Paycheck Decoder

Name _____ Date _____

Jordan expected $1,600. The deposit was $1,188. Where did $412 go? Decode the pay stub.

Maple & Main Market
Earnings statement

Employee: **Jordan Rivera**
Pay period: Oct 5–18, 2026 · Pay date: Oct 23, 2026

EARNINGS		DEDUCTIONS	
Hours	80	Federal income tax	118.00
Rate	$20.00/hr	Social Security (6.2%)	99.20
Gross pay	**1,600.00**	Medicare (1.45%)	23.20
		State income tax	63.60
		Health insurance	44.00
		401(k) retirement (4%)	64.00
		Total deductions	**412.00**

NET PAY $1,188.00

Made-up pay stub for practice. Real withholding depends on your tax form (W-4) and your state. Social Security and Medicare rates are the real 2026 rates.

1. Gross pay is what you earn before anything is taken out. Net pay is what you take home. Write both.

Gross $ _____

Net $ _____

2. What percent of the gross pay was taken out? Show your math.

3. Social Security + Medicare together are called FICA. What did FICA cost on this paycheck?

4. Sort the $412 into three buckets.

Government $ _____ **Future you $** _____ **Protection $** _____

5. Jordan is paid every two weeks (26 paychecks a year). If Jordan budgets like the paycheck is $1,600, how short will Jordan be over a year?

MY MONEY CHOICE

What's the first thing you'd do with your first paycheck? Why?

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Paycheck Decoder

The quick lesson (read aloud, about 1 minute)

> **Gross pay** is what you earn. **Net pay** is what lands in your account. In between come **deductions**: income taxes, **FICA** (Social Security and Medicare, which fund benefits for retirees and others, and health care mainly for people 65 and older), and choices like health insurance or a 401(k) retirement account. Some of that money comes back to you later.

Two teaching points

1. Budget with your **net** pay, never your gross pay.
2. Not every deduction is lost money: the 401(k) is your own savings, and insurance protects you.

Answer key

1. Gross $1,600.00 · Net $1,188.00. 2. 412 ÷ 1,600 = 25.75% (about 26%). 3. FICA = 99.20 + 23.20 = **$122.40**. 4. Government $304.00 (federal 118 + Social Security 99.20 + Medicare 23.20 + state 63.60) · Future you $64.00 (401(k)) · Protection $44.00 (health insurance). 5. $412 × 26 = **$10,712**.

10-minute run

1. Circle gross and net pay (2 min).
2. Answer 1–5 with a partner (6 min).
3. Discuss: which deductions come back to you later?

Ask

"Why might a first paycheck feel smaller than expected?"

Goal

Read a pay stub and explain the gap between gross and net pay.

Take it further

Ask: "Jordan's 401(k) takes $64 each paycheck. How much is that in a year?" ($1,664)

Standard: National Standards for Personal Financial Education (Council for Economic Education and Jump$tart), area: **Earning Income**. Print double-sided: the activity on the front, this teaching side on the back.

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Build Your Credit

Name _____ Date _____

2–4 players · 1 die · a marker each. Everyone starts with a game score of 600. Roll and move; when you land on a square, add or subtract its points. Solid squares help your credit; dashed squares hurt it. At FINISH, highest score wins. (Game points only. Real credit scores usually range from 300 to 850.)

1 **START** Score 600	2	3 Paid your phone bill on time **+20**	4	5 Missed a payment **–40**	6
12	11 Maxed out your card **–30**	10	9 Used only 10% of your card limit **+15**	8	7 Paid on time again **+20**
13 Paid the full balance **+20**	14	15 Opened 3 new cards at once **–10**	16	17 Paid on time **+20**	18
24	23 Kept your oldest account open **+10**	22	21 Set up autopay **+15**	20	19 Payment 30 days late **–40**
25 Paid on time **+20**	26	27 Bill sent to collections **–60**	28	29 Paid on time **+20**	30 **FINISH**

Player	Score at FINISH	Biggest drop: which square?

