

LEARNING MADE EASY



2nd Edition

Estate & Trust Administration

for
dummies[®]
A Wiley Brand



Navigate estate and trust processes with ease

Find simple explanations to help comply with tax regulations

Make sense of unfamiliar administration terms

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Estate and trust attorney



Estate & Trust Administration

2nd Edition

**by Margaret Atkins Munro, EA,
and Kathryn A. Murphy, Esq.**

**for
dummies®**
A Wiley Brand

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Contents at a Glance

Introduction	1
Part 1: Getting Started with Estate and Trust Administration	7
CHAPTER 1: Operating in a Fiduciary World	9
CHAPTER 2: Exploring the Ins and Outs of Estates	19
CHAPTER 3: Identifying Different Types of Trusts	31
CHAPTER 4: Assembling Your Team Members and Knowing When to Use Them	57
Part 2: Administering an Estate	73
CHAPTER 5: Taking the First Steps after Death	75
CHAPTER 6: Navigating the Probate Process	93
CHAPTER 7: Marshalling and Liquidating Assets	111
CHAPTER 8: Paying the Debts, Expenses, Bequests, and Devises from the Estate	135
CHAPTER 9: Closing the Estate	149
Part 3: Operating a Revocable or Irrevocable Trust	159
CHAPTER 10: Understanding the Trustee's Duties	161
CHAPTER 11: Funding the Trust	173
CHAPTER 12: Investing the Trust's Assets and Paying Its Expenses	187
CHAPTER 13: Paying Trust Beneficiaries	207
CHAPTER 14: Creating and Keeping Trust Records	221
CHAPTER 15: Terminating the Trust	235
Part 4: Paying the Taxes	245
CHAPTER 16: Preparing the Estate Tax Return, Part 1	247
CHAPTER 17: Preparing the Estate Tax Return, Part 2	269
CHAPTER 18: Filing Income Tax Returns for a Decedent, Estate, or Trust	295
CHAPTER 19: Weighing Income Tax Implications	319
CHAPTER 20: Reporting Tax Info on Schedule K-1	331

Part 5: The Part of Tens	343
CHAPTER 21: Ten Pitfalls for the Unwary	345
CHAPTER 22: Ten Types of Taxes You May Have to Pay.....	353
Appendix A: Glossary	359
Appendix B: State-by-State Rules of Intestacy and Estate or Inheritance Tax	369
Index	401

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
About This Book	1
Conventions Used in This Book	2
What You're Not to Read	3
Foolish Assumptions	3
How This Book Is Organized	3
Part 1: Getting Started with Estate and Trust Administration	4
Part 2: Administering an Estate	4
Part 3: Operating a Revocable or Irrevocable Trust	4
Part 4: Paying the Taxes	4
Part 5: The Part of Tens	5
Icons Used in This Book	5
Beyond the Book	6
Where to Go from Here	6
PART 1: GETTING STARTED WITH ESTATE AND TRUST ADMINISTRATION	7
CHAPTER 1: Operating in a Fiduciary World	9
Identifying the Players	10
Determining an estate's fiduciaries	10
Knowing who the trustees are	11
Lining up your team of advisors	13
Estate of Change: Delving into Estates	13
Altering the status quo	14
Probating an estate	14
Collecting the estate's assets	14
Paying expenses and making distributions	15
Tying up the estate's loose ends	15
Operating a Trust	15
Understanding your duties as trustee	16
Putting assets into trust	16
Putting the trust to work	16
Discovering the purpose of the trust	16
Compiling and organizing trust records	17
Bringing the trust to its conclusion	17
Paying Uncle Sam	17
Compiling the estate tax return	17
Figuring out the income taxes	18
Planning an income tax strategy	18
Whipping together Schedule K-1	18

