

YOUR MONEY MATTERS

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OKLAHOMA MONEY MATTERS

an adult's guide to personal finance



YOUR MONEY, YOUR LIFE, YOUR FUTURE

What does money mean to you?

It seems like a simple question, doesn't it? But when you really stop and think about it, the answer might not come right away. Money means something different to each of us because we all have unique **needs**, **wants** and **obligations**. These shape our personal financial goals and how we view money.

Basic Needs

These are essentials you must have to live:

- ▶ Food
- ▶ Shelter
- ▶ Clothing

But even needs can have extra layers.

Needs vs. Wants vs. Obligations

Example: Cellphones

- ▶ **Need:** A basic cellphone to communicate with family, friends or your employer.
- ▶ **Want:** A top-of-the-line smartphone with the newest apps and features.
- ▶ **Obligation:** The contract you sign to pay for your monthly phone service.

See the difference? Understanding what money means to you — and how you distinguish needs, wants and obligations — can help you set smarter, more realistic financial goals. For some people, money represents security. For others, it symbolizes freedom, success or opportunity. Before you can effectively manage your finances, it's important to understand what money truly means to you.

Use the questions below to help you explore your values and priorities around spending, saving and planning for the future.

Your Early Money Experiences

- ▶ How did you view money growing up?
- ▶ Did your parents or caregivers ever talk openly about money?

Family's Influence

- ▶ How well did your parents handle money, in your opinion?
- ▶ What lessons do you think you learned from observing them?

Your Current Habits and Values

- ▶ Do you consider yourself more of a spender or a saver?
- ▶ What is your philosophy on charitable giving?

Your Financial Future

- ▶ Financially speaking, where do you hope to be in the next five to 10 years?
- ▶ Are you willing to live below your means now in order to create a stronger financial future?



GET ON TRACK, STAY ON TRACK

Now that you have a better understanding of how you view money, what you want out of life and how you value your financial resources, here are a few key thoughts to keep you on track during your financial planning.

When it comes to spending, wait.

We live in an immediate gratification society; we're used to getting what we want, when we want it. Technology empowers us to have almost everything at our fingertips in a matter of seconds, which increases our urge to spend without thinking or planning ahead.

Try this. Next time you're tempted to purchase an inexpensive item you weren't planning to buy, don't. Give yourself three days; if you still want it, then you can consider making the purchase. If it's a larger, more expensive item, like a car or home, resist the urge to upgrade as long as possible.

Determine your money values and priorities and stick to them.

By now, we all know the difference between our needs, wants and obligations. However, something another person considers a want, you and your family may highly value. For example, giving to charity isn't a basic survival need, but planning for charitable expenses is a priority for many. Living in a nice home may be important to you, but maybe wearing expensive clothing or driving a new vehicle isn't. Find out what's most important to you and your family and cut back in other areas to ensure you can afford your lifestyle.

Forget about what other people have.

Many people live lives they can't afford by drowning in debt. Focus on your future goals and ignore how your friends, family, coworkers and neighbors spend their money. Chances are they use credit excessively to afford their lifestyle. Keeping up with others is a never-ending battle.



BEGIN WITH A BUDGET

Financial success begins with creating and sticking to a budget. A budget, also known as a spending plan, allows you to plan for your monthly expenses and keep better track of where your money goes.

To complete your spending plan, you'll need to:

- 1. Know your monthly income.** This can include your paycheck, child or spousal support, and occasional funds like gifts, tax refunds, or rebates. If your income changes from month to month because your hours vary or you earn commissions, build your budget using your base pay or by averaging your last three paychecks.
- 2. List your financial responsibilities.** What bills and expenses do you have each pay period and how much do they typically cost? Don't forget to include expenses that occur periodically, like insurance premiums or property taxes. Your fixed expenses are easier to track because they stay the same each month — think mortgage, car or student loan payments. Your variable expenses, like groceries, fuel and entertainment, are trickier because they change from month to month. Don't forget about savings. Pay yourself first before paying bills.
- 3. Track your spending.** Monitoring your variable expenses is about to get easier. Hang onto your receipts and write down all financial transactions for one month so you can get an accurate picture of your spending.
- 4. Categorize your spending.** Next, pull out your stash of receipts and list of transactions and lump them together in like categories. You'll probably see piles emerge for "dining out," "entertainment," "clothing," "household repairs/updates," "groceries," etc. Based on your current spending, assign each category a monthly amount.
- 5. Do the math.** Then, subtract predicted expenses from your projected income. Are you already over budget? If so, refine a few of your variable expense categories and try again. After implementing your budget, if you find yourself spending more or less, adjust your categories — or spending — accordingly.

