

# ESTATE PLANNING BASICS ©



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Revision 1

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## INTRODUCTION

This publication excludes a discussion of the financial and retirement planning aspects of estate planning, as well as any discussion of life insurance needs, because American Estate & Trust, LC (hereafter "AE-Trust") does not directly become involved in those areas. Many of AE-Trust's independent Associate members do provide financial, retirement and insurance planning and services, but only as a part of their own independent practice. What this publication focuses on are the proper methods of holding legal title to property during your life, and passing your estate on to your heirs in a manner and timing of your choosing, all with minimum taxes and intervention by the legal system.

AE-Trust is a state of Nevada licensed and regulated trust company, meeting all state requirements for capital reserves and bonding. The company is regulated and audited by the Nevada Financial Institutions Division (FID), the bank regulatory division for Nevada (see [www.TrusteeAmerica.com](http://www.TrusteeAmerica.com) for more about AE-Trust).

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professionals. NAFEP provides formal training to this network of professionals through its Certified Estate Advisor® (CEA®) designation and certificate program.

Most of the estate, tax and financial planning that is done with AE-Trust programs involves the use of trusts. Not just living trusts though, but many other specialized and useful trusts. These other trusts go far beyond the living trust, and create some important benefits.

## Two Important Definitions:

**Estate.** The total property owned by an individual prior to the distribution of that property under the terms of a will, trust or inheritance laws. An individual's estate includes all assets and liabilities.

**Property.** Property is described as either real or personal. Real property is real estate, and personal property is everything else. Personal property includes physical assets such as automobiles, equipment, household items, etc. Personal property also includes financial property, such as securities, notes or loans receivable, bank accounts, cash and insurance policies.

## Why Do Estate Planning?

**Dying Intestate.** We need to do estate planning to avoid dying "intestate". Dying intestate means dying without having created either a will or a trust which provides instructions for passing your estate on to your heirs. Dying intestate is like taking your property and attempting to throw it to your heirs on the other side of a deep chasm, a chasm which is filled with hazards. These hazards (probate, creditors, con-artists, lawsuits, judgments, lawyers, and death taxes) can damage much or most of the value of your estate.

All property owners have done some estate planning for the distribution of their estate to their heirs whether

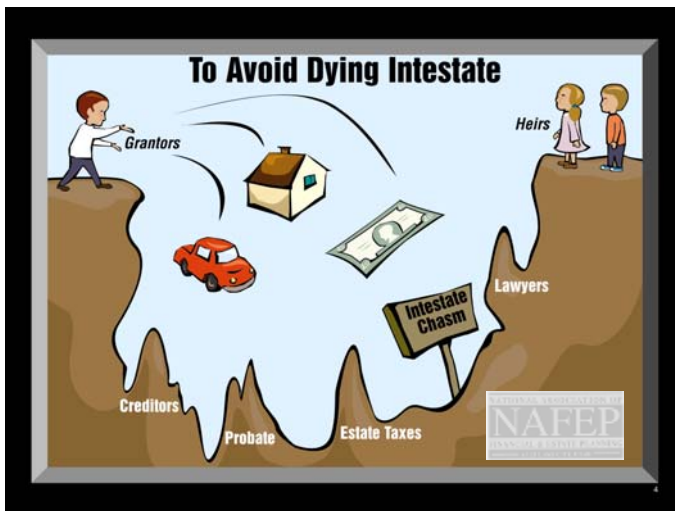


Figure 1

they are aware of it or not. Without a will or a trust the inheritance laws (laws of intestacy) of your state will determine how your property will pass to your heirs. If you have no heirs that fit the state's formula, the assets will be taken by the state. Often times the state's formula and rules for moving assets to your heirs will not be what you would have chosen if you had done some planning.

One of the best ways to get your estate over the intestate chasm is to build a bridge to your heirs, otherwise known as a trust. This provides for the estate to be taken safely over the financial risks which are posed by probate, creditors, con-artists, lawsuits, judgments, lawyers, and death taxes. Let's evaluate some of these financial risks to better understand how and why to avoid them.

