

# THE TAX PICTURE

## The 15-Point Tax Checklist

Following These Easy Steps Will Simplify  
The Filing Process And Help Maximize Your Return

by Jeff Schnepfer

(NAPSA)—We've all got a vested interest in doing our taxes the right way, the first time. This step-by-step list can make the task less taxing:

1) **Get Serious.** Schedule a time to get to work and commit to it.

2) **Get Started.** My father reminds me of the old proverb, "A trip of a thousand miles begins with a traffic jam."

Get in that "jam," and your tax return will begin to gel.

3) **Get Organized.** Get your W-2s together to report wages, your 1099s to report interest and dividends, your 1099Bs for reporting stock and bond sales, and your 1098s for deducting your interest and taxes. The IRS and your accountant both want final numbers.

4) **Get Informed.** Learn about changes to 2002's tax law. If you're tax "simple," Web sites such as the IRS and MSN Money can actually do the return for you. If you're tax savvy, do your own return after learning all the new rules.

5) **Get Help.** Don't hesitate to ask for help—it's deductible. But call for an appointment now (the earlier the better).

6) **Get Status.** Decide how you're going to file. The lowest rates are with joint returns, but if there are potential high medical or miscellaneous deductions, Married Filing Separate may yield a lower total tax. Alternatively, a single mother may qualify for the Head of Household rates, which are better than the rates for filing Single. There are other options too. You need to know the rules.

7) **Get Adjusted.** "Above The Line" deductions are allowed whether you itemize or not. They range from interest on student loans to alimony.

8) **Get Itemized.** The chart next to line 36 on your 1040 lists your standard deduction. Compare this amount to your total allowable itemized deductions. Take the higher amount.



**Learning To Save—Experts say to find out about changes to 2002's tax law. It could save you money.**

9) **Get Exemptions.** For 2002, you get to deduct as much as \$3,000 from your income for each qualified exemption you have.

10) **Get credit.** A credit is the best expense to have. It's a dollar-for-dollar reduction in your taxes.

A deduction reduces your tax by your marginal rate.

11) **Get Cash.** Decide how you're going to file. That's going to effect how quickly you're going to get that refund. For example, if you e-file, you get your money back faster.

12) **Get Filed.** You've done the hard work, now get it off your desk.

Or file for an extension.

13) **Get Receipts.** If you filed on paper, get a receipt. I always mail my returns certified, return receipt requested.

14) **Get Planning.** Start your 2003 planning now. Don't put it off—people don't plan to fail, they merely fail to plan.

15) **Get Real.** Do your best but don't obsess. Remember, it's the new, friendly IRS—but, they will charge interest and penalties.

To learn more about tax preparation and filing, visit [money.msn.com](http://money.msn.com) or check out Microsoft Money 2003 software, for a more in-depth analysis of all your finances.

• *Mr. Schnepfer is a lawyer and accountant.*