GREAT ADVICE FOR GRADS 2024

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First off, huge congratulations on graduating—you did it!

As you step into the next chapter after college, it's natural to feel a mix of excitement and uncertainty, especially when it comes to managing your finances.

I know, I know, it's not the most exciting topic, but trust me, getting a handle on your finances now will set you up for success down the road.

So, here's the deal:

Budgeting Basics: Start by creating a budget that works for you. It doesn't have to be super fancy — just make sure you're spending less than you're earning.

Tackling Student Loans: Yep, those pesky student loans. Don't stress, though. Give your loan servicer a call, explore your repayment options, and come up with a plan that works for you.

Spring Clean Your Finances: Just like you tidy up your place in the spring, take some time to declutter your bank accounts. Consolidate if you can, cut out any unnecessary fees, and make sure everything's running smoothly.

Building Generational Wealth: It's never too early to start thinking about your financial future. Whether it's investing, saving for retirement, or starting a side hustle, take small steps now that will pay off big time later, finding the balance is key.

Remember, nobody expects you to have all the answers right out of the gate. It's okay to ask for help and learn as you go. Mastering your finances is a journey, not a destination.

You've got this!

Michelle

Inceptia

Financial Tips for New College Grads

KIMBERLY PALMER

For new college graduates, receiving that first post-degree paycheck can be almost as exciting as getting the diploma itself. But it also presents a challenge: Given the many demands on a young person's budget, how should those funds be managed?

We asked five money experts to share their best personal finance strategies to help this year's college grads successfully launch their financial lives. Here's what they said.

FIND YOUR BUDGETING STYLE

To figure out how to allocate your money toward needs, wants and everything else, Erin Lowry, author of the "Broke Millennial Workbook," says that instead of following the latest budgeting trend on TikTok, it's helpful to just sit down with a pen and paper. "Write down what your big expenses are," she says.

After accounting for large items like rent, car payments and food, you can then see what nonessentials also fit. "You might want to go out to dinner with friends, build up new work attire or adopt a dog," Lowry says. Writing out the budget helps you figure out what you can afford and when, she adds.

"We conceive of budgets as restrictive things that keep us from having fun, but you should be thinking of it as a way of controlling how your money is spent. If you don't know, you've sacrificed all control," Lowry says.

FACTOR IN TAXES

Melissa Jean-Baptiste, a financial educator and the author of the book "So… This Is Why I'm Broke," says it's easy to forget to account for taxes, so you might have less take-home pay than you anticipated. Retirement contributions and other deductions can further lower that amount.

Jean-Baptiste suggests setting aside some time to really understand your first paycheck and all those deductions. "Take yourself on a money date so you understand how much you're bringing home and how much you have left to save and invest," she says.

SAVE SMARTLY

Even if they're paying off debt, Alex Rezzo, a certified financial planner and the founder of Andante Financial in the Los Angeles area, urges new grads to start saving for retirement right away. "There will always be a more immediate excuse to delay saving for retirement," he says, but he urges people to find a way to save at least 1% of each paycheck and to increase that amount over time.

He also suggests parking your direct-deposited paycheck funds in an online bank that offers a competitive high-yield account and is backed by the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. That way, the money likely will earn more than it would sitting in a traditional bank's checking or savings account.

PROTECT YOUR CREDIT

As you build your independent financial life, making at least the minimum payments on your student loan and credit card accounts can help protect your credit. Missing a payment, Lowry says, could damage your credit score. She suggests focusing on paying down any high-interest debt first to reduce the total amount going to interest.

Lowry also suggests freezing or locking your credit, which makes it much harder for identity thieves to apply for new credit in your name. Just remember that if you freeze your credit, you'll also have to thaw it if you want to apply for credit yourself, she says, adding, "you might want to wait until you're through a period of time when you're applying for new accounts."

MAKE MISTAKES AND LEARN FROM THEM

Kennedy Reynolds, chief education officer at Acorns, a financial services company, says mistakes are part of the learning process, whether it's overspending or accruing credit card debt, but the key is to learn from the experience. "If you have debt to pay down, take that paycheck and split it up" toward those bills until they are paid off, she says.

"Try to picture yourself later and know that the choices you're making now will have a long-term impact," she adds.