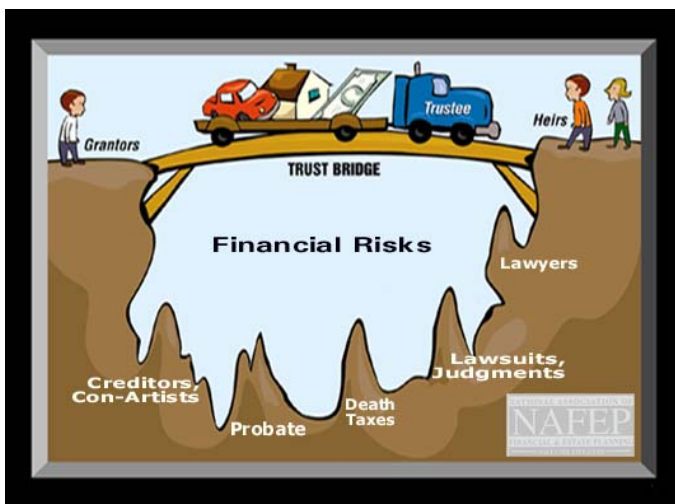


Figure 2

**Problems With Probate.** If you die with any property titled in your personal name, there must be a probate process for that property (assuming the estate is above a minimum size). Probate is the state's legal procedure for handling two major functions for your estate. (1) Identification of the rightful heirs to the estate and the share size that each heir will receive, and (2) getting the legal title of the property out of your name and into the name of the heirs. Having a will drawn up in advance of your death will take care of the first function, identification of the rightful heirs and their share. With no valid will for your estate the state will use its own formula for determining heirs and their share. But even with a will the re-titling of your property still must be handled through a court administered probate procedure. When someone is dead the only way that their property can be legally re-titled in the heirs' names is by a court order in a court supervised process.

Avoiding probate is desirable because it can be a time consuming and expensive process. Reliable estimates are that on a national average probate costs run from 6% to 10% of the value of the estate. This means that an estate worth only \$200,000 could cost \$12,000 to \$20,000 to probate. These costs are based on the fair market value of the property, and not on just the net worth or equity. In some cases probate ends up in litigation that drags on for years. Frequently it leads to family battles, and it often causes or allows the decedent's wishes to be ignored. In addition, probate procedures are all made public, causing family privacy to be lost.

One good way to avoid probate is through the use of a family estate planning trust. Think of the trust as the bridge referred to earlier, a bridge which will allow a trustee to haul your assets safely across the intestacy chasm to your heirs on the other side. The way a trust avoids probate is by titling your property in the name of the trust before your death. You have complete control of the property during your life, but the trust is considered to be the legal owner of the property for title transfer purposes. Upon your death a trustee that you pre-selected will simply handle the transfers or payments to your heirs that you specified in the trust. You have a great deal of flexibility in specifying the details of these payments and transfers (see the "Estate Transfer & Heir Planning" topic below). After your death the trustee can handle everything quickly and simply without lawyers, court supervision, excessive costs or delays.

**Problems With Joint Tenancy Ownership.** Most married couples, and many parent-child combinations,

choose joint tenancy with rights of survivorship as their method of holding title. This may be done with both real estate and financial assets. The idea is that when one joint owner dies, the surviving joint owner or owners will automatically receive the decedent's interest in the property without probate. As a probate avoidance technique, this approach does work, but there are several potential problems:

1. The whole amount of the estate held in joint tenancy is subject to all of the liabilities of all joint owners. If one owner gets a judgment, tax lien, etc., the lien holder can take the entire property to satisfy the judgment. (There are some exceptions to this problem with personal residences in some states, but those exceptions don't hold up when the asset is either sold or when both tenants die.) If a parent holds a home in joint tenancy with a child, and that child gets a divorce, the divorcing spouse of the child can potentially take the whole house in the divorce settlement.
2. When a spouse dies and leaves assets to the surviving spouse through joint tenancy, the surviving spouse then has outright control of the assets. The danger is that the surviving spouse may give some or all the assets away to a new spouse or lover, leaving the original heirs cut out of the estate.
3. Often times the surviving spouse doesn't do any formal estate planning, so that probate was avoided on the death of the first spouse, but isn't on the death of the second.