CHAPTER 2: Exploring the Ins and Outs of Estates	19
Defining the Estate for Probate Administration Purposes	20
Will Power: Understanding How a Will (Or No Will) Affects an Estate	21
Dying testate	21
Dying intestate	22
Taking a Look at Who Can Inherit	23
Surviving spouse	23
Individuals omitted from the decedent's will (including intentional disinheritance)	25
The other players: Devisees and legatees	26
Heirs-at-law	26
Defining the Estate for Tax Purposes	27
Transfer taxes	27
Other taxes	30
CHAPTER 3: Identifying Different Types of Trusts	31
Differentiating for Income Taxes: Grantor versus Non-Grantor Trusts	32
Grantor trusts	32
Non-grantor trusts	33
Intentionally defective grantor trusts	33
Creating Trusts during Lifetime and after Death	34
Trusts created during lifetime	34
Trusts created under a last will	35
Grasping Revocable Trusts	35
Still breathing: Living trusts	36
Tackling Totten Trusts	37
Going incognito: Nominee trusts	38
Understanding Irrevocable Trusts	38
Making gifts to an irrevocable trust	39
Getting the maximum tax benefit out of dying: Marital trusts	40
Protecting the estate tax exemption: Credit shelter trusts	44
Grandpa (or Grandma) knows best: Grandchildren's trusts	45
Better safe than sorry: Insurance trusts	45
It's only a name, not a description: Crummey trusts	47
Keeping a finger in the pie: Grantor-retained interest trusts	48
Exploring Charitable Trusts	50
Split-interest charitable trusts	51
Non-operating charitable foundations	52
Owning Subchapter S Shares in Trust	53
Qualified Subchapter S Trusts (QSSTs)	53
Electing Small Business Trusts (ESBTs)	54

CHAPTER 4:	Assembling Your Team Members and Knowing When to Use Them	57
	Finding What You Need to Go It Alone	57
	Finding an Attorney	59
	Knowing where to look	59
	Asking the right questions	61
	Discussing payment options	62
	Finalizing your decision	63
	Working with your attorney	63
	Hiring a Tax Professional	65
	Discovering where to look	65
	Discussing payment options	66
	Considering Help from Other Pros	66
	Determining whether you need an investment advisor	67
	Obtaining appraisers where necessary	69
	Consulting with other miscellaneous pros	70
	Recognizing Malpractice	71
	Surveying why malpractice occurs	71
	Covering your ass . . . ets	72

PART 2: ADMINISTERING AN ESTATE 73

CHAPTER 5:	Taking the First Steps after Death	75
	Addressing the Immediate Concerns When Someone Dies	76
	Honoring anatomical gifts	76
	Having an autopsy performed	76
	Arranging the Funeral	77
	Making important decisions	77
	Obtaining copies of the death certificate	82
	Understanding How Death Changes Everything about the Decedent's Assets	83
	Bank accounts and the need for funds	83
	Powers of attorney	84
	Locating the Estate-Planning Documents	84
	The Last Will and testament (The Will)	84
	Trust agreements and amendments	85
	Letters of intent	86
	Other documents that dispose of property	86
	Notifying Those Who Need to Be Notified	86
	Creating Calendars and Files	89
	Eyeing what kind of calendar to create	89
	Setting up a filing system	90

CHAPTER 6: Navigating the Probate Process	93
Filing the Last Will with the Probate (Or Equivalent) Court	94
Figuring Out Whether Administration Is Necessary	95
Do you need a temporary executor?	95
Do you need a special administrator?	97
Determining domicile	98
Accessing ancillary administration	99
Deciding What Shape Your Probate Procedure Should Take	100
Taking small estate shortcuts	101
Traveling the traditional probate route	103
Taking Important First Steps after Your Appointment	107
Eyeing the Surviving Spouse's Rights and Decisions Regarding Property	109
Exercising rights ahead of the provisions of the will	109
Electing against the will	109
Claiming dower	110
 CHAPTER 7: Marshalling and Liquidating Assets	 111
Understanding Why You Need to Determine What the Decedent Owned	112
Observing the Obvious: Big-Ticket Items	113
The bricks and mortar: Real estate	113
Things that move: Cars, boats, and cycles	114
Small (and closely held) businesses	114
Tracking Down All the Other Assets	115
Reading the mail	116
Perusing other personal papers	118
Finding the hiding places	118
Emptying the safe deposit box	119
Sleuthing for digital assets and info	120
Checking over prior tax returns	121
Listing Personal and Household Effects	122
Appraising the Property	123
Tangibles	124
Intangibles	125
Real estate	127
Contacting the Employer about Employee Benefits	127
Locating and Collecting Insurance Proceeds	129
Ascertaining Any Other Death Benefits	130
Preparing and Filing the Probate Inventory	132
Liquidating Assets	132
Selling stocks, bonds, and other securities	133
Disposing of real estate	134