LOOK BEYOND YOUR PAYCHECK

Linda Whiteman, a personal finance teacher at Outschool, an online learning platform for kids, teaches her students to think entrepreneurially. After all, she tells them, most millionaires are business owners.

"You don't have to work for someone," she says. She asks her students to consider what they can teach others, whether offering piano lessons online or creating digital art. Pursuing additional income streams outside of a paycheck can help grow wealth, she adds.

Jean-Baptiste found success doing exactly that: She used her experience as a teacher to create and sell lesson plans online. "I was bringing in $10,000 a year that I could put toward debt," she says. Her lesson plans eventually turned into the financial literacy business that she operates today.

Earning additional income outside of a paycheck, she says, "can be a game-changer"— financial wisdom that applies at any age.

This article Financial Tips for New College Grads was originally published on NerdWallet on June 8, 2023.

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6 Ways to Spring Clean Your Bank Accounts

RUTH SARREAL

Spring cleaning isn't just for your closets or attic. It can apply to your finances, too. Taking the time to do a deep clean of your spending and deposits can help ensure you're using minimal effort throughout the year to meet your saving and budgeting goals. Here are a few steps to take when you're ready to spring clean your bank accounts.

1 REVIEW ACCOUNT TRANSACTIONS FROM YOUR BANK

Look through your statements from the past few months for any penalties or charges that have been assessed by your bank. While some banks and credit unions have eliminated overdraft fees, yours might still be charging them. Some banks also charge an inactivity fee if you haven't used your account in a while. Or your account might charge a monthly service fee.

If you've been charged an overdraft recently, try asking for a refund and consider what you can do to avoid those fees next time. Find an account that doesn't penalize overdrawing your funds or charge any monthly or other fees. There are plenty of FDIC-insured banks that offer competitive accounts with no fees and no minimum requirements.

2 HIT 'UNSUBSCRIBE'

Scanning your bank account can be an effective way to see your subscription payments in one place. The cost of your subscription services can be much higher than you estimate. A survey done by market research firm C+R in 2022 of 1,000 consumers found that consumers, on average, estimated their subscription spending to be $86 per month. Their actual average monthly spending on subscription services was $219. So it's a good idea to audit your subscription charges.

"One of the things I recommend that people do when it comes to subscriptions is to make sure you're at the right level," says Mical Jeanlys-White, CEO and founder of WealthMore, a firm that aims to provide accessible and affordable financial advisors for investment and financial planning services. She says to consider whether you need the subscription, and if you do, to see whether a cheaper plan might be enough. "Are you keeping a premium level where you may just need the basic?" she asks.

3 TAKE A HOLISTIC VIEW

As you review your subscriptions, take time to look at all your transactions and expenses, including ones from your credit cards. Consider whether they all align with your money goals. "The biggest transfer of your wealth is your day-to-day spending. So be intentional," says Jeanlys-White. "Do I want to transfer my wealth to this vacation? This retailer? This restaurant here? This wine bar?"

4 GO PAPERLESS

If you receive paper bank statements, consider switching to electronic statements. Some financial institutions charge a fee for paper statements, so it could be an opportunity to save a few dollars each month. If you're not already receiving and paying bills online rather than by mail, you can set this up for yourself as part of your spring cleaning.

Anora Gaudiano, a certified financial planner and assistant vice president at Wealthspire Advisors in New York City, recommends also ditching paper checks, if possible. "Checks get lost and checks get stolen," she says. "People can use online payment systems and wires to avoid this." You can set up online bill pay or, in some cases, use peer-to-peer payment apps such as Zelle or Venmo if you're paying someone you know and trust.

5 AUTOMATE YOUR ACCOUNTS TO MEET YOUR GOALS

There's a lot you can automate to make it easy to manage money in your bank accounts. You can set up automatic bill payments from your bank account for recurring expenses such as utilities, and set up direct deposit for your paychecks. You can even split your direct deposits so that a certain amount goes straight to your savings, for example; or you can set up recurring auto transfers from a checking account into savings. Jeanlys-White recommends turning that discipline of good financial habits to autopilot mode so you don't have to think about it.