Paying yourself first means setting aside money designated for your savings goals before paying bills. Make it a habit and watch your account grow!



Monthly Spending Plan

Here's an example of what your spending plan might look like. Use the budgeting calculators at OklahomaMoneyMatters.org to practice creating your own budget.

	Projected	Actual
MONTHLY INCOME	\$3,800	\$3,756
Monthly Expenses		
Savings	\$250	\$200
Charitable Giving	\$50	\$35
Rent	\$800	\$800
Car Payment	\$350	\$350
Day Care	\$550	\$550
Groceries	\$300	\$325
Diapers/Formula	\$150	\$150
Utilities	\$200	\$186
Fuel	\$250	\$226
Cellphone/Internet	\$115	\$121
Cable	\$38	\$38
Entertainment	\$100	\$98
Dining Out	\$150	\$122
Gifts	\$50	\$45
Clothing	\$75	\$90
Beauty/Health	\$50	\$60
Medical/Co-pays	\$40	\$45
Gym Membership	\$50	\$50
Miscellaneous	\$50	\$60
Monthly Total	\$3,618	\$3,551
Difference	+\$182	+\$205

BUDGETING SUCCESS TIPS

Recruit your family

If you have kids, involve them in deciding where the family can cut back and help them set savings goals. When they have a say in the plan, it's easier for them to stay motivated — especially when they're tempted to spend instead of save. For example, if your family is working toward a vacation fund, everyone might agree to limit movie outings to help save a little extra.

Communicate with your family

Talk with your family about the decisions you make each day to stick to your spending plan. Did you forgo the fancy coffee and choose home-brewed java for your caffeine fix? Let them know about your spending struggles and successes.

Don't forget the fun.

If you eliminate your entertainment budget completely, your spending plan will be impossible to stick to. Set aside money to do fun, family activities at least once per week and you're more likely to stick with your spending plan.

Set aside some funds for a rainy day.

Contribute regularly to an emergency fund. Aim to save at least \$500 to cover minor unexpected expenses and repairs. Continue saving until you have three to six months' worth of living expenses set aside for emergencies.

Do what works for you and your family.

Many budgeting variations exist; find one that works for your situation and stick to it. If you try one strategy and it doesn't work, don't give up. Try something new.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- ▶ Credit Karma offers free access to your credit scores, [CreditKarma.com](https://www.creditkarma.com)
- ▶ GoodBudget tracker for the modern age, [GoodBudget.com](https://www.goodbudget.com)
- ▶ PocketGuard budgeting system, [PocketGuard.com](https://www.pocketguard.com)
- ▶ NerdWallet: Smart Money App, [NerdWallet.com](https://www.nerdwallet.com)
- ▶ OKMM Budgeting for Adults, [OklahomaMoneyMatters.org](https://www.oklahomamoneymatters.org)

TWISTS ON THE CLASSIC BUDGET

If you're technology averse and prefer old-fashioned pen-and-paper for tracking your spending, fear not. Check out the following twists to the classic spending plan to see if one fits your financial lifestyle.

1, 2, 3

How it works

You'll need three bank accounts — two checking and one savings. First, decide how much of every paycheck you want to put toward savings and have that amount automatically sent to your savings account. Via direct deposit, send the rest of your paycheck to checking account No. 1. From this account you'll pay all monthly fixed expenses, like rent, car payments and utilities.

With the money left over after paying your fixed expenses, divide by four and set up a weekly automatic transfer of that amount to checking account No. 2. Use this account for all variable expenses like groceries, entertainment, clothing and eating out. Refrain from transferring more money or using credit cards.

The perks

This process forces you to save first and live off limited funds for your variable expenses.

The Envelope System

How it works

[Download](#) or grab some envelopes and write the name of each category in your spending plan on a separate envelope. Then place the monthly amount of cash you plan to spend on that category inside. Forget checks and plastic cards, use these envelopes instead.

Once the cash in each envelope is gone, there's no more spending until next pay period. One word of caution — be careful if you implement this plan. If your cash gets lost or stolen, there's no replacing your money.

The perks

This strategy forces you to spend only the amount you've allotted for groceries, gas, entertainment, clothes, etc.

Cut Back

How it works

Grab your bank and credit card statements and make a list of recurring expenses and the amount spent. Instead of cutting your overall spending by a certain percentage, choose one or two large expenses and cut those. Maybe it's cable television, the second car or your gym membership. Whatever it may be, cut it loose and add those extra funds toward your savings goals.