CHAPTER 8:	Paying the Debts, Expenses, Bequests, and Devises from the Estate	135
	Determining and Paying Debts of the Decedent and Administration Expenses	136
	Finding out how and when to pay claims	136
	Prioritizing payment	138
	Declaring the estate insolvent	140
	Informing Potential Beneficiaries of Their Right to Consider Disclaimer	140
	Segregating and Distributing Specific Property	142
	Treading slowly before distributing	142
	Making the distributions	143
	Considering tangible property	144
	Looking at intangible property	144
	Fulfilling bequests of specific dollar amounts	145
	Dividing Other Personal Property Equitably	146
	Basing division on letter of intent	146
	Creating a system for heirs to choose	147
	Disposing of unwanted personal property	147
	Slicing Up the Residue	147
CHAPTER 9:	Closing the Estate	149
	Obtaining Tax Closing Letters	149
	Acquiring Releases of Lien for Real Estate	150
	Paying Final Administration Expenses	151
	Making Final Distributions to Residuary Beneficiaries	152
	Preparing and Filing Final Estate Income Tax Returns	153
	Readying Accounts for Allowance by the Probate Court	153
	Using the appropriate form of accounting	154
	Following the proper probate procedures	155
	Remembering filing fees	158
	Appointing a guardian ad litem, if needed	158
	Filing a military affidavit, if necessary	158
	Notifying the surety	158
	PART 3: OPERATING A REVOCABLE OR IRREVOCABLE TRUST	159
CHAPTER 10:	Understanding the Trustee's Duties	161
	Getting Acquainted with the Trust Instrument	162
	Creating a plan based on the trust's terms	162
	Identifying the players	163
	Reforming the trust	164

Empowering the Trustee	165
Buying and selling assets	165
Determining distributions to beneficiaries	165
Hiring and firing advisors	167
Coloring Inside the Lines: Understanding Fiduciary Duty and Limitations	168
Exercising discretion	168
Obtaining errors and omissions insurance	169
Protecting the Trust's Assets	169
Diversifying the assets	170
Asking for help	170
Preparing and Filing Annual Income Tax Returns and Accounts	171
CHAPTER 11: Funding the Trust	173
Putting Assets in Trust during Life	173
Signing It Over: Giving the Trust Asset Ownership	174
Cash and securities	175
Privately held stocks, promissory notes, and limited partnership interests	177
Real estate	178
Life insurance policies	180
Personal and household property in trust	183
Rolling Property into Trust after Death	185
CHAPTER 12: Investing the Trust's Assets and Paying Its Expenses	187
Appreciating the Importance of Income and Principal in Trust Administration	188
Defining principal and income	188
Distinguishing between the two	189
Using Investment Advisors Effectively	191
Holding and Diversifying Assets	192
Stocks	193
Bonds	193
Mutual funds	195
Cash needs	197
Real estate	198
Small business stocks	198
Going Green in a Trust	199
Socially conscious	200
Politically aware	200
Looking to the Beneficiaries' Needs	201
Age	202
Purpose of trust	202

Paying the Trust's Expenses	204
Trustee's fees	204
Investment advice	205
Accounting fees	205
Taxes	205
CHAPTER 13: Paying Trust Beneficiaries	207
Notifying Beneficiaries of the Trust	208
Obtaining addresses and Social Security numbers	208
Verifying dates of birth	209
Determining Scheduled Distributions	209
Figuring out how much to pay	210
Creating a payment schedule	213
Distributing When the Beneficiary Reaches a Specific Age	214
When Beneficiaries Request More Money: Paying Out Extra Distributions	215
Making the Decision to Distribute Discretionally: Eyeing the Trust's Terms	217
Ensuring health and well-being	217
Paying for education	217
Buying a home	218
Starting a business	219
Using trustee discretion	219
CHAPTER 14: Creating and Keeping Trust Records	221
Creating a Filing System	221
Getting started: Organizing the right way	222
Keeping the trust instrument handy	224
Compiling correspondence	224
Filing financial records	225
Preserving annual accounts	225
Referencing tax returns	226
Preparing an Initial Inventory and Valuing the Assets	227
Arriving directly from the donor	227
Coming from the donor's estate	228
Compiling Records of All Transactions	228
Knowing the difference between income and principal	228
Filing income tax returns annually	229
Producing Annual Trust Accounts	230
Assembling the desired information	230
Obtaining assents of beneficiaries	232
Filing with the probate court	232