6 STREAMLINE YOUR BANK ACCOUNTS

Review the bank accounts you have open. For each, ask yourself, "Does this serve me? Is this aligned with my lifestyle and the goals that I want to accomplish?" says Lea Landaverde, Founder of Riqueza Collective, which makes bilingual financial education accessible to underrepresented communities.

Investigate if your savings accounts still have competitive rates. The best rates right now are around 5% annual percentage yield, while the national average savings rate is just 0.46% as of February 2024. If you're not earning as much as you could be, consider moving your money to a high-yield savings account or, for funds you won't need in the near future, to a high-rate certificate of deposit.

Comb through to see if there are any accounts that you aren't really using. Consider consolidating or closing accounts and moving funds where they can earn more interest.

Alternatively, you may find that you want to open another account in order to get streamlined. You can open two checking accounts, for example: one for paying bills and another for your spending money. Or you may find it helpful to have multiple bank accounts at different banks or credit unions to keep your savings at a different place than your checking account, so your funds aren't easy to dip into when you're tempted to spend more. "You can have multiple accounts," says Landaverde. "There is no right or wrong with having 10 accounts versus two accounts."

DON'T LIMIT YOURSELF TO SPRINGTIME TO CLEAN UP YOUR BANK ACCOUNTS

"I would suggest that you do a financial spring cleaning, summer cleaning, fall cleaning and winter cleaning," says Jeanlys-White. Landaverde agrees that it's a good idea to review your bank accounts more regularly. "You can set up a monthly reoccurring date with yourself on a Sunday or on a Friday when you get paid, to organize your finances to ensure that you kind of know where your paycheck is going," says Landaverde. This way, reviewing your finances is less overwhelming, she says.

Whether you're spring cleaning your bank accounts for the first time or you already have the kind of regular schedule that Landaverde and Jeanlys-White recommend, taking the time to consider whether you're getting the most of your deposit accounts — and switching banks or accounts when necessary — can help you maximize your earnings and avoid fees.

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The article 6 Ways to Spring Clean Your Bank Accounts was written for NerdWallet on February 28, 2024.

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Calling Your Student Loan Servicer? It Pays to Prepare

ELIZA HAVERSTOCK

If you need free, personalized guidance about your federal student loans, want to switch repayment plans, or are dealing with misleading or incorrect bills, there's one place to call: your student loan servicer.

But these days, ringing up your servicer isn't guaranteed to resolve your issue. In the face of an unprecedented return to student loan repayment last fall, servicers had to staff up quickly with limited resources. And borrowers have reported hours-long hold times, misleading advice, incorrect or late billing statements and other shortcomings from their servicers. As a result, the White House has withheld more than $9 million in servicer pay as of January for "failing to meet contractual obligations."

"This is not the point where you can rely on the servicers 100% to give you the most accurate up-to-date information you will need if you're a borrower," says Alpha Taylor, a National Consumer Law Center staff attorney focused on student loans.

Though issues like billing errors and long hold times are largely out of your hands, you can still take action to have an efficient, helpful call with your student loan servicer. Here's how to prepare for a servicer call that gets results.

IDENTIFY YOUR SERVICER

The federal government contracts with a handful of private companies, called servicers, to manage student loan repayment. You're assigned a servicer when you first take out your student loans. Servicers send monthly bills, collect your payments and help you keep your loans in good standing by providing support and guidance.

To determine which servicer is yours, log in to your account on StudentAid.gov. You can also get in touch with any of the loan servicer contact centers by calling the Federal Student Aid Information Center at 800-4-FED-AID.

KNOW WHAT SERVICERS CAN (AND CAN'T) HELP YOU WITH

Your servicer should be able to answer almost any question or concern you may have about your student loans, Scott Buchanan, executive director of the Student Loan Servicing Alliance, said by email. Common call topics include:

- Switching repayment plans.
- Forbearance or deferment.
- Setting up autopay.
- Lowering payments with income-driven repayment, like the new SAVE plan.
- Where to send payments.
- Incorrect or late billing statements.
- Locating student loan-related tax forms.
- Enrolling in Public Service Loan Forgiveness.

However, servicers can't help with everything. They don't own your loans, or decide the terms — they only manage the repayment process.

"We can help you access benefits and programs, but we can't change them," Buchanan said. "For example, we cannot change your interest rate, change the number of payments needed to access forgiveness programs or negotiate the loan balance amount. Those are all the terms and conditions that Congress and the government set."