The perks

Cutting one bigger item versus making an across-the-board cut alleviates the need to re-evaluate your spending plan on a regular basis, which saves you time and effort.



Join the conversation on Facebook! Tell us about your successful budgeting tips at [Facebook.com/OklahomaMoneyMatters](https://www.facebook.com/OklahomaMoneyMatters).

SUCCESSFUL SAVING

If you're like most adults, you're looking for the key to successful saving. Here it is, boiled down to one simple phrase — start now.

No matter what stage of life you're currently in, make it a priority and a habit to save for your future, big-ticket items and emergencies.

There are two ways to look at saving. Saving can mean putting money aside and investing, but it can also mean living a more frugal lifestyle and cutting back on your spending. Both are important pieces of the puzzle if you want to watch your savings account grow.

Saving for your future can't be overlooked if you want financial security and independence for your family. Many experts recommend saving at least 10-15% of your income; if that doesn't seem doable, start contributing as much as you can on a regular basis and work your way up from there. It's making savings a consistent action that matters.

What Should You Save For?



Emergencies

An emergency account should be high on your priority list so unexpected expenses won't find their way to your credit card. Three to six months of living expenses is recommended for your emergency fund, but aim to stash away at least \$1,000 to cover minor bills and repairs. Since an emergency is never planned, put your money somewhere easily accessible, like an interest-bearing savings account or money market account.



Retirement

Whether you're 25 or 55, retirement should be on your mind. Take advantage of an employer's 401(k) or other sponsored investment program, especially if they offer matching funds. At minimum, contribute enough to get the full company match — that's free money!



College

Consider monthly contributions for each child to an Oklahoma 529, our state's college savings plan. Participation in Oklahoma 529 offers several savings perks, including an Oklahoma income tax deduction on contributions and tax-free growth and withdrawals. Visit oklahoma529.com for more information.



Wants

If you're dreaming of a vacation, a new car, a home, or any other major purchase, start saving for it now. Paying with cash instead of relying on credit cards or loans can save you hundreds — or even thousands — of dollars over time. The more you're able to save upfront, the less you'll end up paying in interest.

Let's say you purchase a TV on credit for \$1,000. If you made only the minimum payment — based on 3% of the outstanding loan balance — and your credit card charges an 18% annual interest rate, it would take nearly eight years to pay off that debt, and you'd pay an additional \$698 in interest!

Credit Card Minimum Payment Calculator at GreenPath.com.

Cut Back, Move Forward

Now that you know what you're saving for, let's look at ways to increase the amount you can put back by evaluating your expenses. Trimming back spending on wants and other variable expenses helps us get one step closer to our savings goal. Living a more frugal lifestyle doesn't have to mean going without. If you're married or in a committed relationship, sit down and talk to your partner about your financial goals. Do you want to retire and travel at 55? Do you dream of paying cash for your next car or home? These goals will take dedication and planning. Once you've determined your joint financial goals, ask yourselves:

- ▶ How soon do we want to reach this goal?
- ▶ What are we willing to sacrifice to reach it?
- ▶ How will we cut back our spending?

Embrace the Frugal Lifestyle

Curbing your spending isn't as much of a sacrifice as it seems. Just by making small changes in your spending habits, you can stash away extra cash toward your goals. Here are just a few of the many cost-saving ideas to consider.

- ▶ **Limit the number of times you eat out each month.** Dining out, grabbing lunch on the go and stopping for morning coffee quickly add up. Commit to cook more meals at home, make your own coffee and watch your savings grow.
- ▶ **Be smart about buying groceries.** Plan a menu ahead of time and buy items in bulk, when appropriate. Try to use recipes that call for the same ingredients and use coupons to boost your savings.
- ▶ **Resist the urge to upgrade.** If you have an item that still works — a car, toaster, washer, TV, or anything else — don't replace it just because there's a great sale. Wait until it actually stops working. Replacing a functional item is simply wasting money.
- ▶ **Don't buy new.** Take advantage of other people's upgrades if you're in the market for an item. Shop websites like [Craigslist.com](https://www.craigslist.com), [eBay.com](https://www.ebay.com) or [Facebook Marketplace](https://www.facebook.com/marketplace), and don't forget flea markets and thrift stores.
- ▶ **Limit nights out on the town.** Host a game night at home with your friends instead of going out to dinner and a movie. Consider low-cost options like local sporting events, theater productions and other community activities.