CHAPTER 15: Terminating the Trust	235
Distributing All Assets According to the Trust Instrument	235
Calculating final income distributions	236
Holding back funds for final taxes and fees	237
Paying the remaindermen	238
Submitting the Final Income Tax Returns	240
Determining any final tax liability	241
Filing a short-year return	241
Preparing Final Accounting and Obtaining Assents of All Remaindermen	242
Finally finishing a non-probate trust	242
Polishing off a probate trust	243
Dealing with Outliers after the Trust Terminates	244
 PART 4: PAYING THE TAXES	 245
CHAPTER 16: Preparing the Estate Tax Return, Part 1	247
Figuring Out Which Estates Must File	248
Who must file	248
Who actually files Form 706 and when	249
Obtaining a Release from Personal Liability	250
Understanding Some of the Nitty-Gritty Rules for Filing Form 706	251
Where and how to file	251
How to pay the tax	251
Penalties for late filing, late payment, and understatement of valuation	252
Signature and verification	253
Extensions of time to file and pay tax	253
Supplemental documents	255
Completing the Form 706, Pages 1–4	257
Part 1: Decedent and Executor	257
Part 2: Tax Computation	257
Signature of executor(s)	259
Signature of preparer other than the executor	259
Part 3: Elections by the executor	259
Part 4: General Information	262
Part 5: Recapitulation	265
Part 6: Portability of Deceased Spousal Unused Exclusion (DSUE)	265
Being Ready for and Handling an Audit	266
Getting an Estate Tax Closing Letter	267

CHAPTER 17: Preparing the Estate Tax Return, Part 2	269
Tackling the Most Common Schedules	269
Focusing on real estate: Schedule A.....	270
Identifying stocks and bonds: Schedule B.....	271
Addressing mortgages, notes, and cash: Schedule C.....	276
Considering life insurance: Schedule D.....	277
Eyeing jointly owned property: Schedule E.....	278
Considering other property: Schedule F.....	279
Touching on funeral and administration expenses: Schedule J.....	281
Recording debts, mortgages, and liens: Schedule K.....	285
Listing net losses and such: Schedule L.....	286
Covering bequests to a surviving spouse: Schedule M.....	287
Recording charitable, public, and similar gifts and bequests: Schedule O.....	289
Knowing When to Ask for Help	290
Listing transfers during life: Schedule G.....	290
Exercising powers of appointment: Schedule H.....	291
Considering annuities: Schedule I.....	291
Claiming a credit for foreign death taxes: Schedule P.....	292
Getting a credit for tax on prior transfers: Schedule Q.....	292
Generation-Skipping Transfer tax: Schedule R.....	292
Electing a qualified conservation easement exclusion: Schedule U.....	293
Filing a protective claim for refund: Schedule PC.....	293
 CHAPTER 18: Filing Income Tax Returns for a Decedent, Estate, or Trust	295
Before You Begin: What You Need to Do.....	296
Obtain a federal tax ID number	296
Choose a tax year-end	297
Calculating the Income.....	298
Interest	298
Dividends	299
Business income	299
Capital gains and losses	300
Income from rents, royalties, partnerships, and other estates and trusts	302
Farm income or loss	303
Ordinary gain or loss.....	303
Other income.....	304
Deducing Deductions	304
Interest	305
Taxes.....	306
Fiduciary fees.....	306

	Charitable deductions	307
	Attorney, accountant, and preparer fees	308
	Miscellaneous itemized deductions	308
	The Income Distribution Deduction (Schedule B)	309
	The estate tax deduction	311
	Taxes owed	311
	Credits	315
	Additional taxes	316
	Answering the Questions on the Back of Page 2 (Form 1041)	317
CHAPTER 19:	Weighing Income Tax Implications	319
	Timing Payments In and Out of an Estate	320
	Benefitting from the estate's fiscal year	320
	Balancing the estate's taxable income against the beneficiary's	321
	Timing the receipt of income	323
	Paying the ongoing expenses of the estate	323
	Investing to Minimize Income Taxes	324
	Limiting the fiduciary's income taxes	324
	Protecting the beneficiary	326
	Introducing the Unearned Income Medicare Contribution (UIMC) Tax	327
	Calculating the tax	328
	Lessening the tax's impact	328
CHAPTER 20:	Reporting Tax Info on Schedule K-1	331
	Understanding Schedule K-1	331
	General information	332
	Income items	335
	Deductions and credits	336
	Alternative minimum tax information	337
	Allocating Types of Income on the K-1	338
	Preparing Supplements to Schedule K-1	339
	Showing foreign tax allocations	339
	Providing state tax information	340
	Creating Nominee Form 1099s	340
	PART 5: THE PART OF TENS	343
CHAPTER 21:	Ten Pitfalls for the Unwary	345
	Failing to Terminate an Existing Real Estate Purchase and Sale Agreement	345
	Taking a Lump Sum Distribution from a Pension Plan, IRA, or Deferred Compensation Plan	346

