APPRAISEITNOW

Valuing a Decedent's Personal Property for Probate and Form 706: Photo-Based Appraisals, In-Person Appraisals and Informal Sale Estimates Compared (2026)

AppraiseItNow Inc.

November 2026, version 1

Published by AppraiseItNow Inc., New York City. www.appraiseitnow.com

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Educational material, not an appraisal.

Scope of this 2026 comparison of estate contents valuation methods

This comparison, dated 2026, is written for executors, administrators and estate attorneys who must put a value on the contents of a decedent's home and the other tangible property the decedent owned. It compares three ways that value is commonly produced:

- An appraisal prepared remotely from photographs and documents.
- An in-person appraisal by an appraiser who visits the property.
- An informal sale estimate from a dealer, a prospective buyer or an estate sale organizer.

Each method is judged on three criteria: whether it produces a value as of the date of death, how well it supports the filings an estate has to make, and how complete its documentation is. The comparison is neutral about method. It does not rank one inspection approach as correct in every case, because the right approach depends on the property, its condition and what has happened to it since the death.

What "estate contents" covers in this comparison

"Estate contents" here means the tangible personal property a decedent left behind. That includes furniture, rugs, silver, china, jewelry, paintings and prints, antiques, clothing, tools, collections, vehicles, boats and any machinery or equipment the decedent owned personally. Some of these are high-value single items. Most are ordinary household goods whose value lies in the aggregate: a kitchen's worth of cookware, a garage of hand tools, a closet of clothing.

The comparison uses two everyday terms throughout:

- **Date-of-death value** means the value of an item as of the day the decedent died, regardless of when the appraiser sees the item or writes the report.
- **Informal sale estimate** means a figure, spoken or written, from someone who buys, sells or liquidates property, stating what items might bring or what that person would pay. It is not prepared as an appraisal and does not follow appraisal standards.

What this comparison leaves out

The decedent's house, land and other real property fall outside this comparison. AppraiseItNow does not appraise real estate. An estate with real property arranges that valuation separately. Financial accounts, securities and similar intangible assets are also outside the scope, since they are not "contents" that anyone inspects. Closely held business interests are mentioned only where a decedent's business equipment or inventory sits among the personal property.

The comparison also does not address state probate procedure in detail. The estate attorney is the right source for what a particular court expects. Where this document discusses probate, it describes practical steps rather than rules.

About the publisher of this comparison

AppraiseItNow is a tech-enabled appraisal company headquartered in New York City that prepares USPAP-compliant appraisals of personal property, fine art, machinery and equipment, vehicles, boats, inventory and closely held businesses for clients in all 50 states, remotely and in person. AppraiseItNow prepares every appraisal in accordance with USPAP, the Uniform Standards of Professional Appraisal Practice (USPAP, 2024 edition). Joe Kattan is the owner and chief executive officer of AppraiseItNow. AppraiseItNow's website is www.appraiseitnow.com. Where this document describes AppraiseItNow's own practices or records, it says so; elsewhere, it describes generic option types.

Criteria for judging a date-of-death valuation of a decedent's personal property

The three criteria below reflect the questions an executor actually faces when the valuation reaches a court, a tax return or a beneficiary who disagrees with it.

Criterion 1: Whether the method produces a true date-of-death value

Estate assets are valued at fair market value on the date of death (Treas. Reg. § 20.2031-1). That single sentence drives most of the difficulty in valuing estate contents. The valuation is retrospective: the appraiser is almost never looking at the property on the date of death. Weeks or months have usually passed. Items may have been moved, distributed to family, donated, sold or damaged. The market for some categories may have shifted.

An appraisal's effective date is the date the value applies to. It can be current, past (a date of death or donation) or future, and the report states both the effective date and the report date (USPAP, 2024 edition). A method scores well on this criterion when it states the date of death as the effective date, explains how the appraiser reached a value as of that date, and accounts for any gap between the condition of the property at death and its condition when it was documented.