LET IT GROW

Now that you've picked a few ways to cut back, it's time to increase your savings. The more money you save and the earlier you begin saving, the more your money will grow because of compounding interest. Compounding interest is when interest earned on your savings is added to the principal — and you continue to build interest on your original investment and on the interest you've already accrued! The longer you save, the more compounding interest works in your favor.

The following chart shows how your investment account can grow by age 65, based on the age you begin saving and the amount saved weekly. For example, if you start saving \$50 a week at age 20, you'll have nearly half a million dollars by age 65 (the purple numbers). On the flip side, waiting a year to begin saving means your account will have one less year to grow before you're 65. For example, if you wait a full year to begin saving \$50 each week (starting at age 21, instead of 20) you'll lose over \$14,000 by age 65 (the blue numbers). This chart assumes a 5% return, compounded annually through the use of various investment options.

AGE 20



Amount contributed each week:	\$10	\$25	\$50	\$100
Total savings at age 65:	\$85,143	\$212,859	\$425,176	\$851,432
Total amount lost by waiting one year (age 21) to start saving:	-\$4,562	-\$11,406	-\$22,811	-\$45,622

AGE 30



Amount contributed each week:	\$10	\$25	\$50	\$100
Total savings at age 65:	\$48,154	\$120,385	\$240,768	\$481,537
Total amount lost by waiting one year (age 21) to start saving:	-\$2,801	-\$7,002	-\$14,003	-\$28,008

AGE 40



Amount contributed each week:	\$10	\$25	\$50	\$100
Total savings at age 65:	\$25,445	\$63,614	\$127,227	\$254,454
Total amount lost by waiting one year (age 21) to start saving:	-\$1,719	-\$4,299	-\$8,597	-\$17,194

AGE 50



Amount contributed each week:	\$10	\$25	\$50	\$100
Total savings at age 65:	\$11,504	\$28,761	\$57,522	\$115,045
Total amount lost by waiting one year (age 21) to start saving:	-\$1,055	-\$2,639	-\$5,278	-\$10,556

MORE SAVING STRATEGIES

Make savings automatic

Each pay period, have money automatically transferred from your paycheck to your savings account. Direct deposit makes saving simple because you won't miss what you don't see.

Adjust your withholdings

Make sure your W-4 form is filled out to your best advantage. File a new W-4 anytime there's a major change in your life, like a marriage or birth of a child, which can affect the amount of tax you'll owe. If you receive a sizeable tax refund each year, you may want to complete a new form and retain more of your earnings each month. Make sure the money you just spared from the IRS isn't spent; put that extra money into savings.

Put away windfall money

When you earn a raise, get a refund or receive a cash gift, put it in your savings account. You know you can get by without the extra money, so put it to work for your goals. It'll be worth even more later.

Ask for a discount

Whether it's a cellphone bill, gym membership, hotel stay, car insurance or beauty treatment, ask for a discount. It doesn't hurt to ask and you never know — they may just grant your request! Put the money you saved in your savings account.

Re-evaluate service providers

Compare auto and home insurance providers often to make sure you're getting the best rate. You may receive a significant discount if you insure both with the same company. Also, some companies offer discounts if you work for specific employers or within a particular industry.

HELPFUL RESOURCES

- ▶ Financial Planning Association
[PlannerSearch.org](https://www.plannersearch.org)
- ▶ Oklahoma 529 Plan
[Oklahoma529.com](https://www.oklahoma529.com)
- ▶ Saving Calculator
[BankRate.com/calculators](https://www.bankrate.com/calculators)



DIGITAL WALLETS

Digital wallets are apps that electronically store your payment information — like debit cards, credit cards, or bank accounts — and let you pay or send money using your phone instead of cash or cards. Some digital wallets can hold money balances, while others simply connect to your bank account to complete purchases. Many families use digital wallets to give teens limited access to money, with features that let parents monitor spending and set limits. Digital wallets are not banks, but they often partner with banks to safely hold funds and process transactions.

COMMONLY USED DIGITAL WALLETS

- ▶ Apple Cash
- ▶ Venmo Teen Account
- ▶ Cash App Families

DIGITAL WALLET PROS

- ▶ Real-time money tracking
- ▶ Built-in parental controls
- ▶ Convenient and fast payments
- ▶ Safer than carrying cash
- ▶ No monthly fee

DIGITAL WALLET CONS

- ▶ Risk of overspending
- ▶ Security and scam risks
- ▶ Loss of access without phone
- ▶ Privacy concerns
- ▶ ATM fees may apply



KEEP UP WITH YOUR CREDIT

The majority of adults use credit in some form, whether it's a mortgage, car loan, student loan or purchases on a credit card. If better understanding your credit is a priority, check out our credit Q&As.

