Your First Paycheck

Read the stub. Budget from the net. Save first.

A first paycheck disappears faster than any money you'll ever earn — not because the amount is small, but because it arrives with no plan attached and a hundred claims already on it. The whole skill of a first check fits in one sitting: read the stub, assign the whole net before it's gone, and count your first goal in checks.

Here's one worked start to finish. Jayden is 17, working at a grocery store. His check: **20 hours at $12.50 an hour is $250 gross**. Then **$31.25 came out** — taxes and the rest, one line on his pay stub. His **net pay is $218.75**, and that net is the only number he budgets from.

The example — Jayden's check, assigned

Read the stub first, always: what you earned, what was taken out, what actually landed. The gross is a nice number. The net is the true one. Every plan built on the gross is a plan to come up short.

Then the whole check gets assigned before it's gone:

> **Save first — car fund** — $50
>
> **Gas** — $40
>
> **Phone** — $25
>
> **Fun** — $60
>
> **Leftover** — $43.75

Add them up: **$218.75** — the whole check, every dollar with a job, decided while the money was still in the account instead of reconstructed after it left.

And the first goal is counted in checks, not wishes. The car fund is **$900**. At **$50 a check**, that's **18 checks** to goal — so the tracker has **18 boxes**, one filled every payday, until the fund is full. A goal counted in checks is a countdown. A goal counted in "someday" is a wish.

The steps

- **Read the stub before you spend anything.** Gross, what was taken out, net. Know all three numbers, every check — the stub changes, and the habit of reading it is worth more than this one check.
- **Budget from the net only.** The net is what landed. It's the only true number you have.
- **Save first.** Jayden's $50 moves to the car fund before anything else gets a vote. Saving what's left after spending is saving whatever survives — usually nothing. Saving first is the whole trick,

and it never gets easier than the first check, when the habit costs the least to build.

- **Assign the whole check.** Gas, phone, fun, leftover — keep going until what you've assigned equals the net exactly. A dollar without a job will find one, and you won't like its choice.
- **Count the goal in checks.** Total cost divided by what you save per check equals the number of paydays between you and the goal. Boxes on a page make it visible: fill one every payday.

The honest part

Notice that fun has a line — **$60** of it, planned and guilt-free. That's not a leak in the plan; it's what makes the plan survivable. A first budget that bans fun entirely will be dead by the second check, and the lesson it teaches is "budgets don't work," which is the opposite of the truth. The truth is smaller and better: a budget is just the whole check, assigned on purpose — fun included, saving first, nothing left to chance.

And the $43.75 marked "leftover" isn't a mistake in the math. Unassigned-on-purpose is a real job: it's the flex that absorbs a short week or a good day without touching the car fund. The difference between a leftover and a leak is that the leftover was decided.

The free way

One notebook page per check runs all of it. The stub's three numbers across the top — gross, taken out, net. The assignments underneath, added until they equal the net. And a row of boxes for the goal: total cost divided by savings per check, one box filled each payday. Three minutes a check, and a first paycheck stops evaporating.

If you'd rather start from pages already laid out for it, the Teen / First-Job Budget Planner is in our shop.