

# The Sorting Guide

*The complete DIY playbook for clearing a home — the five-color system, the rules, and the exact order so you never give value away.*

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The first time you have to empty a whole house — a parent's, a grandparent's, sometimes your own — the hard part isn't the lifting. It's that every object in front of you is a small decision, there are thousands of them, and a handful of those decisions are quietly worth real money you can't see just by looking. This guide is the system used to make those thousands of decisions without losing the valuable few, without losing your weekends, and without losing your family in the process. It's the same method a seasoned professional runs in their head — written down, in order, and handed to you for free.

I've spent most of my working life in the auction business, which means I've watched thousands of households get broken down and sold. Two things are true about nearly all of them. The first is that the families doing the work are trying hard and care a great deal about getting it right. The second is that effort, on its own, doesn't protect value — and sometimes it quietly destroys it. The difference between a clean outcome and an expensive one is almost never how hard someone worked. It's whether they had a system.

## Value is more than money

Before any of the sorting, it helps to widen what the word value even means. Every estate runs on five limited resources, and every decision you make either spends them or protects them: your time, your energy, your money, the physical space the property takes up (which usually costs something every month it sits), and your mental focus — the hardest one to get back. The right call for an item isn't the one that would sell for the most. It's the one that handles the item well across all five at once.

### FROM THE AUCTION ROOM

*A woman once kept her late father's woodshop completely intact for fourteen months, because clearing it felt like erasing him. The storage unit ran \$165 a month — a little over \$2,300 by the time she called us. When the tools finally went to auction, they brought about \$1,900. She hadn't lost money on the tools; she'd lost it on a year of rent for a decision she couldn't bring herself to make. The shop was never the problem. The not-deciding was.*

## Six decisions. Five colors. One system.

Here is the entire method in one sentence: every item in the property gets exactly one colored sticky note, and nothing leaves until everything has one. That's it. Five colors, so anyone who walks through can read the whole plan off the walls at a glance — no meetings, no master spreadsheet, no 'wait, what did we decide about the dresser.'

- GREEN — SELL. There's a willing buyer at a price worth the effort: auction, estate sale, specialty buyer, online, or consignment.
- YELLOW — DONATE. Usable, and a charity will actually take it: thrift store, Habitat ReStore, Goodwill, scheduled pickup. A donation receipt has real tax value — it isn't 'nothing.'
- RED — TRASH or RECYCLE. Genuinely broken, unusable, or expired: junk removal, a roll-off dumpster, scrap metal, e-recycling.
- PINK — KEEP. Going to a specific, named person. Write the name and a pickup date right on the note. 'The family' is not a name.
- BLUE — RESEARCH / SPECIALIST. Unknown value, or a category you know can be worth real money. Don't guess and don't move it — secure it and get an expert look.

Notice that only one of the five colors is 'I'm not sure' — and even that one has a job: get it looked at. There is no sixth color for 'I'll decide later.' Later is where estates go to stall.

### ONE ROOM, START TO FINISH

*Take a single bedroom. The bed frame and dresser are solid and sellable — green. The clothes are clean and wearable but worth more as a donation receipt than as a sale — yellow. The cracked lamp and the expired medications in the nightstand — red (and the meds go to a pharmacy take-back, not the trash). Grandma's wedding ring, which your sister has always been promised — pink, with your sister's name and 'pickup by the 15th' on the tag. And the small, dark painting nobody ever looked twice at, signed in the corner — blue. Hold it. That last one is the whole reason this system exists.*

**Map your zones. Put a strip of blue painter's tape on each room's doorframe and write a name or number on it. Then 'the green-tagged dresser in Zone 3' means the same thing to everyone, and nobody has to walk upstairs to find out what you meant.**

## The order of operations

The system tells you what each item is. The order tells you when to act — and the order matters just as much, because the single most expensive mistake in this entire process is clearing the house

before everything else has happened. Do it in this sequence, every time, no matter how tight the deadline is.

#### FROM THE AUCTION ROOM

*A family once hired a junk crew to 'clear it all out so we can finally see what we're dealing with' — clearance first, as step one. The roll-off cost them about \$600. Into it went a shoebox of costume jewelry that had three pieces of real gold mixed in, and a 'beat-up old painting' a dealer told them afterward would have brought somewhere near \$2,800. So they paid roughly \$600 to throw away about \$3,500. I tell this story a lot, because the lesson is brutal and simple: the truck does not come back.*

- 1 **SECURE** the valuable and sensitive items first — cash, jewelry, coins, firearms, important documents, medications. Photograph them, write them down, move them somewhere safe. Do this before anyone else sets foot in the house.
- 2 **CONFIRM** who is in charge. No contracts, no sales, no commitments until the decision-maker is settled. If it isn't clear who that is, that's a question for an estate attorney, not a family group text.
- 3 **LET FAMILY CLAIM** their keepsakes — name on the tag, a real pickup date, and the item physically out of the house before the sale. Promises made out loud are not the same as items removed.
- 4 **EVALUATE** the high-value, low-friction things — the categories where one free expert look can protect real money. This happens before the sale opens, not after.
- 5 **MAKE SURE THE SPACE WORKS** — confirm that people and equipment can actually get the big items out the door and down the stairs.
- 6 **OPEN** the sale or auction.
- 7 **DONATE** what's usable — with a receipt, and with the pickup scheduled before clearance is booked.
- 8 **CLEAR** what's left. Last. Always last. Once that truck is loaded, whatever's on it is gone for good.

## The rules that keep it honest

Underneath the colors and the order, a handful of plain rules keep the whole thing from drifting:

- Sort before you clear.
- Secure the valuable items before anything else moves.
- The most valuable things get evaluated before the sale opens, not after.
- Everything comes out before clearance goes in.
- Every item gets exactly one assignment.
- Damaged does not automatically mean trash.

- High-value, low-friction categories get a specialist's eyes — every time.
- Sentimental value is real value, and it's allowed to win.
- 'I haven't decided yet' is not a category.
- You decide what to keep; let your advisor decide where things sell best.
- A tight deadline changes the timeline, not the rules.
- Stopping for the day — or the week — is sometimes the right call.

## When 'junk' isn't junk

Two kinds of mistakes hide inside the word junk, and they cut in opposite directions. One is assuming something is valuable because it's old or because it cost a lot once. The other is assuming something is worthless because it looks rough. The market doesn't care about either of your assumptions — it pays for what people want right now.

### TWO ITEMS, TWO LESSONS

*A heavy oak buffet that cost \$3,500 new, built to last a hundred years, sold for \$330 — because almost nobody furnishes that way anymore, and the market prices what's wanted, not what's well-made. In the same season, a battered tool chest a family had tagged for the dumpster brought \$4,200 once someone who knew tools opened the drawers. Old and expensive isn't the same as valuable. Ugly isn't the same as worthless. When you can't tell which one you're holding, that's exactly what the blue note is for.*

## When to pause

A few situations aren't 'keep going' — they're 'stop and get the right help first.' These aren't failures or dead ends; each one simply has a clear next step. Pause for hazardous materials (remediation before anything else), firearms (always handled through a licensed FFL dealer — no exceptions, regardless of value), no confirmed authority to act (an estate attorney), legal or financial documents you weren't expecting (secure them and ask before acting), and for a person in the family who simply isn't ready yet. Take care of the person first. The house will still be there.

**You can run this entire system yourself — thousands of families do. But you don't have to run it alone, and you don't have to guess on the blue-note items. Send us a few photos and we'll give you an honest, free read on what to keep, sell, donate, or clear — and the right order to do it in your home, specifically. No charge, no pressure, and we never take a cut of what sells.**