For estates that may file an estate tax return, there is a second possible date. The executor may instead elect the date six months after death, only if that lowers both the gross estate and the estate and generation-skipping transfer tax. The election covers every asset, and anything sold or distributed in those six months is valued on the day it was sold or distributed (Treas. Reg. § 20.2032-1). A valuation method that cannot accommodate this possibility leaves the executor without the information needed to evaluate the election.

Criterion 2: Filing support for probate and Form 706

Filing support means how well the valuation holds up when it is attached to, or relied on for, something the estate submits. Two kinds of filing matter most:

- **The estate tax return.** When household and personal effects include articles of marked artistic or intrinsic value, such as jewelry, art, antiques, silver and rugs, worth more than $3,000 in total, a sworn expert appraisal is filed with the return, together with the executor's sworn statement about the list and the appraiser (Treas. Reg. § 20.2031-6). Form 706 is due nine months after the date of death. An automatic six-month extension is available to file, not to pay (Treas. Reg. §§ 20.6075-1 and 20.6081-1).
- **The probate inventory and accounting.** Courts and beneficiaries look at the inventory to see that the executor identified the property and valued it on a defensible basis. The practical test is whether a skeptical reader, such as a beneficiary who believes a painting was undervalued, can see who valued the item, how, and as of what date.

Whether a given estate's articles meet the description in the estate tax rule, and therefore whether that attachment requirement applies, is a determination for the estate's attorney or tax adviser. This comparison does not make that determination for any example.

Criterion 3: Documentation the estate file can stand on

Documentation means the record behind the number: identification of each item or group, photographs, condition notes, the method used, the market evidence relied on, the scope of the inspection and any assumptions. Good documentation lets someone who never saw the house understand what was there. It also protects the executor, who may be asked years later to explain how a figure was reached.

USPAP does not require an in-person inspection in every assignment. The appraiser decides the scope of work, including how much inspection credible results need, and the report describes that scope (USPAP, 2024 edition). Under this criterion, a method scores well when its report states plainly what was inspected and how, rather than when it follows any particular inspection method.

The three ways to value a decedent's household and personal effects

A remote appraisal prepared from photographs and documents

In a photo-based appraisal, the executor or someone acting for the estate photographs the property and supplies documents, and the appraiser works from that record. The appraiser identifies items, groups ordinary household goods, researches comparable sales and states a value as of the date of death.

The approach depends heavily on the quality of the photographs. AppraiseItNow's photo requirements by asset type: for vehicles, the outside and inside, plus the mileage for anything motorized; for boats, the outside with the cover off, the helm, the engine and the inside, plus the HIN and engine hours; for machinery, a few photos of each machine, the hours and whether it runs; for fine art, the front, back, signature and frame; for household items, one clear photo per item or group.

For estate work in particular, AppraiseItNow sets out what it needs at the start. For an estate file, AppraiseItNow requires the decedent's legal name and the date of death and, for estate tax, whether the alternate valuation date may be elected. Photos that show every room, closet and shelf can replace an item list; the appraiser counts and groups from the photos. That last point matters to executors who are grieving, short on time or living far from the decedent's home: the executor photographs; the appraiser does the inventorying.

The remote approach is common in practice. Of the 1,226 appraisals AppraiseItNow opened between November 8, 2025 and November 8, 2026, 1,137 were done from photographs and documents and 27 in person; the method was not recorded for the other 62. Of the same 1,226 appraisals, 521 were for charitable donations, 175 for insurance (102 claims and 73 coverage), 144 for estates (61 probate, 46 estate tax and 37 estate settlement), 50 for divorce and 15 for Roth IRA conversions.

An in-person appraisal by an appraiser who visits the property

In an in-person appraisal, an appraiser, often a local one, visits the decedent's home or wherever the property is stored. The appraiser handles items directly, examines marks, construction and condition, and takes the photographs. On an in-person appraisal, the appraiser identifies and photographs everything at the visit; the client still provides the address and the paperwork they hold, such as titles, receipts, certificates and records.

The strengths of a visit are physical: an appraiser can turn a piece of furniture over to look at joinery, test whether a machine runs, check a rug's back for repairs, or find a maker's mark that never appears in a photograph. The limitations are also physical. A visit requires access to the property, coordination with whoever holds the keys, and the property still being in one place. Most AppraiseItNow appraisals are completed remotely from photographs and documents; when an inspection is needed, an appraiser visits the asset in person (www.appraiseitnow.com).