Creating a Feeding Frenzy When Splitting Personal Property	347
Missing Court Deadlines.	348
Forgetting Tax Filing Deadlines	348
Failing to Communicate with the Heirs and Legatees	349
Exercising Poor Fiduciary Judgment	349
Underestimating the Devotion Required.	350
Taking Nonsanctioned Shortcuts	350
Paying from the Wrong Pocket	351
CHAPTER 22: Ten Types of Taxes You May Have to Pay	353
Federal Gift Tax	354
Federal Estate Tax	354
Generation-Skipping Transfer Tax	354
State Inheritance or Estate Tax	355
Estate and Trust Income Taxes (Federal and State)	356
Decedent's Final Federal and State Income Taxes	356
Local Income Taxes	357
Local Real Estate Taxes.	357
State Intangibles Taxes.	357
Excise Taxes	358
APPENDIX A: GLOSSARY	359
APPENDIX B: STATE-BY-STATE RULES OF INTESTACY AND ESTATE OR INHERITANCE TAX	369
INDEX	401

Introduction

This country is aging. Fewer babies are being born, and people are living longer and longer. They're also managing to accumulate more and more wealth. Wealth is relative; two generations ago, a middle-income family owned a house and maybe a car and perhaps even had a little money in the bank. Today, that scenario has become much more complicated. Many who would never consider themselves wealthy now own more than one home and have investments in the stock market, retirement accounts that continue on after death, and debt up to their eyeballs.

With this increased complexity in financial affairs comes a parallel complexity in transferring all these accumulated assets to the next generation(s), either at death or before. In the past, heavy-duty trusts were only for the very wealthy; today, they've become part of the legal landscape for ordinary Americans. And because ours is a do-it-yourself society in so many aspects, that I-can-do-it-myself attitude has carried over into trust and estate administration. Why, many people ask, should they pay someone else to do work that they themselves can perform just as well for a fraction of the cost?

And that's why we wrote the second edition of this book. Between the two of us, we have more than 60 years of estate and trust administration experience. In that time, we've come across some unusual situations in our careers and devised ways to avoid standard pitfalls that await the unwary. We wrote this book to share with you some of this accumulated wisdom — and to help you avoid the mistakes that we've made (or narrowly avoided).

About This Book

Estate & Trust Administration For Dummies, 2nd Edition, is the practical reference for those who find themselves appointed as executor, administrator, or personal representative of an estate, or as trustee of a trust. In these pages, you can find advice on what to do — and what to avoid — as you acquire, manage, and dispose of assets that belong to the estate or trust you're administering.

The world of estate and trust administration is one that can baffle you before you ever get out of the starting gate. You're asked to make decisions literally before you've had the opportunity to process that your friend or family member has died. In those first days after a death, when so much of the world seems like it's at sixes and sevens, you need to decide about the funeral, collect house keys, find the decedent's last will — the list seems endless, and so are the opportunities to have seemingly innocuous items fall through the cracks.

That's where this book comes in. We designed it to explain how you can administer an estate or trust by yourself. It gives you guidelines on what aspects of the work you can undertake on your own and which areas you really want to ask for an expert to help you.

Simply put, this book allows you to create and follow a road map toward successfully completing your appointed task without ripping out your hair and running into the streets screaming. You can use this book in a couple of ways:

- » **As a reference:** Everything's here, whether you have questions about probate, taxes, or how to plan a funeral. The world of trusts and estates can seem complicated, but it's all governed by common sense and rules (and plenty of them).
- » **As an advisor:** Some problems may seem unsolvable when you first confront them, but rarely is that truly the case. This book can help you find what questions you need to ask and who you should look to for answers. It gives you solid advice that you can literally take to the bank and lets you know when you would be better served by seeking professional advice.

We try to give you as complete information as possible, but trust and estate administration covers a lot of ground, much of it very complex. Still, we have to warn you that every situation is different, and periodically having a professional check your progress in administering any estate or trust is never a bad idea. At best, he or she will confirm that you're doing a brilliant job; at worst, the pro will catch any mistakes you may be making before they have a chance to become really serious.

Conventions Used in This Book

To help you navigate this book, we use the following conventions:

- » *Italic* highlights words or terms that are being defined. (We also use it occasionally for emphasis.)

- » **Boldface** indicates keywords in bulleted lists or the action parts of numbered steps. It also flags the names of specific tax documents so you can find them easily in any discussion.
- » `Monofont` tells you that you're looking at a Web address.