1. Which square hurts the most? Which habit shows up on the board most often?

2. How many on-time payments (+20) does it take to make up for ONE bill sent to collections (−60)?

MY MONEY CHOICE

Would you get a credit card at 18? What rule would you set for yourself?

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Build Your Credit

The quick lesson (read aloud, about 1 minute)

> A **credit score** is a number lenders use to guess whether you'll pay back money. FICO scores usually range from 300 to 850. The biggest factor is **payment history**: paying on time. Keeping balances low, having older accounts and not opening lots of new ones at once also help.

Two teaching points

1. Pay on time, every time. It matters most.
2. Use only a small part of your credit limit.

Answer key

1. Bill sent to collections (−60). Paying on time is the most common square, just as payment history is the biggest part of a FICO score (about 35%). 2. Three on-time payments (3 × 20 = 60).

10-minute run

1. Read the rules; play one game (6 min).
2. Fill in the score table.
3. Answer 1 and 2.

Ask

"Why would a lender care about your past payments?"

Goal

Credit history is built by paying on time, keeping balances low and avoiding new debt in a rush.

Take it further

Ask: what are three ways a good credit score saves money later? (Lower loan interest, apartment approval, lower deposits.)

Standard: National Standards for Personal Financial Education (Council for Economic Education and Jump$tart), area: **Managing Credit**. Print double-sided: the activity on the front, this teaching side on the back.

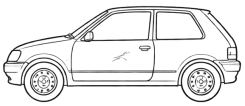
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The Car Decision

Name _____ Date _____

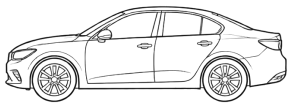
You take home $1,800 a month and have $3,000 saved. You need a car for work. Compare three deals. Gas and insurance are extra on all three.



A · Used hatchback



B · New compact SUV



C · Lease a sedan

Price	$9,000	$28,000	No price: you rent it
The deal	Loan: $6,000 at 9% APR for 3 years	Loan: $25,000 at 7% APR for 6 years	Lease: 3 years, 10,000 miles a year, then you return it
Down payment	$3,000	$3,000	$3,000
Monthly payment	$190.80	$426.23	$329.00
Number of payments	36	72	36
Total you pay down + monthly × payments			
% of $1,800 take-home			
What you own at the end			

1. Which deal has the lowest monthly payment? Which costs the most in total?

2. How much interest do you pay on deal B? (Total of the loan payments − $25,000)

3. Many money experts suggest keeping car payments to about 10% of take-home pay. Which deal fits?

MY MONEY CHOICE

Which would you choose? What would you give up to get it?

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The Car Decision

The quick lesson (read aloud, about 1 minute)

> Car ads show the **monthly payment**, but the real cost is the **total**: down payment + every monthly payment. A longer loan lowers the monthly payment but adds more **interest**. A **lease** is renting: lower cost up front, but you own nothing at the end. Gas, insurance and repairs come on top of all of it.

Two teaching points

1. Compare total cost, not just the monthly payment.
2. Longer loans = smaller payments but more interest.

Answer key

Totals: A $9,868.80 · B $33,688.56 · C $14,844.00. Share of take-home: A 10.6% · B 23.7% · C 18.3%. At the end: A you own the car (paid off after 3 years) · B you own the SUV after 6 years of payments · C you own nothing, you hand it back.
1. Lowest monthly: A ($190.80). Most in total: B. 2. Interest on B: $426.23 × 72 − $25,000 = **$5,688.56**.
3. Only A is close to 10%.

10-minute run

1. Fill in the three totals (5 min).
2. Find the % of take-home for each.
3. Debate: lowest payment vs. lowest total.

Ask

"Why do car ads show the monthly payment, not the total?"

Goal

The monthly payment isn't the price. Compare total cost, interest and what you own at the end.

Take it further

Ask: "What happens to deal B if you lose your job in year 2?" Talk about why a smaller payment gives you room to breathe.

