



READING A TAX RETURN

As a Roadmap

Most tax returns are read selectively. Attention gravitates toward totals, refunds, or line items that appear to explain the result. This guide invites a different approach. Rather than treating the return as a verdict on the year, it encourages reading it as a compressed record of how financial decisions interacted once timing and circumstance were no longer hypothetical.

A tax return does not explain why decisions were made. It shows what happened when those decisions overlapped. That distinction matters.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

You do not need to answer every question on this page. Read through them slowly and notice which ones create friction or surprise. Those moments are often more informative than complete answers. The goal is not to diagnose a problem or identify a solution. It is to see how timing, interaction, and context shaped the outcome you are reviewing.

COMPRESSED, NOT SIMPLIFIED

A tax return compresses an entire year into a single document, placing income earned months apart alongside investment activity, benefits, charitable gifts, and liquidity events as if they occurred together. What appears simultaneous on the page often reflects decisions made at very different times and under different conditions. This compression can blur sequence, but it also creates clarity. Decisions that never intersected during the year become visible in relation to one another, offering a perspective that was not available when choices were made individually and in real time.

Ask Yourself:

1. Which decisions appear adjacent on the return even though they occurred far apart in time?
2. Where does the combined effect of decisions matter more than any single choice on its own?



WHERE INTERACTION BECOMES VISIBLE

Many tax outcomes are better explained by interaction than by any single decision. Income levels influence how investment activity is taxed, liquidity events change the value of deductions, and the timing of one event can amplify or mute the effect of another. These relationships are rarely obvious when decisions are made. They emerge only when outcomes are calculated together. The tax return records those combined effects without explanation, making it visible where overlap shaped the result.

Ask Yourself:

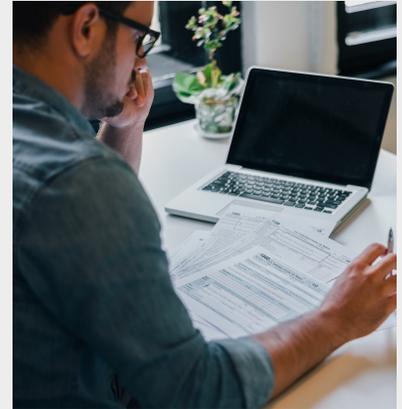
1. Where did the interaction between decisions matter more than the decisions themselves?
2. Which outcomes were shaped by timing rather than intent?

WHAT THE RETURN DOES NOT SHOW

While a tax return is comprehensive, it is incomplete in important ways. It records outcomes without context. It does not capture intent, alternatives that were considered and rejected, or decisions that were postponed or avoided. It also does not distinguish between results that were anticipated and those that came as a surprise. For this reason, the return should be read with restraint. It reflects what happened, not how decisions were evaluated as they were made.

Ask Yourself:

1. Which outcomes lack context when viewed only through the return?
2. What decisions or tradeoffs shaped the result but do not appear on the page?



FROM OUTCOME TO INSIGHT

When reviewed as a system snapshot, a tax return becomes a source of insight rather than judgment. Patterns of timing, concentration, and interaction come into view, revealing how decisions worked together under real conditions. These patterns are difficult to see while choices are being made, when attention is narrow and information is incomplete. They become clear only in hindsight, once outcomes are recorded side by side. The purpose of this review is not to identify mistakes or prescribe changes, but to understand how decisions combined, and where alignment or misalignment influenced the result. That understanding provides a more reliable foundation for future judgment than any single line item on the return.

Ask Yourself:

1. What patterns become visible only when the year is viewed as a whole?
2. Where did interaction shape the outcome more than any individual decision?

Copyright 2026 Stickney Research - All Rights Reserved

Securities and investment advisory services offered through Integrity Alliance, LLC, Member SIPC. Integrity Wealth is a marketing name for Integrity Alliance, LLC. Stickney Research is not affiliated with Integrity Wealth. Tax and legal services are not provided by Integrity Wealth.

This document is published for residents of the United States only. This document is informational only and is intended to provide general information about the subject matter covered and is provided with the understanding that no tax, legal, accounting, or other professional advice is being rendered.