The use of a family trust is one of the best ways to hold property title, because it can avoid the three problems mentioned above.

**Problems With Beneficiary Arrangements.** Many assets may be transferred to heirs quite well with beneficiary arrangements. For example, beneficiaries may be specified on pension plans, insurance policies, annuities, bank and investment accounts. When the original owner dies, the remainder amounts or death benefit will be paid quickly to the named beneficiaries, in the amounts specified to each beneficiary and without probate. There are some problems and limitations with this system, however:

1. There can be no controlled or timed payouts to the beneficiaries with most beneficiary arrangements.

2. There are no provisions for beneficiaries who become incapable of handling their financial affairs.
3. Beneficiary distributions will be subject to the lawsuits, liens, bankruptcies and divorce problems of the beneficiary.
4. There will often be problems if the beneficiary predeceases the original owner (such as the money being paid to the spouse of the beneficiary, rather than being held for or paid to the beneficiary's children).

**Problems Due to Incapacitation.** When a property owner has either sole or joint tenancy ownership, and then becomes mentally incapacitated, the property is in legal limbo. This is due to the incapacitated owner being incapable of conveying legal title or signing legally binding documents. This can prevent the property from being sold or even being leased. Often times an expensive and time delaying court conservatorship procedure is the only answer. A family trust is the most comprehensive and best detailed manner to deal with incapacitation issues. But, a simple device known as a durable power of attorney will also take care of the problem in some cases.

**Protecting Estates From Divorce, Lawsuits And Other Legal Problems.** Lack of formal and specialized estate planning leaves the estate owner(s) extremely vulnerable on this issue. This estate planning area is known as asset protection or wealth protection. See the topic entitled "Wealth Protection" on page 7 for more information on coping with these and other risks.

**Death Taxes On Your Estate.** Many people think that estate taxes were abolished by the 2001 Tax Act. But actually, estate taxes at the federal level were scheduled by the 2001 law to stick around through 2009 (see Figure 3), and then be replaced with some loss in step-up in basis. The loss in basis step-up means that your heirs will not receive your assets with a basis which is equal to the fair market value of those assets. As a result, when the heirs sell those assets they must pay capital gains taxes on the gain (profit). That gain is the difference between what you paid for the assets and what your heirs sell them for. Under pre 2001 tax law, heirs received a full basis step-up to fair market value, and never had to pay a capital gains tax. Further, estate and inheritance taxes at the state level are often quite significant, and they were not abolished by the federal Tax Act of 2001.

<b>Scheduled Changes in Estate and GST Tax Exemptions &amp; Rates (Gift Taxes Not Included!)</b>		
<b>Year</b>	<b>Rate</b>	<b>Exempt Amount</b>
2001	55%	675,000*
2002	50%	1,000,000
2003	49%	1,000,000
2004	48%	1,500,000
2005	47%	1,500,000
2006	46%	2,000,000
2007	45%	2,000,000
2008	45%	2,000,000
2009	45%	3,500,000
2010	0%	Unlimited

\* Unchanged from prior law

Figure 3

This is all very complicated, but the bottom line is this: If you as an individual expect to be worth upwards of \$1 million by the time of your death, or the year 2010 if that comes earlier (and if you are married, that is upwards of \$2 million), then your estate faces death taxation issues. And, if you did pre-2001 estate planning, your existing trust or other estate planning needs to be revisited and probably updated.

The 2001 Tax Act did increase the amount of exemption from federal estate taxes which is allowed to estates (see Figure 3). But what if that exemption is not enough for your estate? Or what if your estate faces capital gains taxes due to the loss of basis step-up? There could be a problem considering the appreciation and growth that your estate will enjoy before your death, especially when you add in the death benefits from your life insurance and remainder amounts of your pension plan. Good estate planning can easily increase death tax exemption amounts by several million dollars for married couples, but some type of trust is required for maximum reduction of death taxation. Neither a will, beneficiary arrangements nor joint tenancy ownership of property are sufficient to take care of death taxation issues for either married or single estate owners.

