Alex Carter, CFP®.
BELLEVUE, WA · LPL FINANCIAL

PLANNING · GUIDE

The 5-Zone Cash Flow Worksheet

A fill-in-by-hand companion to your ClarityCompass check-in: see where your money actually goes each month, one zone at a time.

An educational guide from Alex Carter, CFP®

Bellevue, WA · LPL Financial

> *Most of us know roughly what we earn, but far fewer of us can say with confidence where it all goes. This worksheet is a calm, judgment-free way to map your monthly spending across five everyday zones (Housing, Savings, Family, Debt, and Lifestyle) so the full picture is in front of you on a single page. Grab last month's bank and card statements, a pen, and twenty unhurried minutes; there are no right answers here, only a clearer view of your own numbers.*

01 How to use this worksheet

This is a companion to the ClarityCompass assessment. Where ClarityCompass asks how you feel about your finances, this worksheet looks at the raw monthly numbers underneath those feelings. The two work well side by side: the picture you build here can give your reflections something concrete to point at.

Work through one zone at a time. For each, you'll find a short plain-English explanation, a few reflective prompts to consider, and a small table to fill in by hand. Pull the actual dollar figures from a recent month's statements rather than estimating from memory. Memory tends to round in optimistic directions. If a month was unusual (a big trip, an annual bill), make a note in the margin so you remember it later.

- Use one recent, fairly typical month so the numbers reflect normal life.
- Enter monthly amounts; for bills you pay once or twice a year, divide by 12 to get a monthly figure.
- If you're not sure which zone a line item belongs in, pick one and stay consistent. Consistency matters more than the perfect category.
- Round to whole dollars. Precision to the penny isn't the point; the shape of the picture is.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
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> Tip: Print this and fill it in by hand. Writing each number down tends to make spending feel more real than scrolling through an app, and the totals at the end are easier to sit with on paper.

02 Zone 1: Housing

Housing usually represents one of the larger shares of a monthly budget, so it's a natural place to begin. This zone covers keeping a roof over your head and the lights on: rent or mortgage, property taxes and insurance if they aren't already bundled into your payment, utilities, and the ongoing costs of maintaining where you live.

Capturing housing fully often surprises people: not just the rent or mortgage line, but the steady stream of utilities and upkeep around it. The reflective prompts below can help you notice the pieces that are easy to overlook.

- What is the full cost of where you live each month, beyond just the rent or mortgage payment?
- Which housing costs are fixed, and which ones move around month to month (heating, cooling, water)?
- Are any annual or seasonal housing expenses (property tax, HOA dues, a maintenance fund) worth dividing into a monthly figure here?
- Does this total feel in line with what you'd expect, or larger or smaller than you assumed?

03 Zone 2: Savings

Savings is the zone for money you intentionally set aside rather than spend. That can include contributions to an emergency fund, transfers into savings or investment accounts, and amounts directed toward retirement accounts such as a 401(k) or IRA. Listing these as their own zone treats saving as a deliberate choice rather than whatever happens to be left over at the end of the month.

Some people find it helpful to think of savings as a 'bill you pay to your future self.' Whether that framing fits you is personal. The goal here is simply to see, in one place, how much is currently flowing toward your future. How much to save, and into which kinds of accounts, depends on your circumstances and is worth discussing with a qualified advisor or tax professional.

- How much are you currently moving toward savings or investments in a typical month?
- Are these contributions automatic, or do they depend on remembering to make them?
- Do you have a sense of how many months of expenses your emergency savings would currently cover?
- If this zone is smaller than you'd like, which other zone might it be competing with for the same dollars?

> GOOD TO KNOW
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> Tip: Even a small, steady amount counts here. The purpose of this zone is to make saving visible, not to hit any particular number. There's no universal 'right' figure that applies to everyone.

04 Zone 3: Family

The Family zone covers the costs of caring for the people who depend on you and supporting your household beyond housing. Depending on your situation, that might include groceries, childcare or tuition, healthcare and insurance premiums, support for aging parents, or other commitments tied to the people in your life.

This zone looks very different from one household to the next, and that's expected. Some of these costs are non-negotiable; others reflect values and priorities that are entirely yours to weigh. The prompts below are meant to help you see the whole of it, not to judge any part of it.