What's the best credit card for me?

For the best deal, choose a credit card that doesn't charge an annual fee, offers a low fixed interest rate and provides a clear explanation of fees for late payments and courtesy services, like cash advances and balance transfers. Beyond that, determine what "extras" you want from a card. Are cashback bonuses or frequent flyer miles important to you? Compare credit cards at [BankRate.com](https://www.bankrate.com), [CreditCards.com](https://www.creditcards.com) or [CardRatings.com](https://www.cardratings.com).

Should I co-sign on a friend's credit card or auto loan?

Only you can answer this question. Just remember, if your friend doesn't meet the financial obligation, as co-signer it becomes your responsibility to pay up.

What's my credit score?

Your credit score is the tool lenders use to determine the likelihood that you'll repay money you borrow. The FICO score, developed by the Fair Isaac Corporation, is the most widely used credit evaluation system; scores range from 300-850. A higher score means you'll qualify for lower interest rates and access to more credit.

How's my FICO score figured?

Your credit score reflects five general categories:

- ▶ **35%** — Payment history (if you make your payments on time)
- ▶ **30%** — Amount owed (your ratio of debt to available credit)
- ▶ **15%** — Length of credit history (how long you've had credit in your name)
- ▶ **10%** — New credit (if you've opened new accounts recently)
- ▶ **10%** — Types of credit used (different types of credit, like revolving accounts, installment accounts or mortgages)





What's the difference between my credit report and my credit score?

Your credit score takes into account information from your credit report to determine your creditworthiness. Credit scores range from 300-850. Your credit report is a comprehensive list of your past and present credit accounts, your payment history and balance information. Checking your credit report through [AnnualCreditReport.com](https://www.annualcreditreport.com) is free; however, accessing your credit score isn't. Read more about getting your credit score at [Consumer Finance Protection Bureau](https://www.consumerfinance.gov).

How do I check my credit report?

The Annual Credit Report Service ([AnnualCreditReport.com](https://www.annualcreditreport.com)) will provide free weekly copies of your credit report from Equifax, Experian and TransUnion as required by the Fair Credit Reporting Act. Also, Equifax, Experian and TransUnion — the largest consumer reporting agencies — will provide additional copies of your credit report and your credit score for a small fee. Instructions for ordering your report and addressing any errors are available on the website.

What do I look for when checking my credit report?

Make sure all your personal information is correct, including your name, address and previous employment. Look at your accounts listed to make sure the information is accurate and that new accounts haven't been taken out in your name without your knowledge. If you find errors, contact the consumer reporting agency immediately to dispute them.

How can I raise my credit score?

Increasing your score takes time. The best way to maintain a good score or raise a low one is to pay your bills on time and in full, elect not to use all the credit that's available to you and limit new lines of credit.

Did you know that about half of U.S. employers surveyed use a credit report as part of their regular hiring process?

Source: [Urban Institute](https://www.urbaninstitute.org)

GET OUT OF DEBT

If you're committed to getting out of debt, try the debt snowball, a method suggested by financial professionals. It's a highly effective way to quickly pay off debt and gain momentum toward a healthy financial lifestyle.

Find extra money.

The success of the debt snowball is contingent upon finding extra money to put toward your debt. In this example, we'll use \$100. Where do you find the extra money in your budget? Cut streaming services, limit eating out, earn extra income...do what you can to aggressively attack your debt. If you can't afford \$100, start with \$50 or \$75. To make the snowball work you must find a way to pay extra on your debt.

Show no interest.

Don't worry about interest rates. It makes sense logically to go after the debt with the highest interest rate first because you'll save more money in interest. However, changing behavior often isn't a logical decision; it's more of an emotional one. Using the debt snowball, you'll pay off your lowest-balance debt first, helping you feel a sense of relief and accomplishment almost immediately. Although we aren't focusing on interest rates, if you feel like your interest rates are too high, call your creditors to see if they'd consider lowering them.

Keep making all payments.

It's important that you make at least your minimum payment on every debt you owe. The extra money you set aside to help blast your debt will be added to the minimum payment on the debt listed first. Pay this new amount on that debt only, but continue to pay at least your minimum on all other accounts. Once the first debt is paid off, add that payment amount to your payment for the next debt on your list until it's paid off, too. Repeat until all debts are paid.