What You're Not to Read

We'd love for you to read every single word we wrote, but we're also realistic and understand that you probably only have time for just the need-to-know information. If you're overwhelmed and want just the essentials, you can skip anything marked with a Technical Stuff icon; all you'll miss is some overly technical gibberish.

Foolish Assumptions

The world of estates and trusts is rife with assumptions, foolish and otherwise. Here are some of the assumptions we made about you:

- » You're not a professional trustee or executor, or a trust or estate administrator already (although even if you are, you should still find the information in this book helpful).
- » You probably have no idea what you bit off when you agreed to act as either an executor or trustee, but you're eager to find out.
- » You're not scared of hard work, both physical and mental, and you're not afraid to delegate. You can do much of what needs to be done in administration yourself, whether it's prying up floorboards in search of the secret money stash or creating a probate account, but you recognize that sometimes paying someone else to do a task you feel unprepared to tackle makes perfect sense.

How This Book Is Organized

It really wasn't difficult to organize this book because it naturally split itself into its component parts: defining a whole lot of terms and types of trusts you may not be familiar with, estate administration, trust administration, and finally transfer tax and income tax issues. The following sections outline the contents of each part.

Part 1: Getting Started with Estate and Trust Administration

What we both discovered when we first landed in law offices and started administering estates and trusts was that lawyers, judges, and just about everyone else involved spoke in code. Not only did they use words such as *whereas* and *hereunder* in general conversation, but they also threw around terms such as administratrix, CRATs, CRUTs, GRITs, and QPRTs like confetti at a wedding. In this part, not only do we give you the terminology that any executor or trustee worth his or her weight knows but we also explain who all the players are in estates and trusts (and, in the case of trusts, exactly what games are being played).

Part 2: Administering an Estate

Administering an estate is a multistep — sometimes simultaneous-step — operation that requires an eye for detail and sometimes a great deal of patience. In this part, we take you from soup to nuts: figuring out what the decedent owned (and owed), locating the necessary documents, figuring out who inherits, shepherding the estate through the probate process (if necessary), distributing what's left after everyone who has a claim against the estate has been paid, and closing the estate for good. It may seem like a monumental task, but taking it one step at a time, even if those steps go in directions you don't want them to, inevitably leads you to your desired conclusion.

Part 3: Operating a Revocable or Irrevocable Trust

Your duties as a trustee are different from the duties of an executor, and the scope of the work is generally less intense, although it takes longer. In this part, we acquaint you with what powers you have as trustee and what duties you're expected to perform. We explore your relationship to the trust's beneficiaries and how to keep it cordial. Plus, we explain how to keep the necessary records and how to terminate the trust after its job is done.

Part 4: Paying the Taxes

Because the IRS considers trusts and estates separate entities, you have the enviable task of making sure that you file all necessary tax returns on time. We walk you through preparation of a simple estate tax return (**Form 706**) and through the annual income tax returns for trusts and estates (**Form 1041**). We also explain what you need to know to prepare the decedent's final **Form 1040**. Finally, we show you how to report to beneficiaries any income you may have distributed to them so they in turn can declare that information on their **Form 1040**.

Part 5: The Part of Tens

What would a *For Dummies* book be without the Part of Tens? In this part, we reveal ten mistakes that are easy to make but even easier to avoid with just a little planning, as well as the ten different types of taxes a trust or estate may be liable for. And, in case that wasn't enough, we've also included two appendixes. The first is a glossary. The second is a state-by-state list of basic rules of *intestacy* (dying without a valid last will), plus current state estate tax rules (and where you can find more information and forms, if necessary). Just a quick note of caution: The intestacy rules are far more complex than what we were able to include in the appendix. If you're administering an intestate estate, be sure to consult with the probate court or a qualified attorney as to the disposition of that particular estate.

Icons Used in This Book

The little pictures in the margins are icons. Here's what they mean:



REMEMBER

So much to remember, so little time: This icon alerts you to important information you really don't want to ignore.



SEEK ADVICE

Of course, you want to manage all the administration tasks yourself. But some you're just not qualified for, and others — take our word for it — you really do want to have someone who knows cast a hairy eyeball over. When you see this icon, you've just come across an item we suggest you don't attempt without assistance.



TECHNICAL
STUFF

Estate and trust administration can get pretty technical. This icon points out specific information regarding rules, regulations, and especially Internal Revenue Code references.



TIP

We've picked up lots of techniques through hard experience, and we're happy to share them with you. This icon points out administration gems that will make your life easier. Remember, though, that not every trust or estate will need every tip that comes your way; make sure that a tip applies to your situation before you use it.



