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THE TAX LAWYER

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Should You Do Your Own Tax Return?

You may find it amusing that members of Congress can't do their [own tax returns](#). Well, perhaps they *could*, but reports suggest the only one who does is Sen. Michael Enzi, R-Wyo. See [The Blind, the Illiterate, and Members of Congress](#). But exactly what do we mean by "do it yourself?"

One study from the [Tax Policy Center](#) said 89 percent of the public seeks help filling out returns from accountants or software. But in my book, using software *doesn't* mean you aren't doing it yourself. That would be like saying you didn't assemble that Ikea furniture unless you did it without a screwdriver.

I'm a [tax lawyer](#) and don't prepare returns. However, since I advise about returns I'm considered a "preparer" anyway under IRS rules. See [Tax Tips From Tyra Banks](#).

Filing deadlines are already approaching, so don't wait too long to consider whether you'll file yourself or hire a preparer. The best way to avoid the last minute scramble is to be proactive. If you're not sure whether you want to do your own return or hire a professional, do some checking.

One big variable is how much money you make and how complex your return may be. Having many investments, interests in businesses, etc. can make hiring an accountant or other preparer advisable. Although preparing a tax return has gotten more complicated which may favor paid preparers, there are more resources available today.

Today, it's far easier to do your own taxes than most people realize. You could start with the [IRS website](#), which makes [filing yourself](#) quite easy. Even if you don't file yourself, there are many resources on the IRS website which make it worth a visit. See [Don't Miss The IRS Website](#). Another good choice is commercial software such as [TurboTax](#) or one of the other available programs. Try it out and see if you can manage.

One advantage of using software yourself is that you can readily compare alternatives and see the relationships between the numbers. For example, if you're married, you can easily compare married filing separate versus joint. Whether you use a preparer or not, think carefully about this [issue](#).

Paper vs. Electronic? In addition to the decision whether to prepare your own returns, another separate issue is how to **file** your returns. Last year, the IRS says 70 percent of taxpayers, a whopping [99 million people](#), filed electronically. IRS e-file is approaching 1 billion returns. It is getting increasingly rare to file on paper, although you can still do so if you self-prepare. While I've always been [reluctant](#) to embrace e-filing (for details, see [Ten Ways To Audit Proof Your Tax Return](#)), taxpayers and return preparers alike have embraced it.

In fact, if you go to a return preparer who expects to file 100 or more returns, the preparer will be required to e-file your return. For more, see [E-Filing And The IRS Website](#). If you're a do-it-yourselfer, the IRS offers "[Free File](#)." If you made \$58,000 or less, you qualify for free tax software that is offered through a private-public partnership with manufacturers. If you made more than this amount or are comfortable preparing your own tax return, there's [Free File Fillable Forms](#), which are simply the electronic versions of IRS paper forms.

For more, see:

[Make Your Tax List and Check It Twice](#)

[The Biggest Problem Facing Households And The IRS Is... The Tax Code](#)

[The Other Individual Mandate: Tax Prep](#)

[Taxpayer Advocate Service – Choosing A Return Preparer](#)

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