FINANCIAL 101 · ONE-PAGE CHECKLIST

The Financial Order of Operations

Where each next dollar should go. Work down the list. Most people live on step two or three for years — that is fine.

- [ ] 01 **Starter emergency fund**
  About one month of essential expenses, in a separate savings account.
- [ ] 02 **Capture the full employer match**
  Contribute enough to your 401(k) to get every dollar offered. It is part of your pay.
- [ ] 03 **Kill high-interest debt**
  Credit cards and anything charging double digits. A guaranteed return no investment matches.
- [ ] 04 **Full emergency fund**
  Three to six months of essentials, sized to job security and dependents.
- [ ] 05 **Fund an HSA, if eligible**
  Requires a qualifying high-deductible health plan. Invest it rather than spend it if you can.
- [ ] 06 **Max a Roth (or traditional) IRA**
  Your own account, your own low-cost fund choices.
- [ ] 07 **Max the 401(k)**
  Go back and fill the workplace plan to the annual limit.
- [ ] 08 **Taxable brokerage & other goals**
  Everything above is full. Same index funds; now the house, the sabbatical, whatever is next.

Throughout, at every step

Low-cost index funds. A written stock/bond split. Automatic contributions. One rebalance a year.
That is the whole strategy. The exciting alternatives usually end worse.

2026 LIMITS · IRS NOTICE 2025-67

401(k) / 403(b) / TSP employee limit	**$24,500**	50+: +$8,000 · ages 60–63: +$11,250
Total 401(k) incl. employer	**$72,000**	
IRA (Roth + traditional combined)	**$7,500**	Catch-up 50+: +$1,100
Roth IRA income phase-out	**$153k–$168k single**	$242k–$252k married filing jointly