An informal sale estimate from a dealer, buyer or estate sale organizer

An informal sale estimate comes from someone in the business of buying, selling or liquidating property. It may be a walk-through with a figure at the end, a quote for the cost and expected proceeds of an estate sale, or an offer to buy the whole contents. These estimates are often free and quick to obtain, and they can be genuinely useful for deciding what to do with property.

They are, however, a different kind of document from an appraisal. An informal estimate is typically framed around what the person giving it expects a sale to bring, or what that person would pay, at the time the estimate is given. A purchase offer reflects the buyer's own interest in reselling at a profit. The person giving the estimate may also have a stake in the outcome, such as an interest in running the sale or buying the goods. None of this makes the figure dishonest; it makes it a figure produced for a purpose other than stating the value of the property as of the date of death.

How photo-based appraisals, in-person appraisals and informal sale estimates perform on each criterion

Date-of-death value: how each method handles a retrospective effective date

Photo-based appraisal. A photo-based appraisal can state the date of death as its effective date, and AppraiseItNow sets the effective date by purpose: for insurance coverage and personal use, the report date; for estate and probate, the date of death; for a donation, the contribution date, or the report date for a future gift signed no more than 60 days before it; for a gift, the date of the gift; for an insurance claim, the date of loss; for a divorce, the date counsel sets; for an IRA conversion, the conversion date.

The main risk for a photo-based estate appraisal is a mismatch between what the photographs show and what existed at death. If the executor photographs the house soon after the death and before anything is moved, the record is close to a snapshot of the date-of-death condition. If photographs are taken later, the appraiser has to address the gap. One tool for doing so is an extraordinary assumption. An appraiser may assume an uncertain fact is true (an extraordinary assumption) only when it's needed for credible results, there's a reasonable basis for it and the analysis stays credible, and the report must say so clearly (USPAP, 2024 edition). For example, an appraiser might assume that a dresser's condition in a photograph taken after a family member moved it matches its condition at death, if there is a reasonable basis for that assumption, and say so in the report.

A practical advantage of the photo-based approach for date-of-death work is that executors often already have photographs. Family members may have taken pictures during a final visit, for an insurance file or while sorting belongings. Earlier photographs can help an appraiser see what the house looked like closer to the date of death.

In-person appraisal. An in-person appraisal can also state the date of death as its effective date. The visit gives the appraiser firsthand knowledge of condition on the inspection day, which is helpful when the inspection happens soon after the death. When the visit happens months later, the appraiser faces the same gap a photo-based appraiser faces, and may rely on the same kind of disclosed assumptions about condition at death. An in-person visit is also impossible for anything already distributed or sold before the appointment, so the appraiser may end up working from photographs and documents for part of the property anyway.

Informal sale estimate. An informal estimate is usually anchored in the present: what the goods will bring at the sale being proposed, or what the buyer will pay this week. It rarely states an effective date at all, and when it does, the date is usually the day of the walk-through. Converting a present-day liquidation figure into a date-of-death value is not something the estimate does; it is a separate exercise the estimate leaves undone.

Hypothetical example: a gap between the death and the documentation. A hypothetical decedent dies in March. The decedent's three adult children each take a few pieces of furniture in April. In June, the executor wants the contents valued. With a photo-based appraisal, the executor photographs every room, closet and shelf of the house as it stands, and also gathers photographs the children took of the pieces they removed, plus any earlier family photographs showing the rooms. The appraiser works from the combined record, states the March date of death as the effective date and discloses any assumptions about the condition of the removed pieces. With an in-person appraisal, the appraiser sees what remains in the house and works from photographs and documents for what left. With an informal sale estimate, a buyer quotes a figure for the remaining contents as of June, and the removed pieces do not appear at all.