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Pay in 4: The Real Cost

Name _____ Date _____

"Pay in 4" apps split a price into 4 equal payments: one the day you buy, then one every 2 weeks. One plan looks easy. What happens when you stack four?

Your money: you earn $100 every Friday. After gas and lunch, **$60 a week** is left for payments. **The catch:** this app charges a **$7 late fee** for every payment you miss.

Step 1. Fill in every payment on the calendar. Headphones are done for you ($160 ÷ 4 = $40). **Step 2.** Add each week. Mark ✗ if it's over $60.

	Wk 1	Wk 2	Wk 3	Wk 4	Wk 5	Wk 6	Wk 7	Wk 8	Wk 9	Wk 10	Wk 11
Headphones $160 · starts wk 1	*$40*		*$40*		*$40*		*$40*				
Hoodie $80 · starts wk 2											
Game controller $120 · starts wk 4											
Sneakers $200 · starts wk 5											
Week total											
Over $60? ✗											

1. Which weeks are over $60, and by how much?

2. If you miss one payment in each of those weeks, how much do late fees cost?

3. All four items cost $560. Eleven weeks of $60 is $660. So why are you still short?

4. Fix the plan. Change ONE start week so no week is over $60.

MY MONEY CHOICE

Would you split a $200 purchase into four? When is it OK, and when is it a trap?

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Pay in 4: The Real Cost

The quick lesson (read aloud, about 1 minute)

> **Buy now, pay later** (pay in 4) splits a price into four payments, often with no interest if you pay on time. That is a form of **credit**: you get the item now and owe the money later. One plan is easy. Several at once can bunch up in the same weeks, and missed payments bring **late fees**.

Two teaching points

1. Track every payment on one calendar before you add a new one.
2. Waiting a few weeks often fixes the problem. Here, waiting until week 9 for the sneakers means no week goes over $60.

Answer key

Week totals: Wk 1 $40 · Wk 2 $20 · Wk 3 $40 · Wk 4 $50 · Wk 5 $90 · Wk 6 $50 · Wk 7 $90 · Wk 8 $50 · Wk 9 $50 · Wk 10 $30 · Wk 11 $50.

1. Week 5 and week 7, $30 over each. 2. Two late fees = **$14**. 3. Timing: payments bunch up in weeks 5 and 7 even though the total fits. 4. Wait to buy the sneakers until week 9 (payments in weeks 9, 11, 13, 15): no week goes over $60. Week 11 or 12 also works, and so does buying the headphones last (week 12). Waiting is the fix.

10-minute run

1. Fill in the calendar (5 min).
2. Find the weeks over $60.
3. Fix the plan; compare fixes.

Ask

"Why do pay-in-4 apps make it so easy to stack purchases?"

Goal

Stacked buy-now-pay-later plans can cause late fees even when the total looks affordable.

Take it further

Ask: "What if your hours at work were cut one week? Which plan would you protect first?"

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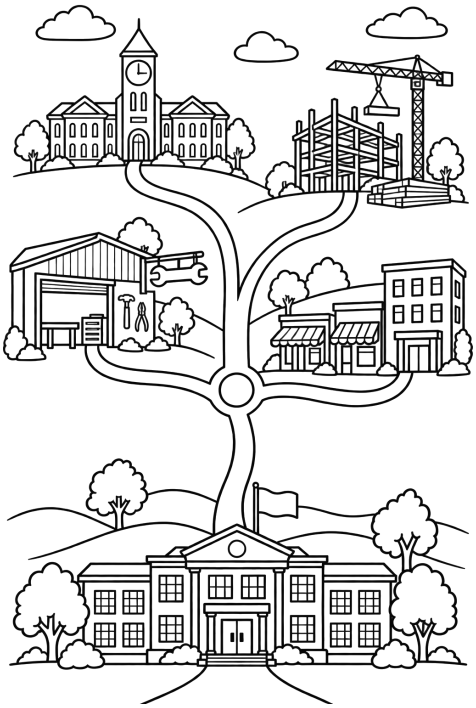
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Four Roads After High School

Name _____ Date _____

Four roads leave the same school. Using the example numbers, find each road's money after 10 years: total pay − cost of training.