The following chart illustrates this principle. See how quickly payments on your smaller debts will "snowball" to eliminate your large debts. Visit OklahomaMoneyMatters.org to review the [Debt Snowball flyer](#) and learn how to tackle debt strategically. This resource walks you through a simple, step-by-step method to pay off balances faster and stay motivated along the way.

Debt	Total Owed	Minimum Payment	New Payment
Discover	\$300	\$20	$\$20 + \$100 = \$120$
Visa	\$800	\$75	$\$75 + \$120 = \$195$
Car	\$6,000	\$300	$\$300 + \$195 = \$495$

GETTING HELP

If your debt has grown into a situation you can no longer handle, contact a reputable nonprofit credit counseling provider associated with the National Foundation for Credit Counseling, 833.746.7578 or NFCC.org.

GOOD CREDIT MATTERS

Keeping up with your credit and getting out of debt takes time and dedication. Why make the effort? Here's the difference having good credit makes to your wallet.

Imagine that you purchase a home for \$150,000 and finance the full amount for 30 years. With good credit, you'll have a much lower interest rate and pay less over the life of the loan. In the example below, you pay over \$300 more each month and \$100,000 more in interest over the life of the loan if you have bad credit!



\$150,000 Home x 5% = \$805 per month (you pay back the \$150,000 plus \$139,000!)

\$150,000 Home x 8% = \$1,100 per month (You pay back the \$150,000 plus \$246,000!)

Payday Loans

Payday loans may seem convenient, but they can be costly. Payday loans allow people to get cash with no credit or background check. The interest rate is extremely high, possibly more than 500%. This type of loan is legal; however, lenders will often offer to roll your debt into larger and larger loans. Payday lending is a quick trip into an even bigger financial hole. Almost any other solution to your cash crunch would be better in the long run.



HELPFUL RESOURCES

- ▶ [MyFICO.com](https://www.myfico.com)
- ▶ [AnnualCreditReport.com](https://www.annualcreditreport.com)
- ▶ [Experian.com](https://www.experian.com)
- ▶ [TransUnion.com](https://www.transunion.com)
- ▶ [Equifax.com](https://www.equifax.com)
- ▶ [CreditKarma.com](https://www.creditkarma.com)

AVOID IDENTITY THEFT

Identity theft occurs when someone uses your personal information, like your name, Social Security number (SSN) or credit card number, without your permission to commit fraud or other crimes.

Don't want to be a victim? You can take special precautions to make sure your personal information doesn't fall into the hands of would-be thieves.

Online

Guard your information

Don't give out your personal information via email or on the internet unless you initiate the inquiry. Your bank or credit card company will never ask you to verify your account information by email.

Be password savvy

Create unique, hard-to-break passwords for each of your accounts. Never use your birth date, name or phone number as a password. Choose a password with a mix of upper- and lower-case letters, characters and numbers that would be hard to guess.

In-Person

Keep personal documents safe

Store personal papers, such as your birth certificate, Social Security card, loan information and insurance policies, in a fire-proof lock box. These are relatively inexpensive to purchase and are available from a variety of stores.

Shred unnecessary documents

Invest in a cross-cut shredder and destroy all unnecessary documents that contain personal information.

Protect your SSN

Don't carry your Social Security card in your wallet and don't use your SSN as an identification number. If you're asked to give or confirm your SSN in a public setting, try to avoid providing it verbally. Instead, jot it down on a piece of paper and shred it later. Or, better yet, type it on a calculator or on your cellphone's display so you can delete it immediately.

Put a stop to junk mail

Opt out of receiving pre-approved credit or insurance offers by calling 888.567.8688 or visiting OptOutPrescreen.com, a service run by the consumer reporting agencies.

Get online

Switch to online bill payment methods to eliminate your paper trail. In addition, 24-hour account access will allow you to more closely monitor your account activity and respond faster to fraudulent charges.

A website like Security.org can help you gauge the strength of your password.

Already a Victim?

If you've been a victim of identity theft, you'll need to act fast. Follow these four steps to limit the amount of damage done to your good name.

- 1.** Check your credit reports and place a fraud alert on each one. Fraud alerts prevent a thief from opening more accounts in your name.
- 2.** Close the accounts that have been tampered with or opened without your knowledge.
- 3.** File a complaint with the [Federal Trade Commission](#).
- 4.** File a police report.

For detailed information about each step, visit [IdentityTheft.gov](#).

One of the quickest and easiest ways to guard yourself against identity theft is to routinely check your credit report. Visit [AnnualCreditReport.com](#) to get weekly credit reports from each of the three major consumer reporting bureaus. Be on the lookout for new accounts taken in your name without your knowledge.



