



A Map for Your Family

A will is an essential legal document that describes how your estate should be distributed upon your death. It is the basis for the probate process and can serve as a guide for your heirs.

A letter of instruction — which has no legal status — provides information that can help your loved ones settle your estate and move forward with their lives. You might consider it a map for your family.

Unlike a will, which must follow legal guidelines for your state and may require an attorney, a letter of instruction can be written yourself in any way you choose. Here are some topics you may want to address.

Financial accounts and account numbers, including online user names and passwords. If you prefer not to write down user names or passwords, the executor of your estate should be able to access accounts with the account numbers and your Social Security number.

List of documents and their locations, including (but not limited to) your will, insurance policies, tax returns, bank and investment account documents, real estate deeds and mortgage documents, vehicle titles, Social Security and Medicare cards, marriage and/or divorce papers, and birth certificate.

Contact information for professionals who handle your financial and legal affairs, such as your attorney, financial advisor, insurance agent, and accountant. Also include others who may be helpful, such as a business partner or trusted friend.

Bills and creditors, including when payments are due and other pertinent information, such as loan terms and balances as of the date of the letter.



A letter of instruction could be just as important as a will to help your heirs settle your estate and move forward with their lives.

Your final wishes for burial or cremation, a funeral or memorial service, organ donation, and charitable contributions in your memory.

You might also include more personal thoughts or life lessons that you want to pass on, or you could write a separate letter. Keep your letter of instruction in a safe, yet accessible place and tell your loved ones where it can be found. It might be wise to give a copy of the letter to the executor of your estate and other trusted friends or advisers.

Be sure to review the letter regularly and update it as appropriate. Your heirs will thank you for taking the time to prepare.

This material has been provided for general informational purposes only and does not constitute either tax or legal advice. Although we go to great lengths to make sure our information is accurate and useful, we recommend you consult a tax preparer, professional tax advisor, or lawyer.