Road	Training cost	Pay while training	Pay after	10-year money
College (4 years)	$45,000	$5,000/yr (part-time)	$60,000/yr	
Trade school (1 year)	$15,000	$0/yr	$45,000/yr	
Apprenticeship (4 years, paid)	$0	$30,000/yr	$55,000/yr	
Straight to work	$0	$32,000/yr	$32,000/yr	

Example numbers for practice. Real costs and pay depend on the school, the job and where you live. Raises are ignored.

Real data: in 2024, full-time U.S. workers with a bachelor's degree earned a median of **$1,543 a week**; with a high school diploma, **$930 a week** (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics).

1. Which road has the most money after 10 years?

2. Which road pays the most per year by year 10?

3. Use the real data: about how much more does a bachelor's degree earn in a 52-week year?

4. A career lasts 40+ years. How could the winner after 10 years be different from the winner after 40?

MY MONEY CHOICE

Which road fits you? What would it cost, and what would it pay you back?

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Four Roads After High School

The quick lesson (read aloud, about 1 minute)

> Every path after high school costs something: money, time, or both. Some paths pay you while you learn. Others cost more up front but often pay more later. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics data for 2024: full-time workers with a bachelor's degree earned a median of $1,543 a week, compared with $930 for those with a high school diploma. Averages aren't destinies: the field you choose matters a lot.

Two teaching points

1. Compare cost, time and long-term pay together.
2. Short-term winners and long-term winners can be different.

Answer key

10-year money: College $335,000 · Trade school $390,000 · Apprenticeship $450,000 · Straight to work $320,000.

1. Apprenticeship (with these example numbers). 2. College ($60,000/yr). 3. ($1,543 − $930) × 52 = **$31,876** a year. 4. Higher yearly pay adds up over decades, so a road that starts slower can finish ahead; costs, interest on loans and job demand also matter.

10-minute run

1. Fill in the 10-year money column (5 min).
2. Read the real data box.
3. Debate question 4.

Ask

“What matters to you besides pay?”

Goal

Every road has a cost (money and time) and a payoff. Compare both, short-term and long-term.

Take it further

Have students research one real program near them: its cost, length and starting pay.

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Investment or Gamble?

Name _____ Date _____

You have $500. Here are 10 places it could go. Sort each one: S = safe saving, I = investment, G = gamble.

S = Safe saving. Your money is protected and grows slowly. You can count on getting it back.

I = Investment. Owns a share of real businesses, spread out, held for years. Value goes up and down, but has grown over time.

G = Gamble. Hype, rush, "guaranteed" huge returns, or all your money on one bet. You could lose it all.

1 An index fund that owns small pieces of the 500 biggest U.S. companies.
☐ S ☐ I ☐ G

2 "My cousin says this new coin will 10× by Friday. Get in now!"
☐ S ☐ I ☐ G

3 A high-yield savings account at an FDIC-insured bank.
☐ S ☐ I ☐ G

4 A U.S. savings bond.
☐ S ☐ I ☐ G

5 $20 a week on lottery tickets.
☐ S ☐ I ☐ G

6 Putting all your money in one stock because a video says it will "moon" tomorrow.
☐ S ☐ I ☐ G

7 A 12-month certificate of deposit (CD) at your bank.
☐ S ☐ I ☐ G

8 A meme coin an influencer is paid to promote.
☐ S ☐ I ☐ G

9 A Roth IRA invested in a broad stock index fund for 40 years.
☐ S ☐ I ☐ G

10 A stranger online promises "guaranteed 30% a month."
☐ S ☐ I ☐ G

1. Which offer is most likely a scam? What gives it away?

_____

MY MONEY CHOICE

You have $500. Where does it go, and why? Split it if you like.

_____

_____

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Investment or Gamble?