**Gift Taxes.** Gift taxes were not eliminated from the 2001 Tax Act, though the Act allows larger gifts and lower tax rates (see Figure 4). Anyone can make a gift to any other person with no federal gift taxes, provided that the gift amount is in the low, five figure range (we cannot state the exact amount here because the exempt amount indexes upwards with inflation). A married couple can give twice the exempt amount to one person in any given year. A married couple can give four times

the exempt amount to another married couple or to two children. For annual gifts within those limits there is little tax planning to do and no gift tax return to be filed. In many of the cases of gifts which exceed those limits, they are made because the estate is too large for estate tax purposes and the estate owner is likely to die before 2010 (die before the elimination of federal estate taxes). These extra large gifts then will usually be made to provide estate tax relief, by reducing the size of estate that will be left to the heirs. Gifts exceeding the low five figure annual exemption do require special planning and gift tax returns. Many of these larger gifts will need to be done with special trust programs to reduce or avoid gift taxes altogether.

<b>Scheduled Changes in Gift Tax Exemptions and Rates</b>		
<b>Year</b>	<b>Rate</b>	<b>Exempt Amount</b>
2001	55%	675,000*
2002	50%	1,000,000
2003	49%	1,000,000
2004	48%	1,000,000
2005	47%	1,000,000
2006	46%	1,000,000
2007	45%	1,000,000
2008	45%	1,000,000
2009	45%	1,000,000
2010+	35%	1,000,000**

\* Unchanged from prior law  
\*\* Permanent?

Figure 4

**Estate Transfer & Heir Planning.** One of the big benefits of pre-death estate planning is the ability to name your heirs, specify the share of your estate they will receive, and dictate the manner and timing at which the heirs get their share. Generally speaking this part of estate planning may be done with either a will or a trust. But as mentioned above it takes a trust to avoid probate, protect the estate from judgments and liens, and to minimize death taxes.

Some of the heir planning issues to consider are as follows (note that the letter footnotes are explained at the end of this topic, next page):

1. Whether the heirs are to receive equal or unequal shares. There are several factors that can cause the estate owners to vary the share sizes they leave to each heir. (W, T, B\*)

2. At what age should the heirs get their share, or should their share be paid in two or three installments at different age milestones, paid out for life, etc. (T\*)
3. Whether or not to leave specific property to certain heirs, such as the family home to one child and certain other property to another child. (W, T, B, JT\*)
4. Whether or not to clearly omit or disinherit any heirs. (W, T\*)
5. How to deal with situations where a married couple each have different children from former marriages, but they want to create one comprehensive estate plan. This may require dealing with issues such as one spouse having more children, or one spouse having a larger estate. (T\*)
6. Dealing with cases where estate owners get married after they have built their own separate estate, which they may want their new spouse to benefit from, but then they want the remainder of the estate to go to their heirs and not to their spouse's heirs. (T\*)
7. What to do in a case where a child has reckless spending habits or substance abuse problems, and the parents fear that child will quickly misuse the inheritance. (T\*)
8. How to deal with mentally or physically disabled heirs. (T\*)
9. Assuring that the heirs will use their share to pay for a college education, and do so in a prudent manner. (T\*)
10. What happens if an heir predeceases the estate owner. (W, T, B, JT\*)
11. How to deal with specific gifts to special heirs, such as grandchildren, nieces and nephews, charities, etc. (W, T, B, JT\*)

\* Footnote:

W=Will, T=Trust, B=Beneficiary Arrangements, JT=Joint Tenancy Arrangements. These codes indicate what estate transfer methods can possibly be used to accomplish this goal. Trusts are the only method which cover all situations listed, and which will work as desired in all cases. NOTE: Beneficiary and joint tenancy arrangements will not necessarily work, or work well enough, in your individual case. Be sure to see the above specific topics on these issues.

