser and follow along.

Reboot the phone into the bootloader interface (turn off the phone, then turn it on while holding the volume down button). The phone will display the Fastboot Mode screen (a red warning triangle and the words "Fastboot Mode"). Then connect it to the computer.

From this point on, just follow the installer's prompts, starting at Unlocking the Bootloader. The web interface provides buttons and instructions for each step.

Note: Some steps are fast, others take longer. For example, 'Unlock bootloader' was quick, but 'Obtaining Factory images' took about 10 minutes. There's a progress bar, but sometimes I wondered if something had gone wrong—just be patient. A 10–15 minute wait while 'Flashing factory images' is not unreasonable, and the phone may reboot a couple of times during the process.

See also: Apps Installed After GrapheneOS Setup for a list and reviews of the apps I installed after setting up GrapheneOS.

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Last update: **2026/05/16 20:41**