The alternate valuation question. For an estate that may file Form 706, the executor needs to know early whether the six-month alternate valuation date is under consideration, because the election covers every asset, and anything sold or distributed in those six months is valued on the day it was sold or distributed (Treas. Reg. § 20.2032-1). In the hypothetical above, the April distributions to the children would matter if the election were made. Whether to make the election is a decision for the executor and the estate's tax adviser; the valuation method's job is to make that decision possible by keeping track of what was sold or distributed and when. For an estate file, AppraiseItNow requires the question of whether the alternate valuation date may be elected to be answered at the start.

Filing support: probate inventories, Form 706 and beneficiary scrutiny

Photo-based appraisal. A photo-based appraisal prepared in accordance with USPAP is an appraisal in the full sense: it states the effective date, describes the scope of work, identifies the property and explains the analysis. The estate tax rule quoted above provides for a sworn expert appraisal filed with the return, together with the executor's sworn statement about the list and the appraiser. The inspection method is a scope-of-work question, which USPAP leaves to the appraiser and requires the report to describe. Whether a specific report and the accompanying statements meet what the estate's return requires is a question for the estate's attorney or tax adviser.

For probate, a photo-based report gives the court and beneficiaries a written record they can read without visiting the house. Its photographs and groupings let a beneficiary see where a disputed item appears and how it was valued.

In-person appraisal. An in-person appraisal prepared in accordance with USPAP offers the same kind of filing support. Its added value in a filing context comes from the appraiser's firsthand examination, which can be persuasive when a beneficiary questions authenticity, condition or attribution. A report that says the appraiser examined the back of a canvas, the hallmarks on silver or the foundation of a rug answers questions a photograph might leave open.

Informal sale estimate. An informal estimate is not prepared as an expert appraisal, does not follow appraisal standards and usually does not identify the property item by item. It offers little support for a sworn statement about the list and the appraiser. In a probate setting, a beneficiary who suspects that items were undervalued can point out that the person who gave the number may have had an interest in buying the goods or running the sale. An informal estimate can still inform the executor's decisions about disposing of property, but it does not stand in for the appraisal when one is filed or relied on.

Deadlines and sequencing. Form 706 is due nine months after the date of death. An automatic six-month extension is available to file, not to pay (Treas. Reg. §§ 20.6075-1 and 20.6081-1). Because the return deadline is fixed by the date of death, executors benefit from starting the valuation of contents early, before property is dispersed and while photographs can still capture the house intact. The deadline itself does not depend on the valuation method, but the point at which an executor can begin documenting the property does. Photographing the house is something an executor can begin immediately; scheduling a visit depends on the appraiser's and the executor's availability and on access to the property.

Documentation: what each method leaves in the estate file

Photo-based appraisal. The documentation of a photo-based appraisal begins with the executor's photographs and ends with the appraiser's report. The photographs themselves become part of the estate's record, which is useful long after the report is delivered. Gaps in the photographs show up as questions from the appraiser.

AppraiseItNow's records show how often those questions arise. Of 867 appraisals AppraiseItNow reviewed between October 27, 2025 and September 23, 2026, 31% needed something more from the client and 24.6% went through a formal request for missing details. 33% of estate files (probate, estate tax and estate settlement) went through a request for missing details, the highest rate of any purpose in AppraiseItNow's records between October 27, 2025 and September 23, 2026.

Those requests tend to be answered. In 162 requests for missing details that AppraiseItNow sent between August 2025 and September 2026, the median first reply from the client came in 0.1 days; 55% were resolved within a day and 89% within a week. Identifiers such as a VIN or serial number took a median 0.6 days to arrive, receipts 0.7 days, donation documents 1.7 days and photos 2.0 to 3.7 days. Because photos were the slowest item to arrive, a practical step for an executor is to photograph the entire house thoroughly at the start rather than in pieces.

AppraiseItNow collects what the appraiser needs before the appraisal starts, and asks only for what the appraiser needs.

In-person appraisal. In an in-person appraisal, the appraiser generates the photographs and identification at the visit, so the executor's documentation burden shifts to access and paperwork: the address, keys or a contact on site, and any titles, receipts, certificates and records. The report's documentation depends on how thoroughly the appraiser photographs and records the property during the visit. A careful visit produces a strong record; a hurried one may leave less detail than a methodical set of executor photographs would.