The quick lesson (read aloud, about 1 minute)

> Every choice with money has **risk** (the chance to lose) and **return** (the chance to gain). Safe savings, like an FDIC-insured account, protect your money but grow slowly. Investing in a broad fund owns many companies and has grown over long periods, with ups and downs. A **gamble** bets on hype or luck. Anyone who promises a "guaranteed" huge return is a red flag.

Two teaching points

1. Higher possible return = higher risk. There is no safe shortcut.
2. Spread money out and give it time; avoid hype and rush.

Answer key

1 = **I** · 2 = **G** · 3 = **S** · 4 = **S** · 5 = **G** · 6 = **G** · 7 = **S** · 8 = **G** · 9 = **I** · 10 = **G**.
Safe saving: 3, 4, 7. Investments: 1, 9. Gambles: 2, 5, 6, 8, 10. Number 10 is almost certainly a scam: no real investment can guarantee 30% a month. Number 8: a paid promotion means someone profits from your buying.
Question 1: offer 10.

10-minute run

1. Read the S / I / G box together.
2. Sort the 10 offers (5 min).
3. Share and defend your $500 split.

Ask

"Why would someone promise a guaranteed return? What do they want?"

Goal

Risk and return go together. Hype, rushing and "guaranteed" big returns are signs of a gamble or a scam.

Take it further

FDIC insurance covers bank deposits up to $250,000 per depositor, per insured bank, per ownership category. Ask: why might that make savings feel safe?

Standard: National Standards for Personal Financial Education (Council for Economic Education and Jump$tart), area: **Investing**. Print double-sided: the activity on the front, this teaching side on the back.

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My First Apartment

Name _____ Date _____

Your first full-time job: $2,600 a month take-home. Live alone, or split a two-bedroom with a roommate? Fill in the totals. (Example numbers for practice.)

Monthly cost	Live alone	With a roommate (your half)
Rent	$1,300	$750
Utilities (power, water)	$150	$90
Internet	$60	$30
Groceries	$350	$350
Transportation	$250	$250
Phone	$45	$45
Total costs		
Left over from $2,600		

1. What percent of take-home pay goes to rent in each case? (rent ÷ 2,600 × 100)

2. Many budget guides suggest keeping rent to about 30% of income. Which option fits?

3. Living alone, plan your leftover: how much to savings, how much to fun, clothes and surprises?

4. Name one thing the roommate option costs you that isn't money.

MY MONEY CHOICE

Roommate or solo? What's the trade-off for you?

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My First Apartment

The quick lesson (read aloud, about 1 minute)

> Housing is usually the biggest bill. Many budget guides suggest keeping rent around 30% of income. A roommate can cut costs a lot, freeing money to save, but it trades away some privacy and control. There's no single right answer, only trade-offs you choose with your eyes open.

Two teaching points

1. Rent often decides how much is left for everything else.
2. Every housing choice has money and non-money trade-offs.

Answer key

Totals: alone $2,155, left over **$445** · roommate $1,515, left over **$1,085**.
1. Alone 1,300 ÷ 2,600 = **50%**; roommate 750 ÷ 2,600 ≈ **28.8%**. 2. The roommate option. 3. Any plan that adds to $445. 4. Privacy, quiet, control over your space, the risk of a roommate not paying.

10-minute run

1. Fill in both totals (4 min).
2. Find the rent percentages.
3. Debate roommate vs. solo.

Ask

“What would you need to know about a roommate before signing a lease?”

Goal

Housing is usually the biggest bill. A lower rent leaves room to save, but every choice has non-money trade-offs.

Take it further

Have students look up a real rental listing near them. What income would make it 30% of take-home?

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What If? Insurance Match

Name _____ Date _____

Bad things happen. Protection helps. Write the letter of the protection that helps most in each "what if." Use each letter once.