DO RESEARCH AND PREPARE YOUR QUESTIONS

Before calling your servicer, it's important to do your homework. You don't need to be a student loan expert, but you should have a basic idea of the repayment plans, relief options and forgiveness programs that may be available to you.

Trusted resources include StudentAid.gov, the Education Department's loan simulator and the NCLC's Student Loan Borrower Assistance project.

Doing this research will help you ask informed questions and allow you to cross-check your servicer during the call.

"I want the borrower to understand that no one knows their student loans story better than them," says Taylor. "If you have a feeling that something is off, if you think that you're applying for SAVE and a monthly payment you thought you were going to get is not the one that appears on your bill, chances are you're probably right."

GATHER KEY DOCUMENTS

For an efficient servicer call, you should gather relevant documents and account numbers and have them on hand before picking up the phone. Depending on your goals, this may include:

- Your student loan servicer account number.
- Your Social Security number.
- Your loan history, available in your StudentAid.gov account.
- Recent mail and email communications from your servicer.
- Last year's tax return, including income and family size.
- A copy of your student loan billing statement.
- Your bank account information.
- A recent bank statement.

BLOCK OUT A CHUNK OF TIME FOR THE CALL

Be prepared to wait a bit to speak with your servicer. During the last two weeks of October 2023 — when federal student payments were resuming after a three-year pause — borrowers waited an average of 73 minutes to speak with a servicer agent, according to a January report from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau.

Hold times have leveled off since October, Buchanan said, but you can still minimize your wait by calling on a Thursday or Friday morning, or during the early morning or late afternoon on other days of the week.

Locate your student loan servicer's customer service phone number on the servicer's website.

Once you're on the phone with a servicer, the conversation can be swift. Servicers can handle most basic, clarifying questions in a couple of minutes, while more complex calls take upwards of 15 minutes, Buchanan said.

"It really depends on what help you need and how much research you've already done," he explained.

BE FIRM BUT POLITE

You've done your research, gathered your documents and patiently waited on hold — but what if you still aren't getting the help you need? It's easy to get frustrated with your servicer, but losing your cool won't help you get a resolution.

"Point the servicer in the right direction, but do it firmly, calmly and politely so that they can get the issue resolved," Taylor suggests.

Said Buchanan: "Our staff are hard-working people just like you, so having a positive and open discussion will help you both work together to get to the best answer much faster."

TAKE NOTES

Write down what the servicer tells you during the call, and include details like your customer service representative's name or employee ID number. After the call, follow up with your servicer by email or online chat to confirm what happened over the phone, advises Taylor.

"Just say, 'Hey, just confirming our conversation: This is what I said, this is what the representative told me,' so you have something in writing just in case there is a discrepancy," Taylor says.

CONSIDER A DIY APPROACH — BUT ONLY IN SOME CASES

Not up for a call? Most student loan servicers offer the option to contact them via email or online chat. But if you need personalized guidance right now, a phone call is still the best route, says Taylor.

"It's hard to predict servicers' response time when you send an email," Taylor says. "Other servicers may get back to you sooner, but what we've seen is that some servicers have a massive delay when it comes to responding to written communications."

In some cases, it might not be necessary to contact your servicer at all. If you're confident in the step you want to take, you can most likely do it yourself online. For example, you can apply for income-driven repayment plans and check your loan status on StudentAid.gov, and you can request forbearance, set up automatic payments and access account history through your online servicer account.

IF ALL ELSE FAILS, COMPLAIN

If you can't get the help you need over the phone with a servicer customer service representative, ask to speak with a supervisor. If that doesn't work, consider filing a student loan complaint as a last resort. The notes you took during your servicer call will come in handy if you need to write a complaint.

A complaint can help alert financial regulators to widespread issues in the student loan repayment system, like incorrect billing statements, misleading servicer advice or a wrongfully denied loan discharge application.

The article Calling Your Student Loan Servicer? It Pays to Prepare was written for NerdWallet on February 21, 2024.

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My Path to Generational Wealth: Finding the Right Trade-Offs

ALANA BENSON

At the beginning of his investing journey, Humphrey Yang started small.