WARNING

This icon tells you what to avoid when administering a trust or estate.

Beyond the Book

In addition to what you're reading right now, this book comes with a free access-anywhere Cheat Sheet. To get this Cheat Sheet, go to www.dummies.com and search for "Estate & Trust Administration For Dummies Cheat Sheet" by using the Search box.

Where to Go from Here

This book isn't intended as a must-read-cover-to-cover sort of tome, nor will you be able to pass a trusts and estates course in law school just because you read it. You may choose to read only what interests you and ignore the rest. You can get in and get out wherever and whenever you choose. If important information relating to a particular topic is located elsewhere, the text will send you there, so you never need to worry that you're missing basic information because you skipped a portion of the book. Of course, you may discover that it's just a page turner, and every topic fascinates you, in which case you may want to apply to law school posthaste (after you finish the book, of course).

1

Getting Started with Estate and Trust Administration

IN THIS PART . . .

Find out what's involved in being an executor, administrator, personal representative, or trustee, including the terminology, who's who, and the basics of your responsibilities.

Discover the difference between what constitutes an estate for probate and for estate tax purposes, what to do if there is — or isn't — a will, and how to figure out who can inherit.

Get up to speed on the different kinds of trusts, how to identify them, and their purposes.

Start assembling your administration support team, if necessary, including attorneys, accountants, and other experts.

IN THIS CHAPTER

- » **Becoming comfortable with the terminology surrounding estates and trusts**
- » **Encapsulating estates and taking care of trusts**
- » **Preparing and filing tax returns for trusts, estates, and decedents**

Chapter **1**

Operating in a Fiduciary World

You may have known for a while that someone close to you has named you as the executor of his or her will, as the trustee of a trust he or she's created, or even as both. That knowledge may make you feel extremely honored while that person's alive and kicking and still able to look after his or her assets.

Those warm and fuzzy feelings may come crashing to a halt, though, the day you hear that your friend has passed away, and you're now in charge of the show. All eyes will be on you as you pick up the reins and try to keep this buggy called an estate or trust moving along at a steady clip, while keeping all the promises written down during your friend's lifetime. The responsibility is huge, but so is your potential satisfaction, as you honor his wishes after he is no longer around to appreciate your actions.

This chapter is a jumping-off point for understanding what an estate administrator or trustee actually does: assumes control of someone else's affairs in a way that's both sensitive to family dynamics and responsive to family needs. Mishandled, estate and/or trust administration can cause permanent family rifts; on the other hand, competent and careful management helps keep family memories happy and purpose intact.

Identifying the Players

Administering a trust or estate isn't rocket science, but it does have its own language. One of the biggest stumbling blocks you run across, especially as you're beginning in your new role, is figuring out who all the players are and what roles they all play. The following sections point out some important basic lingo you need to know as you start your journey. Refer to the other chapters in Part 1 for more on your responsibilities as an administrator or trustee.

Determining an estate's fiduciaries

Several kinds of *fiduciaries* (people or organizations who hold and administer assets of one person, either living or deceased, for the benefit of that person or another) may be involved in estate administration, depending upon whether a will exists and who the heirs are. You may not even be the only fiduciary; in that case, you and the other(s) must act in unison. And one person or group can fulfill multiple fiduciary roles, such as when one person is named both executor and trustee. The following are types of fiduciaries you may be named:

- » **Executor:** The *executor* is the person named in the will to “execute” the will — to carry out the wishes of the person making the will, including disposing of the property according to the will. A female executor is sometimes referred to as an *executrix*, although we don't make that distinction in this book. A named executor may decline to act, although we hope this book gives you the confidence to embrace the role.
- » **Administrator:** The *administrator* is a person appointed by the probate court to administer the decedent's estate when the decedent left no valid will. A female administrator may be referred to as an *administratrix*.
- » **Personal representative:** The *personal representative* is a general term for both the executor and the administrator. In some states, this term is used in place of executor or administrator.
- » **Guardian:** A *guardian* is the person appointed by the probate court to take care of the person and the property of another person who is considered incapable of taking care of his or her own affairs because of his or her age (often a minor) or for other reasons such as mental disability, physical incapacity, or illness.
- » **Conservator:** A *conservator* is similar to a guardian, but with less restrictive rules than those for a guardian. For example, the probate court may appoint a conservator for someone who can't properly care for his or her property due to mental disability or physical incapacity, or for a person missing in action or a prisoner of war.