1	You back your car into a pole.	☐
2	You break your arm at soccer practice.	☐
3	A fire damages your apartment and your things.	☐
4	An injury keeps you from working for four months.	☐
5	If a parent passed away, the family would lose that income.	☐
6	A guest slips on your icy steps and gets hurt.	☐
7	Your hours at work get cut for two months.	☐
8	Your phone screen shatters.	☐

PROTECTION

- **A** Auto insurance
- **B** Health insurance
- **C** Renters insurance
- **D** Disability insurance
- **E** Life insurance
- **F** Liability coverage
- **G** An emergency fund (your own savings)
- **H** A device protection plan

Two words to know. Premium: what you pay every month for insurance. **Deductible:** what you pay yourself before insurance starts paying.

1. Your health plan has a $500 deductible. After that, it pays 80% of the bill. The broken-arm bill is $2,000. What do YOU pay?

_____

2. Which "what if" isn't solved by insurance at all? Why?

_____

MY MONEY CHOICE

Which risk worries you most? How would you protect yourself against it?

_____

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What If? Insurance Match

The quick lesson (read aloud, about 1 minute)

> **Insurance** is a deal: you pay a small amount regularly (the **premium**) so that if something big and expensive happens, the insurance company helps pay. You usually pay a first part yourself (the **deductible**). Some risks, like a cut in work hours, aren't insurable. That's what an **emergency fund** is for.

Two teaching points

1. Insurance shares the cost of big, rare risks.
2. Savings cover the smaller, more likely surprises.

Answer key

1 → A · 2 → B · 3 → C · 4 → D · 5 → E · 6 → F · 7 → G · 8 → H.
Question 1: $500 + 20% of the remaining $1,500 ($300) = **$800**. Question 2: #7, hours cut. No insurance covers that; an **emergency fund** does. (Some students may say a phone could also come from savings. That's a fair answer.)

10-minute run

1. Match the 8 cards (5 min).
2. Learn premium and deductible.
3. Solve question 1 together.

Ask

"Why not insure everything?"

Goal

Insurance shares the cost of big, rare risks. Savings handle the smaller, more likely ones.

Take it further

Ask: what insurance might you need at 18, 25 and 40? How does it change?

Standard: National Standards for Personal Financial Education (Council for Economic Education and Jump$tart), area: **Managing Risk**. Print double-sided: the activity on the front, this teaching side on the back.

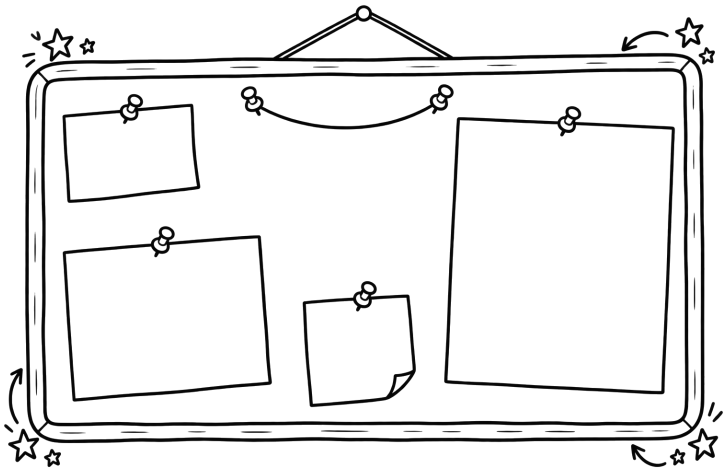
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Money Goals Vision Board

Name _____ Date _____

Pin your goals to the board: write or draw a 1-month goal on the small card, a 1-year goal on the medium card and a 5-year goal on the big card. Then plan each one below.



1 MONTH

small and fast: a win you can get soon

Goal: _____ **Cost: $** _____

First step this week: _____ **Per month: $** _____

1 YEAR

needs a plan and steady saving

Goal: _____ **Cost: $** _____

First step this week: _____ **Per month: $** _____

5 YEARS

big: college, a car, a business, investing

Goal: _____ **Cost: $** _____

First step this week: _____ **Per month: $** _____

Per month = cost ÷ number of months. For 1 year, divide by 12. For 5 years, divide by 60.