## Trusts vs. Wills, Which Is Best For You?

There are cases where a will is the best choice and cases where a trust is. Generally a will is indicated under the following circumstances (also see the 11 item list in the prior topic):

1. The estate is small enough that formal probate won't be required.

-Or-

2. It is reasonable and safe to leave all of the estate through beneficiary and/or joint tenancy arrangements (see the earlier topic, "Joint Tenancy Ownership of Property").

-And-

1. There are no significant death taxation liabilities.
2. There is no need to hold an heir's share of the estate in some type of scheduled or controlled payout (for college or handicapped heirs for example).
3. Mental incapacitation of the estate owner isn't likely to cause problems with financial and legal transactions.

Some examples of where a will is likely the best choice are: (1) A young married couple whose net worth is probably less than \$50,000. Joint tenancy and beneficiary arrangements are desirable here, coupled with general purpose wills for each spouse. If one of the young spouses dies the survivor is likely to live many more years and is likely to provide the best possible care for minor children the couple had together, making a trust unnecessary. A trust would probably be too cumbersome in this situation. (2) Individuals or couples of any age whose estate is less than \$75,000 to \$100,000 total, and where the estate can avoid probate by safe beneficiary and/or joint tenancy arrangements (see the earlier topic, "Joint Tenancy Ownership of Property"). General purpose wills for each individual or spouse should be created.

Even though a will is not required for assets which are transferring by beneficiary and joint tenancy arrangements, a general purpose will should still be prepared. The will makes sure that the non-beneficiary/joint tenancy property passes to the heirs of your choice, and that they receive the amounts or specific assets you wish them to have. The will handles

the disposition of personal effects. The will serves as a catch-all, in the event that there are assets you forgot about, received after the will was prepared, or there is a problem or mistake with a beneficiary or joint tenancy arrangement. Most heirs will re-distribute their inheritance appropriately to the other heirs if they realize the beneficiary arrangement you set up was wrong and your will indicates your real choice.

A trust is generally indicated under the following circumstances (also see the 11 item list in the prior topic):

1. The estate which cannot safely be transferred by beneficiary and joint tenancy arrangements exceeds approximately \$75,000 to \$100,000.
2. There is some danger of a challenge by an heir, or would-be heir, to the estate transfer planning after the estate owner's death. (A trust generally can withstand the challenges better than probate, and often in shorter time, and for less money and hassle.)
3. Avoiding probate is an important goal.
4. The estate cannot simply be paid immediately and outright to one or more heirs, meaning there are minors or other heirs who should have their share paid in a controlled or scheduled manner.
5. There are significant death taxation liabilities.
6. There is a need during the estate owner's life to insulate assets from legal difficulties or a divorce with a non-owner spouse.
7. The estate needs formal or detailed handling procedures during any period of mental incapacitation of the estate owner.

**What Is a Trust?** The major family estate planning functions that trusts are required for are:

1. Management of the estate during mental incapacitation
2. Probate avoidance
3. Reduction or elimination of death taxation
4. Controlled transfer of estate to proper heirs
5. Protecting the estate from lawsuits & seizures

Other AE-Trust publications describe in detail what these functions are and how trusts perform these tasks. But for the limited purposes of this publication, we will describe the basic facets and terminology of trusts.

A trust is a legal entity or device used to take care of property in special ways. Trusts are created by a legal agreement, basically a contract, between two parties. These parties are known as the grantor and the trustee. The grantor and trustee create the agreement for the benefit of a third party known as the beneficiary. (See Figure 5) This agreement is private and is not an arrangement created by state statutes (as are corporations, for example). This is an important feature because private agreements have tremendous flexibility in their provisions. Even though a trust is a private agreement, it is recognized by the laws and courts as an independent legal entity. In fact, trusts are independent entities very much like corporations. Thru their trustee they may own property, they may file tax returns and pay taxes, they may own bank and investment accounts, earn income, distribute profits to the beneficiaries, conduct business activities, etc.