MANAGE YOUR STUDENT LOANS

In addition to mortgages, car payments and other financial responsibilities, many adults are repaying federal student loans borrowed while in college. Unlike other forms of debt, student loans are rarely dismissed through bankruptcy. The quicker you can pay off your student loans, the better.

Repayment Tips

- 1. Get organized.** Carefully read all the student loan-related correspondence you receive and organize all statements, notices and other important loan documents into a file.
- 2. Keep your servicer informed.** Contact your loan servicer immediately if you change your name, address or telephone number.
- 3. Call your lender/servicer if you have trouble making your loan payments.** They'll be able to explain your repayment options, as well as eligibility requirements for a deferment or forbearance.
- 4. Keep a phone log.** Write down the date of each conversation with your lender/servicer, the name of the customer service representative who assisted you and a brief description of the conversation.
- 5. Keep copies of loan documents and forms.** Make a copy of any [forbearance](#) or [deferment](#) forms for your records before sending them to your servicer. Continue making loan payments until your request is approved.
- 6. Set up automatic payments.** Check to see if your servicer can automatically debit your payment from your bank account; if so, this service could prevent missed or late payments.
- 7. Pay more than the minimum payment.** Any additional amount you pay reduces your loan balance, resulting in earlier payoff and lower interest costs over the life of the loan.
- 8. Look into loan discharge and forgiveness programs.** Depending on your major and other factors, all or a portion of your federal student loan debt may be discharged (cancelled) or forgiven. Unless forbearance has been granted, you must continue to make payments until you receive written confirmation that discharge or forgiveness has been approved. For more information, visit [StudentAid.gov](#).

DEFERMENT VS. FORBEARANCE

DEFERMENT

Temporarily postpones your student loan payments. It's available only in certain circumstances and comes with specific eligibility requirements and time limits.

FORBEARANCE

A temporary pause or reduction of student loan payments, usually granted during financial hardship or special circumstances. While payments are paused, interest typically continues to accrue, and the borrower must resume repayment when the forbearance period ends.

Ready Set Repay

To view your student loan status, including how much you owe, visit [StudentAid.gov](#).

For more information on the student loan repayment process, visit [ReadySetRepay.org](#).

For more student loan management tips, read [Borrow Smart from the Start](#) (also available in [Spanish](#)).



GET READY FOR RETIREMENT

Are you ready for retirement, financially speaking? You may be thinking there's plenty to spend money on now, like vacations, braces, mortgages, day care; why should I worry about retirement?

The answer? You can't afford not to. Every month that goes by puts you either one step closer to financial freedom or one step behind. If retirement hasn't been on your radar until now, don't beat yourself up. It's never too early or too late to save for your future. Here's how:

- ▶ **Start now.** No matter how little you can afford to set aside toward your retirement fund, do it now. If it's only \$20 a week to start, that's okay. Find areas in your spending where you can cut back and increase your savings as you free up additional funds. Work your way up to dedicating at least 10% of your income toward your retirement savings.
- ▶ **Bank windfall money.** When you earn a raise, get a refund or receive cash as a gift, put it toward your retirement. You already know you can get by without the extra funds, so put them to work for your future.
- ▶ **Go for the match.** Take advantage of your employer's 401(k) or other sponsored investment program, especially if they offer matching funds. At minimum, contribute enough to get the full company match — that's free money!
- ▶ **Fund an Individual Retirement Account (IRA).** In addition to maximizing your contributions to a matched savings program, make regular contributions to a [Traditional or Roth IRA](#).
- ▶ **Put your security first.** Don't sacrifice your future financial security to pay for your child's education. If you have to choose, fund your retirement first. There are numerous financial aid options available for your child, but only you can provide for a financially healthy retirement.

When investing for your retirement, keep in mind:

- ▶ **Risk.** Risk is the chance you might lose your money. The higher the risk, the higher the potential reward. How much risk are you comfortable with? Typically, the farther you are from retirement, the more time you have to recoup short-term stock market losses, so you can afford to be a little risky. The closer you are to retirement, the more important it is to have a guaranteed return on your investment. As you age, adjust your investments to reflect the appropriate risk for your situation.
- ▶ **Diversification.** Talk to a financial planner about the proper investment mix for your situation. Like the old proverb says, don't put all your eggs in one basket. An expert can help you find the right savings mix. Learn more about saving and investing strategies at [OklahomaMoneyMatters.org](#).
- ▶ **Fees.** Know the fees attached to your retirement account. Also, keep in mind, if you withdraw retirement funds early, you could face some stiff penalty fees.