MY MONEY CHOICE

What will you do THIS WEEK toward goal #1?

_____

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Money Goals Vision Board

The quick lesson (read aloud, about 1 minute)

> Goals happen when they're **specific** (what exactly), **priced** (how much) and broken into **steps**. Short goals build confidence. Long goals need time, and time is what makes saving and investing grow. The first step is the one that matters most: it turns a wish into a plan.

Two teaching points

1. Price it, then divide by the months you have.
2. Start one small step this week.

Answer key

No single right answer. Check the math: per month = cost ÷ months (e.g., a $1,200 goal in 1 year = $100 a month; $6,000 in 5 years = $100 a month). Look for first steps that are specific and doable this week.

10-minute run

1. Fill the board (4 min).
2. Price each goal and find the monthly amount.
3. Share one first step with a partner.

Ask

"Which goal might change as you get older? Is that OK?"

Goal

Goals work when they're specific, priced and broken into steps you can start now.

Take it further

Have students set a reminder for 30 days from now to check their 1-month goal.

Standard: National Standards for Personal Financial Education (Council for Economic Education and Jump$tart), area: **Saving and Investing**. Print double-sided: the activity on the front, this teaching side on the back.

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The Tax Season Escape Room

Name _____ Date _____

Jamie worked two summer jobs and got two W-2 forms. Is Jamie owed money back? Crack all five locks to escape! (Practice forms and numbers.)

Form W-2 (practice) Employer: Burger Barn

Box 1 · Wages	Box 2 · Federal tax withheld
$6,000	$180

Form W-2 (practice) Employer: City Pool

Box 1 · Wages	Box 2 · Federal tax withheld
$4,500	$120

Escape rules (simplified): Taxable income = total wages − the standard deduction (use **$14,000**, a practice number). If that's below $0, taxable income is $0, and so is the tax owed. Refund = tax withheld − tax owed.

LOCK 1
Total wages from both W-2s (Box 1).
$

LOCK 2
Total federal tax already withheld (Box 2).
$

LOCK 3
Taxable income: total wages − $14,000. (Below $0? Write 0.)
$

LOCK 4
Tax owed on that taxable income.
$

LOCK 5
THE BIG ONE. Jamie's refund: tax withheld − tax owed. What does Jamie get back by filing?
$

1. If Jamie never files a tax return, what happens to that money?

_____

MY MONEY CHOICE

What would you do with a $300 refund? Why?

_____

_____

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The Tax Season Escape Room

The quick lesson (read aloud, about 1 minute)

> When you work, your employer **withholds** some pay for federal income tax and sends it to the IRS. Each year you file a **tax return** to check the math. If your income is low, you may owe little or nothing, and you can get the withheld money back as a **refund**. No filing, no refund.

Two teaching points

1. Your W-2 shows wages (Box 1) and tax withheld (Box 2).
2. Refund = tax withheld − tax owed.

Answer key

Lock 1 **$10,500** · Lock 2 **$300** · Lock 3 **$0** ($10,500 − $14,000 is below zero) · Lock 4 **$0** · Lock 5 **$300** refund.

1. Jamie doesn't get the $300 back. A refund only comes by filing. (The IRS generally allows about three years to claim a refund.) The real standard deduction changes each year; check IRS.gov.

10-minute run

1. Read the two W-2s together.
2. Crack locks 1–5 in pairs (6 min).
3. Discuss question 1.

Ask

"Why might a teen with a summer job want to file even if they don't owe tax?"

Goal

Employers withhold tax from paychecks. Filing a return checks the math, and if too much was withheld, you get it back.

Take it further

Show students IRS Free File (irs.gov/freefile) and talk about what documents they'd need.

Standard: National Standards for Personal Financial Education (Council for Economic Education and Jump$tart), area: **Earning Income**. Print double-sided: the activity on the front, this teaching side on the back.

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