REMEMBER

A probate court rarely appoints a conservator for an estate, especially if you've already been appointed as executor or administrator; however, you may find yourself dealing with an already-appointed conservator of an estate beneficiary. Remember, just because you're all working with the same set of assets doesn't mean that you belong to the same team. As executor or administrator, you're only responsible for the property owned by the decedent; a beneficiary's conservator is responsible for that beneficiary's interest.

Knowing who the trustees are

A trust, just like an estate, must have a fiduciary heading up its team: in this case, a *trustee*. The trustee of a trust is charged with the task of investing the trust's assets and balancing the desires of the trust's creator (the *grantor*, also referred to as the *settlor*) with the needs of the *beneficiary of the present interest* (the person or organization entitled to receive the income earned by the trust's assets. Depending on the terms of the trust, perhaps some or all of the trust assets themselves) and the wants of the *remainderman* or *remainder beneficiary* (the person or organization who receives what's left of the trust's assets after the trust period ends). It may sound daunting, but when done properly, everyone should go home happy.



REMEMBER

Because balancing these competing interests can be complicated, many grantors choose two or more individuals and/or corporations to act together as co-trustees, jointly filling these roles, assigning general powers to all and sometimes specific additional powers to certain trustees. In order to differentiate between the trustees, trustees often are designated as either *independent* or *family*. This section discusses these two types of trustees. Chapter 3 goes into more depth about the different types of trusts.

All by themselves: Independent trustees

Independent trustees, or fiduciaries who aren't named in the trust as either grantor, beneficiary, or remaindermen, can be an important cog in keeping the wheels of a trust running smoothly. Whether they're trusted friends of the grantor or are banks, trust companies, lawyers, or accountants, independent trustees owe their primary allegiance to the grantor, who is relying on them to make decisions that best serve the interest of the trust, rather than that of any present interest beneficiary or remainderman.

Frequently, grantors direct an independent trustee to make all decisions regarding discretionary distributions to beneficiaries, especially if one of the trust beneficiaries is also a trustee. And, in the case of testamentary trusts, the probate court often delegates the power to make discretionary distributions to the independent trustee alone so as to remove any semblance of self-serving from a trustee who also has a beneficial or remainder interest in the trust.

For example, one of us acts as trustee for a testamentary trust where the decedent's widow (who is the income beneficiary) and two children (the remaindermen) are also trustees. Only the independent trustee may make decisions regarding distributions of principal to the widow or the children. Distributions to the children prior to their mother's death require either the consent of the independent trustee or the probate judge.



REMEMBER

No independent trustee assumes the responsibilities lightly. As a result, expect to pay for their services, unless the independent trustee is a close friend of the grantor, who may be willing to perform this service out of long friendship and the goodness of his heart. Banks and trust companies most likely have pamphlets that list how they calculate their fees; because they probably have active custody of the trust assets, they usually collect their fees automatically from the trust. Non-institutional professional trustees such as attorneys and accountants bill you for their services. They may charge based on their normal hourly rates, but they're more likely to calculate their fees based on a percentage of the market value of the assets of the trust, as well as a percentage of income collected.

Trusts that mandate an independent trustee typically also include a *line of succession* so that if one trustee is no longer able to act, another is in line to take his or her place. If the trust requires an independent trustee, make sure that any vacancies are filled promptly because it's next to impossible for the trust to function efficiently without one in place.

All in the family: Family trustees

Trust grantors often feel that using only professional trustees (as efficient as they may be) may not account for special family circumstances. In these cases, the grantor may choose to also have a *family trustee*, or a trusted member of his or her family, who knows the players (the present interest beneficiaries and the remaindermen) well and has no difficulty making decisions based on the grantor's wishes.

Family trustees usually have most of the same powers as independent trustees (such as investment powers and the authority to prepare and sign income tax returns and to make scheduled distributions to present interest beneficiaries), but their powers over discretionary distributions are often limited if they have a vested interest in the trust as a present interest beneficiary or remainderman.



WARNING

It's possible for trusts to exist with only a family trustee, although the results are sometimes messy. Somehow, wherever money is concerned, perceptions of appropriate behavior on all sides tend to skew; in our opinion, you're far better off to limit opportunities for self-serving during trust administration by never allowing a family trustee to serve alone. With the addition of an independent trustee, everyone concerned — from the grantor to the present interest beneficiary to the trust remaindermen — can be confident that all the competing interests were considered throughout administration and that the trustees made appropriate and fair decisions.