

Ditch the Acrobat bill.

60+ PDF tools with Stirling PDF — on your own machine.

Merge, split, compress, OCR, sign, redact and convert PDFs — everything most people open Acrobat for — with no subscription and no document ever leaving your computer.

Who this is for

Anyone who only needs Acrobat occasionally but resents the monthly fee. Run it as a plain desktop app, or self-host it for the whole household — both paths are covered.

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Why move off Adobe Acrobat

Acrobat Pro is subscription-only, and even basic edits are gated behind paid plans. Online tools like Smallpdf and iLovePDF upload your documents to someone else's server. **Stirling PDF** is a free, open-source toolkit with 60+ operations that runs entirely on your hardware — nothing is uploaded, nothing is metered.

What it replaces

Merge, split, compress, OCR, convert, sign, redact, watermark, page numbers and password tools — plus a no-code pipeline that chains steps into one click. Covers what most people actually use Acrobat, Smallpdf and iLovePDF for.

1 · Pick how to run it

Two options, same tools. Choose the desktop app for a single computer, or self-host with Docker if you want it available to several people on your network.

Option	Best for	Notes
Desktop app	One computer	Native app for Windows/macOS, fully offline (V2, 2026)
Self-host (Docker)	Household / small team	Needs a machine with Docker; ~2 GB RAM for OCR

2A · Desktop app (simplest)

Download the Stirling PDF desktop app for Windows or macOS from the project's site, install it, and open your PDFs directly — including right-click 'Open With'. Everything runs locally with no setup.

2B · Self-host with Docker

On a machine with Docker and the Compose plugin, a minimal `docker-compose.yml`:

```
services:
  stirring-pdf:
    image: stirringtools/stirling-pdf:latest
    restart: unless-stopped
    ports:
      - "8080:8080"
    volumes:
      - ./data:/usr/share/stirling-pdf
```

Start it with `docker compose up -d` and open `http://SERVER-IP:8080` from any device on your network.

Nothing leaves your machine

Whether desktop or self-hosted, your documents are processed locally and never uploaded — the whole point versus the online PDF sites.

3 · Do the work

- Pick a tool from the grid — merge, split, compress, OCR, sign, redact, and so on.
- For repetitive jobs, build a Pipeline that chains several steps and run it in one click.
- Stirling is GPL-3 with no usage limits — fine for personal and commercial use, no account needed.

4 · Verify

- Run a real task you'd normally use Acrobat for (e.g. merge + compress) and check the output.
- Confirm OCR works if you need searchable scans (self-host needs ~2 GB RAM for OCR).
- Once it covers your needs, cancel the Acrobat subscription.

Common snags

Symptom	Fix
OCR fails or is slow	OCR/LibreOffice tasks need ~2 GB RAM; give the container more.
Can't reach :8080	Check the container is running and the port isn't firewalled.
A tool is missing	Some features need optional add-on images; check the docs.

Found this useful?

This guide is free — pay what you want if it saved you time. More offline & one-time-purchase alternatives to subscription apps, plus other migration guides, at payoncehq.com.

Sources: official Stirling-PDF documentation and project pages. Details current as of 2026; check the project for the latest. Independent guide, not affiliated with Stirling-PDF or Adobe.