

Papers to Gather

It's time to finally organize those files. This task is the perfect excuse to find and finally organize that stuff you've been planning to file for years. Below is a list of important documents.

- Property titles
- Bank/Brokerage account information
- Retirement plans
- Life insurance policies
- Marriage certificates or divorce decrees
- Pre- or post-nuptial agreements
- Birth certificate
- Previous years' income tax returns (local, state, and federal)
- Social Security number
- Auto, life, health, and disability insurance policies (include premium amounts and due dates)
- Employee benefit plan information (health, disability, retirement)
- Investment, checking, and savings accounts
- Location, deeds, and mortgage information for all real estate
- Debts owed or due (personal loans, auto loans, credit cards, charge accounts, notes payable, notes receivable from others)
- Business agreements relating to corporations, partnerships, or sole proprietorships (location, names, buy/sell arrangements)
- Names and phone numbers of persons to be notified in the event of your incapacity or death

People to Tell

It doesn't do any good to have your affairs in order, all of your important papers filed, and your beneficiaries up-to-date if no one knows where to find your records. The worksheets on the following pages include room to write down where your loved ones can find your stuff in a pinch. Make a few copies and give them to trusted friends and relatives. There's only one thing worse than filling out a dead guy's tax forms, and that's doing it without access to his financial records. Believe me, your posse will thank you posthumously.

1. Before you fill anything in, make a few blank copies. Give one to any adult who lives with you. Make several copies and pass them out to friends and family.
2. Next, work your way through the big table. Expect this to be dull and endless. Chip away at it slowly but surely.
3. Pay close attention to these two columns in the table:
 - "How Owned?" for property titles and bank/brokerage accounts
 - "Beneficiary" for retirement plans and life insurance policies

Get these areas right, and the processing of your estate will go smoothly. If not, you risk subjecting your loved ones to years of haggling over your stuff, with the people who really ought to get it being shut out.

4. Develop a complete list of all documents, information, and records that may be needed by your loved ones and specify their location. We've provided space in the worksheet for you to do this.
5. When you're done, make a copy of the ultra-fabulous Really Important Stuff Worksheet and leave the copies in two safe places. The person to whom you assign Durable Power of Attorney should know exactly where to find a copy. Note: If this person is not a signatory on your safe deposit box, she won't be able to get into the box.

It's mind-numbingly comprehensive, so take it one bite at a time. But it's important, so spend a few minutes a week filling it out until you're done.