Figure 5

As stated above, trusts have three parties to them: grantor, trustee, and beneficiary. Grantors are the individuals who own property which they wish to have managed, controlled, protected and transferred to heirs by a trust. Once their property is in the trust the grantors no longer hold the legal title to the property, though they usually retain the exclusive rights to use the property or its income and usually retain full control of the property. The trustee is the legal administrator of the trust and the legal title holder of the property. The grantors' relationship to the trust is determined by the

language which they put into the trust agreement. The beneficiaries are the individuals or charities that receive benefits or income from the trust, and eventually receive the property itself. When the grantors retain the rights to the income and use of the trust property, then the beneficiaries will receive their benefits after the grantors die. In still other cases the grantors and beneficiaries receive trust benefits simultaneously.

**Living Trust.** A family trust in which the grantors hold all three positions -- grantor, trustee, and beneficiary -- is known as a living trust. This is the type trust that forms the AE-Trust Premier I Living Trust. The living trust really isn't a trust though because it is not an agreement between two separate parties, grantor and trustee. There is in fact just one party in the living trust, the grantor or grantors. Since one party cannot write a legally binding agreement with itself, the living trust is not a contract, not a complete trust during the lives of the grantors (even if there are two grantors, legally they are still one party). Therefore the living trust arrangement is not recognized by the laws and the courts as an independent entity. It is simply thought of as an extension of the grantors and as a special way the grantors have titled their property. However, if the grantors appoint an independent or separate trustee to administer the revocable trust and to hold legal title, there is then a real contract and a real trust regardless of who the beneficiaries are.

**Beneficiaries.** If the grantors retain the rights to the benefit, use or income of the property in the trust, then the grantors are also the primary beneficiaries. In that case the heirs who are named to inherit the trust property after the deaths of the grantors are known as secondary beneficiaries. If the grantors do not retain economic benefit or control of the trust property, then their heirs are named as the primary beneficiaries.

**Revocable and Irrevocable.** An arrangement where the trust may be revoked at will by the grantors is known as a revocable trust. If a trust cannot be revoked by a family member without permission of the other trust parties, the arrangement is called an irrevocable trust. Irrevocable trusts are recognized as independent legal entities whereas revocable trusts are not.

The well known living trust referred to above is almost always a revocable type. However the grantors may choose to have an irrevocable trust and then receive some special or extra benefits. Among the most sought after of these other benefits is wealth or asset protection from legal difficulties and con artists (see next topic).

**Wealth Protection.** If you are sued and lose, what could be taken from you? Everything you own. A judgment exposes your entire net worth, your whole estate, even your home. There is little limit to your potential loss. This risk is often the biggest estate planning concern which estate owners have.

A widespread problem for the elderly and other vulnerable estate owners is rip-offs by con artists and unscrupulous relatives. There is a big threat from vehicular or boating accidents which may be your fault. Other serious risks come from business activities or ownership: Business deals gone bad, debts that cannot be paid, unhappy customers, overzealous regulatory agencies, employee lawsuits, product and professional liability, malpractice issues, etc. Astronomical medical costs from serious illness or accident can wipe out an estate. Ownership of construction, industrial equipment, or rental property where an accident could occur are other big danger areas. Some are concerned over risks they face from divorce and ex-spouses. All these hazards leave your property at immense risk in many cases.

To deal with these wealth protection concerns, AE-Trust creates the Premier II-NV Wealth Protection Trust. This trust is a powerful system which makes it impossible or very difficult for creditors or claimants to reach your assets through legal actions. The trust has multiple layers of built-in protections to keep your property safe. This is based on Nevada's "spendthrift trust" law, Chapter 166 of the Nevada Revised Statutes. This statute is Nevada's powerful wealth protection trust law, and the Premier II-NV is carefully designed to meet the terms and requirements of a spendthrift trust under the Nevada statutes. These protections extend far beyond those offered in other states. In fact most states provide no special protection at all (for more information, go to [www.TrusteeAmerica.com](http://www.TrusteeAmerica.com) and select the "Asset Protection" button).