

The Room-by-Room Sort

Forty years of belongings, one room at a time — and an honest answer about what is actually worth money.

The one rule that makes this work: finish a room before you start another. The reason this project stalls is almost never the volume — it is that six rooms get half-sorted and none of them ever gets done. Pick the easiest room first. Momentum matters more than logic here.

Five piles, not two

"Keep or toss" is why people freeze. Use five:

Pile	What goes in it	Where it ends up
Keep	It fits the next home and you use it	Moves with you
Family	Someone specific has asked for it, by name	Tagged with that name, <i>and a deadline for pickup</i>
Sell	Real resale value — see the next page before you assume	Estate sale, auction, or consignment
Donate	Usable, but not worth the cost of selling	Charity pickup
Discard	Broken, expired, or nobody's problem but the landfill's	Haul-away

About the "Family" pile. Set a hard pickup date and say it out loud. Unclaimed sentimental items are the number one cause of a stalled move and the number one cause of sibling conflict in an estate. If nobody has collected it by the date, it moves to another pile. Deciding that rule in advance — while everyone is calm — saves the relationship.

An honest word about what sells

This is the part most people are not told, and it saves months of wasted effort.

Usually worth real money	Usually worth far less than you think
Mid-century modern furniture (1950s–70s)	Brown furniture — Victorian, Colonial, large dining sets
Tools, shop equipment, ladders, yard equipment	Formal china and crystal sets
Sterling silver (by weight, at minimum)	Silver-plate anything
Jewelry, coins, bullion	Collectible plates, figurines, Precious Moments
Firearms (handle through a licensed dealer)	Encyclopedias and most books
Original artwork with a known artist	Mass-market prints and reproductions
Oriental rugs in good condition	Pianos — often cost money to remove
Vintage audio, cameras, watches, instruments	Older TVs, computers, printers
Quality outdoor and patio furniture	Exercise equipment
Anything unopened, boxed, and current	Used mattresses and upholstered seating

The market for a whole category can shift in a decade. Before you spend a weekend on something, search completed-sale prices online — not asking prices. Asking prices are fiction.

Room by room

Kitchen — start here

Fastest visible progress, least emotional weight.

- Discard everything expired — check the pantry and the spice rack, they are always worse than expected
- Keep one set of everyday dishes and one set of pots; the duplicates go
- Small appliances: if it hasn't been used in a year, it isn't coming
- Decide about the china *now* — see the resale table; it rarely sells
- Under-sink chemicals go to household hazardous waste, not the trash

Bedrooms and closets

- Clothing: anything not worn in two years
- Check every coat pocket, purse and shoebox — cash, jewelry and documents hide here
- Mattresses rarely sell; arrange recycling
- Jewelry: separate real from costume before anything leaves the house

Bathrooms and medicine cabinets

- Medications go to a pharmacy or police take-back — never the toilet or the trash
- Discard all expired toiletries and sunscreen
- Keep durable medical equipment if the next home may need it; donate it if not

Living and dining rooms

- Measure the new space first, then decide what furniture fits — not the reverse
- Photograph anything sentimental you are not keeping; the photo carries most of the memory
- Books: keep one shelf, donate the rest — libraries and Friends-of-the-Library groups take them
- Get artwork appraised before selling if any of it might be original

Garage, shed and attic — the hard one

- Paint, solvents, pesticides, motor oil, batteries and propane → household hazardous waste facility
- Tools genuinely sell — group them into lots rather than pricing individually
- Check for asbestos in old insulation and floor tile *before* disturbing anything

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- Look for stored documents — deeds, permits, contractor invoices. These are worth money (see the Cost Basis Worksheet)

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- Old paint cans must be dried or taken to hazardous waste; they cannot go in the bin wet

Paperwork — do this before the shredder

- **Keep permanently:** deeds, title policies, survey, trust and will, birth/marriage/death certificates, military discharge (DD-214), Social Security card
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- **Keep until well after the sale:** every home improvement receipt, permit and contractor invoice — these lower your capital gains tax
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- **Keep 7 years:** tax returns and their supporting documents
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- **Shred:** old statements, expired insurance policies, anything with an account number

Who does the heavy lifting

Option	Roughly what it costs	When it's the right call
Senior move manager (NASMM-certified)	Hourly, commonly \$50–\$100/hr	You are overwhelmed, out of area, or physically unable. They sort, pack, coordinate the sale of contents and set up the new home. For most 55+ moves this is money well spent.
Estate sale company	30–50% commission on gross	The home has enough sellable contents to justify a weekend sale — usually a \$5,000+ estimated gross. They price, stage, staff and clear out.
Auction house	Seller's commission, varies	A few genuinely valuable pieces — art, jewelry, collectibles — rather than a whole houseful.
Consignment	40–60% to the shop	A small number of good furniture pieces and you are not in a hurry.
Donation with receipt	Free pickup; you may get a deduction	Usable goods, no resale market. Get an itemized receipt — non-cash gifts over \$5,000 need a qualified appraisal.
Junk haul-away	Roughly \$400–\$800 per truckload locally	The last pass, after everything of value is out.
Cleanout / specialty service	Quoted per job	Hoarding conditions, biohazard, or a home that has been closed up for years. Do not attempt this yourself — there are real health risks.

A realistic timeline

When	What's happening
8–12 weeks out	Sort room by room. One room at a time. This is the long part.
6–8 weeks out	Family pickup deadline passes. Book the estate sale or auction.
4–6 weeks out	Estate sale happens. Donations picked up.
2–3 weeks out	Junk haul-away. Deep clean.
1–2 weeks out	Prep work for listing — paint, minor repairs, staging.
Listing	Photography, then live.

If you are selling, do not start prep work until the contents are out. Contractors work faster and cheaper in an empty house, and photographs of a half-cleared home cost you buyers.

The part nobody puts in a checklist. This is not really a logistics project. You are closing out a chapter, and some days you will get one drawer done and that will be a full day's work. That is normal and it is not a failure. Build in more time than the schedule says, and let the hard rooms wait for a day when you have someone with you.

Before you rely on any of this

This guide is general education, not legal, tax, or investment advice. I am a real estate broker — not an attorney and not a CPA. Deadlines and dollar figures change, and your situation has facts this guide cannot know. Confirm anything that matters with your attorney and your CPA before you act on it.

Questions, or want this run against your actual numbers? That conversation is free and there is no obligation attached to it.

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