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These Simple Steps Can Save You Time and Trouble With the IRS

TAX REPORT |

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Don't draw unwanted attention to yourself this filing season and other advice from tax pros

Nobody ever wants trouble with the Internal Revenue Service, but there's a special sting when a small misstep causes a big headache.

Did you get an IRS letter asking for hefty tax on a retirement-plan rollover that's tax-free? Or a notice saying you didn't file a return, although you did? Will you have to wait months for your refund because you want a paper check?

These and other snafus can happen, and they often take time and trouble to untangle.

No wonder: The IRS lost more than a quarter of its workforce—about 28,000 people—during 2025, according to National Taxpayer Advocate Erin Collins, who leads an independent watchdog group within the agency. It's often impossible to get IRS help on the phone, and the agency is now on its eighth leader since President Trump took office.

With that in mind, we spoke with tax professionals about simple moves that can help avoid time-consuming IRS troubles.

Here are their suggestions.

Joint filers, don't switch your name order. With married couples who file jointly, IRS computers typically track "Taxpayer" and "Spouse"—and the order of names matters.

This might seem unfair, as about 90% of joint-filing couples list the man's name first. Actually, it doesn't matter who's listed first if the couple is consistent. But switching name order can cause confusion that's hard to untangle. This advice also applies for the final joint return for the year a married taxpayer died. "Even minor changes, such as to a middle name or abbreviation, can cause processing issues," says Elizabeth Young, director of tax practice at the American Institute of CPAs.

Opt for an electronic refund. In March 2025, Trump ordered that federal payments—including tax refunds—be delivered via direct deposit, not as paper checks.

So this year, filers who haven't supplied direct-deposit information for refunds are receiving a CP53E notice asking for it. Filers must supply this information within 30 days through their IRS online account or face longer delays.

As of March 7, the IRS had sent out 1.1 million of these notices. In a recent letter to Treasury Secretary Scott Bessent, two members of Congress said filers receiving refund checks could face a wait of 10 weeks or longer.

Report nontaxable income. Yes, your payouts from Health Savings Accounts and Roth IRAs probably aren't taxable. The same holds for rollovers from 401(k) and 403(b) retirement plans to traditional IRAs, and sales of assets (such as stock or a home) where no tax is due, among other things.

Be sure to report this income, because the IRS gets 1099 forms from financial institutions reporting such payouts and transfers. If the information isn't on the taxpayer's return, that could produce a "matching error" and a computer-generated query demanding tax. Then the taxpayer has to respond—or hire someone to—and provide proof to the IRS. "At best, this is a bother," says Ryan McKeown, a CPA in Mankato, Minn. "At worst, the filer could owe tax if he can't provide proof of a mistake."

Always respond to an IRS letter.

Take letters from the IRS seriously, even if they're absurd. Don't assume the system will correct its own mistakes.

Retirement-plan specialist Natalie Choate, an attorney in Boston, received an IRS letter saying she hadn't taken required withdrawals from her own IRAs. She had, of course. Nevertheless, she sent the IRS detailed records and the problem was resolved. If she hadn't acted, it might have snowballed.

Tax professionals have lots of advice about IRS responses. Phyllis Jo Kubey, an enrolled agent in New York, says to read the letter carefully and follow its instructions. "If you've already responded, try calling the number on the letter to see whether the IRS has your original response—and ask about the status of the issue and whether it can be expedited," she adds. Absent that, consider resending a copy of what you've already sent. In addition, make sure your name, tax year and Social Security number are on the reply. Attach a copy of the IRS's letter—and pay attention to deadlines. What about sending extra proof? Don't. That could expand the scope of the inquiry or slow resolution.

Always get proof of mailing. Tax pros are unanimous: If you mail something to the IRS, *be sure to get and save proof of mailing.* Use certified mail, registered mail, or an approved private delivery service like FedEx or UPS, not labels from self-service kiosks or postage meters. In some cases, the IRS is now providing a tool to upload documents in response to IRS requests. The AICPA's Young says this usually works well and often saves time.

Switching computers or tax software? Look out. Filers who get a new computer or change DIY tax software should remember that items like capital losses or the cost-basis of nondeductible IRAs often don't make the transition.

“Taxpayers should watch this issue closely, as they can miss valuable deductions or pay tax twice on the same income,” says JoAnn May, a CPA near Chicago.

Problems? File for an extension. Does your return have a problem area? File for the automatic sixmonth extension allowed by law. It gives taxpayers who submit Form 4868 until Oct. 15, 2026, to file 2025 returns. Reminder: This isn’t an extension to *pay* your taxes due on April 15. You still have to do that. But it does give time to resolve issues, especially if you need professional help.

It’s better to extend the filing date than to amend a return. Says May, “Amending could bring more scrutiny to your return, and that could lead to more headaches.”

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