- Who do you provide for financially, and what does that support cost in a typical month?
- Which family costs are essential, and which are choices you'd want to protect even if money got tighter?
- Are there caregiving or support costs that don't show up on a statement but still affect your budget?
- Does seeing this total in one place change how you think about its size, in either direction?

05 Zone 4: Debt

This zone captures what you pay each month toward money you've borrowed: credit cards, student loans, auto loans, personal loans, and similar obligations. To keep the picture clean, list your housing-related mortgage payment in the Housing zone and use this zone for your other debts, so you can see them grouped together.

Seeing all of your debt payments side by side can clarify how much of each month is committed before you've spent anything by choice. Which balances to focus on, and in what order, depends heavily on your individual situation, including interest rates and your broader goals. There's no single approach that fits everyone, and a conversation with a qualified professional can help you weigh the options for your circumstances.

- What are you paying toward borrowed money each month, across all of your accounts?
- Which of these are minimum payments, and which include extra that you choose to pay?
- If you grouped these by interest rate, which would stand out as the most expensive to carry?
- How does the size of this zone compare to your Savings zone, and how do you feel about that balance?

06 Zone 5: Lifestyle

Lifestyle is the zone for the spending that makes life enjoyable and reflects your personality: dining out, travel, hobbies, subscriptions, entertainment, gifts, and the discretionary purchases that don't fit neatly anywhere else. This is often the most flexible zone, and for many people the hardest to estimate from memory.

There's nothing to feel guilty about here. The aim is awareness, not austerity. Many small recurring charges and one-off treats live in this zone, so the statement-based approach tends to be especially revealing. Whatever the total turns out to be, it's information you can use however you see fit.

- What did you spend on enjoyment, convenience, and discretionary purchases last month?
- Which recurring subscriptions or memberships are in here, and are you still using all of them?
- Of this spending, what genuinely added to your life, and what was more habit than intention?
- If you wanted to redirect some of this zone elsewhere, where might that money do more for you?

07 Your totals, and what the picture is telling you

Now bring it together. Add up each zone's table, write the five totals in one column, and sum them for your total monthly outflow. Next to that, jot down your typical monthly take-home income. Comparing the two is where the worksheet earns its keep. So is seeing how the five zones stack up against each other.

Resist the urge to grade yourself. A picture you don't love is still a useful picture; it simply shows you where attention might be worth spending next. The questions below can turn your numbers into a few honest observations.

If anything here raises a bigger question about saving, debt, taxes, or planning for a goal, consider it a starting point for a conversation rather than a conclusion. A qualified financial advisor, CPA, or attorney can help you think through what your specific numbers mean for your situation.

- Which single zone is larger than you expected, and which is smaller?
- Does your total monthly outflow leave any room beneath your take-home income, and if so, where is that room currently going?
- If you wanted to grow one zone over the next year, which would it be, and which zone might fund it?
- Which one observation from this page would you most want to talk through with someone you trust?
- What's a single, small adjustment you could revisit at your next ClarityCompass check-in?

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
> A worksheet like this is a snapshot of one month, not a verdict on your finances. Revisiting it a few times a year and watching how the zones shift usually tell you more than any single fill-in ever could.

Key takeaways

- The five zones (Housing, Savings, Family, Debt, and Lifestyle) give you a simple, repeatable way to see your whole month on one page.
- Pull figures from a recent month's statements rather than estimating; actual numbers tend to tell a more honest story than memory.
- Treating Savings as its own zone makes setting money aside a visible, deliberate choice instead of whatever happens to be left over.
- Grouping all your non-housing debt payments together can clarify how much of each month is committed before any discretionary spending begins.
- The Lifestyle zone is usually the most flexible and the easiest to underestimate, which makes the statement-based approach especially worthwhile.
- This worksheet is a starting point for reflection and conversation. How to act on what you see depends on your circumstances and is worth discussing with a qualified advisor, CPA, or attorney.

YOUR SITUATION IS UNIQUE

Questions about how this applies to you?

This guide is a starting point. Schedule a discovery call and we will map it to your own goals, timeline, and circumstances.

Visit carterfinancialplanning.com or call (425) 451-2950.

IMPORTANT DISCLOSURES

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