"When I first started, my goal was to invest consistently, so carving out a percentage of my paycheck did not come naturally," he said in an email interview. "And it was hard because I missed that money."

Yang said he hasn't forgotten the trade-offs he made as a beginner investor. There were things he said he would have preferred to spend the money on — going out with friends, for example, or concerts or other experiences — but he was thinking about his future.

"That's the not so glamorous part of investing, sometimes you are trading off a short-term bit of fun for longer-term and future fun," he said.

Today, the Bay Area content creator shares investing information he's learned over the years, as well as perspective gained from years working in different industries, including financial advice and tech on his various social media platforms. That includes his YouTube channel @humphrey, as well as on Instagram and TikTok as @humphreytalks. Here's what Yang is doing to build generational wealth and to help his audience do the same.

WHAT STRATEGIES HAS YANG USED TO BUILD WEALTH?

Yang said setting an expectation that a percentage of his income would go toward investing was important because he knew that money would compound into more dollars in the future.

In addition to investing a portion of his paycheck, Yang also sought out other income streams.

"In the beginning, I was just working a salaried job, but I would find ways to make extra money on the side through reselling or flipping items," he said, and even that looks a little different now.

"These days, since I'm a creator, there are plenty of income streams you can tap into with an existing audience, affiliates are a big part of my business now, but was something I did not even think about even … three years ago."

Although Yang found ways to make and invest money, he also invested in himself. And all of these experiences have helped him become a better content creator today, Yang said.

"A lot of what I did in tech was applicable to content creation including A/B testing, marketing, psychology, and analyzing data and applying new hypotheses toward my content. Having a finance background made my content creation have a specific focus and having that credibility of being a financial advisor was important to me."

AN ALTERNATIVE PERSPECTIVE TO FIRE

While many may be drawn to the FIRE movement (financial independence retire early), Yang said that he views it a little differently, and it was not an initial driver for him to grow his money.

That's because with FIRE, the premise is to spend as little as possible and save intensively — as much as 50% or more of your income — to have enough to leave the workforce early.

"I definitely understood the principle, but for me, I actually enjoy working — I think I get a lot of fulfillment out of it," he said, although he did see some similarities between FIRE and his personal financial goals.

"I did however, want to get to a point where my investments could fund my entire life in the future, I think the "retire early" part just didn't resonate with me."

What does generational wealth mean to Yang?

Yang didn't start investing with generational wealth in mind, but he said he saw the value of money early on.

"While money isn't everything in life, it does make basic needs and certain things easier," he said. "I think having 'generational' wealth is something to aspire to in order to cover basic needs and make life easier not only for myself but any future offspring."

He painted a picture of what that might look like, starting with an emergency fund.

"Things don't stress you out as much when you have, say, an unexpected car maintenance that costs you an extra $500 that month. Having the ability to buy food for yourself consistently, and pay rent/bills without worrying if you're going to make it that month is a huge privilege once you establish your financial foundation."

When it comes to a foundation for building generational wealth, he stressed the importance of defining what wealth is first.

"Wealth is just the difference between your earnings and your spending," he said. "Either decrease your spending or increase your earning, or ideally — both at the same time."

The article My Path to Generational Wealth: Finding the Right Trade-Offs was written for NerdWallet on December 13, 2023.

JUNE SHAM is a writer at NerdWallet.

TACKLING STUDENT LOAN REPAYMENT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE HARD!

Inceptia knows that student loan repayment can be confusing if you don't know where to find the information you need. That's why we want to help the Class of 2024 proactively get a handle on student loan repayment — before it even begins!

With Inceptia's money mascot — **the Knowl** — as a trusty guide, graduates can use our Student Knowledge Headquarters to find answers, calculators, resource guides and more to prepare for and successfully enter into repayment.

Getting started is easy. Head to HeroKnowl.org to explore our free tools and information.

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For more great articles and tips from NerdWallet, including articles, calculators and other resources for student loan repayment, be sure to check out their student loans homepage.

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About Inceptia

Inceptia enables colleges and universities to strengthen relationships and boost enrollment using dynamic tools and personal outreach programs that empowers students to successfully navigate admissions and financial aid. With tailored solutions and a nonprofit's commitment to service, we remove barriers for students so schools can focus on what matters most — guiding them toward a rich and rewarding life through higher education.