Did You Know?

The way we fund retirement has drastically changed in the past few decades. Employees used to work at the same place for years, earn a pension and retire. Today, retirement planning is primarily the responsibility of the worker, and the average person will change careers five to seven times during their working years.

Individual Retirement Account (IRA)

An Individual Retirement Account (IRA) is a tax-advantaged savings account designed to help individuals build retirement funds. You can open an IRA through banks, brokerages, or investment firms, and it allows you to invest in assets like stocks, bonds, and mutual funds. The main benefit is tax advantages that help your money grow faster compared to a regular taxable account. There are several types of IRAs, but the two most common are the Traditional IRA and Roth IRA.

Contribution Limits for the 2026 tax year:

- ▶ **Under age 50:** You can contribute up to \$7,500 across all IRAs combined.
- ▶ **Age 50 and older:** You can make an additional \$1,100 catch-up contribution, for a total of \$8,600. There is no age cap for contributions as long as you have earned income.

Tax Differences: Traditional vs. Roth IRA

- ▶ **Traditional IRA:** Contributions may be tax-deductible in the year you make them, reducing your taxable income now. Your investments grow tax-deferred, but withdrawals in retirement are taxed as ordinary income.
- ▶ **Roth IRA:** Contributions are made with after-tax dollars (no deduction now), but your investments grow tax-free, and qualified withdrawals in retirement are completely tax-free.
- ▶ **Key difference:** Traditional IRA gives you a tax break today; Roth IRA gives you tax-free income later.

To determine which is the best fit for you, consult a financial planner.



TEACH YOUR CHILDREN ABOUT MONEY

All parents want their children to grow up to be self-sufficient and successful. Teaching your children how to manage their money is an important part of that transition. No matter their age, you can use day-to-day opportunities to educate them about proper money management.

Five and under

- ▶ Open a savings account and make regular deposits.
- ▶ Set a savings goal as a family and have your children help you gather and count loose change to save for that goal.
- ▶ Make your children choose. If they express an interest in more than one item or activity, let's say they want a toy and ice cream, have them choose one and explain why they can't have both.

Six to 10

- ▶ Consider giving an allowance. Start shifting small spending decisions to your children. Visit OklahomaMoneyMatters.org for an allowance-giving guide.
- ▶ Use everyday financial transactions as teaching lessons. If you swipe your debit card to pay at the grocery store, explain what's happening behind the scenes between the bank and the store.
- ▶ Don't buy items on impulse. If your children want a particular item, encourage them to save their allowance or birthday money to purchase it.

11 to 14

- ▶ Start talking about earning income and possible career interests your children might have. Explain to them that the more education they receive, the more money they can expect to earn.
- ▶ Shift more spending decisions their way. Plan to spend \$200 on back-to-school items? Let them be in charge of getting everything on the list and staying under budget. If they decide to buy \$80 jeans instead of a new backpack, don't jump in and save the day when their old one breaks. Teach them to deal with the consequences of their choices.
- ▶ Involve your children in family meetings to talk about household expenses and savings goals. Discuss your family goals and ways to reach them together.

15 to 18

- ▶ Encourage your children to get a job to help pay school-related expenses and save for college.
- ▶ Consider adding your children to your credit card account, or get them a prepaid credit card. Teach them how to use credit responsibly and help them understand all the terms, conditions and fees that come with it.
- ▶ Teach your children about investing for the future. Explore online websites and games to show your children how to invest wisely.



ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

OklahomaMoneyMatters.org

We have the tools to help you take control of your financial future. Visit our website to learn about basic money management, consumer credit, saving and managing student loans.

OKMM™

UCanGo2.org

Education beyond high school is possible for everyone. UCanGo2 can help you plan, prepare and pay for higher education. Visit the website to view and download publications and other resources.



ReadySetRepay.org

Ready Set Repay is an initiative of the Oklahoma College Assistance Program that helps students make smart borrowing decisions and successfully repay their student loans.



OKcollegestart.org

OKcollegestart.org is the official source for planning a college education in Oklahoma. The website provides free resources to help students and parents plan, apply and pay for education and training beyond high school.



OKhigher.org

The State Regents are the coordinating board for Oklahoma public higher education. They set academic standards, grant degrees and manage numerous scholarships and special programs.

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Whether you're married or single, a parent or grandparent, preparing for college or repaying student loans, looking to make a big purchase, building a budget, repairing your credit or looking for ways to fund retirement, this guide is for you.

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