Informal sale estimate. An informal estimate often leaves almost no documentation: a figure, perhaps a short note or an email, and no item-level identification. If the goods are later sold, the sale records describe what was sold and for how much, but those records describe a later transaction rather than the property as of the date of death. For an executor who may need to explain the valuation to a court, a beneficiary or a tax examiner, this is the method's weakest point.

Hypothetical example: documenting a mixed household. A hypothetical decedent's house contains ordinary furniture, a kitchen full of cookware, a set of sterling flatware, several oriental rugs, a few framed paintings, a jewelry box, a garage with a riding mower and hand tools, and a small fishing boat on a trailer. Under a photo-based approach, the executor photographs every room, closet and shelf; takes one clear photograph per item or group of household goods; photographs the front, back, signature and frame of each painting; photographs the boat's outside with the cover off, the helm, the engine and the inside, and records the HIN and engine hours; and photographs the mower, noting its hours and whether it runs. The executor also gathers the boat and trailer paperwork and any jewelry receipts or certificates. Under an in-person approach, the appraiser takes the photographs and the executor supplies the paperwork. Under an informal estimate, a buyer quotes a single figure for "the contents" and possibly a separate one for the boat. Whether the jewelry, silver, rugs and paintings in this house are articles of the kind described in the estate tax rule, and whether they exceed the stated amount in total, is for the estate's attorney or tax adviser to determine.

Summary table of estate contents valuation methods by criterion

Criterion	Appraisal prepared from photographs	In-person appraisal	Informal sale estimate
Effective date	States the date of death as the effective date	States the date of death as the effective date	Usually reflects the day of the estimate or a proposed sale
Gap between death and documentation	Addressed in the report, including disclosed extraordinary assumptions where needed	Addressed in the report, including disclosed extraordinary assumptions where needed	Not addressed
Alternate valuation date	Can be accommodated if the executor raises it at the start	Can be accommodated if the executor raises it at the start	Not accommodated
Property already distributed or sold	Can be included from photographs and records	Requires photographs and records for items no longer on site	Typically omitted
Prepared under USPAP	Yes, when the appraiser prepares it in accordance with USPAP	Yes, when the appraiser prepares it in accordance with USPAP	No
Scope of inspection	Decided by the appraiser and described in the report	Decided by the appraiser and described in the report	Not described
Support for Form 706 sworn appraisal and statement	An expert appraisal; adequacy for a given return determined by the estate's adviser	An expert appraisal; adequacy for a given return determined by the estate's adviser	Not an expert appraisal
Support in probate and beneficiary questions	Written report with item identification and photographs	Written report with firsthand examination notes and photographs	A figure with little supporting detail
Who takes the photographs	Executor or someone acting for the estate	The appraiser, at the visit	Usually no one
Executor's main burden	Thorough photographs and paperwork	Access to the property and paperwork	Little up front; explanation later if challenged
Physical examination of marks,	Limited to what photographs show	Direct	Varies, not recorded

Criterion	Appraisal prepared from photographs	In-person appraisal	Informal sale estimate
construction and condition			
Usefulness for liquidation planning	Indirect	Indirect	Direct

Choosing among the options for valuing a decedent's personal property

The choice is not between a correct method and an incorrect one. A photo-based appraisal and an in-person appraisal can both be credible, standards-compliant appraisals of estate contents, and the appraiser decides which scope credible results need. An informal sale estimate serves a different purpose. The factors below help an executor and estate attorney decide what to ask for and what to prepare.

Factors that favor an appraisal prepared from photographs

- **The property is intact, or can be photographed before it moves.** Photographs taken soon after the death are the closest available record of date-of-death condition.
- **The executor lives far from the property.** A relative or neighbor can photograph the house, and the appraiser can count and group from those photographs.
- **Most of the property is ordinary household goods.** Grouped furniture, kitchenware, clothing and tools are well suited to grouping from clear photographs.
- **Property is spread across locations.** Items in a storage unit, a relative's home and the decedent's house can be photographed separately and appraised together.
- **Some items have already been distributed.** Family members can photograph what they took, which preserves those items in the record.

AppraiseItNow's appraisers specialize by asset class rather than by geography. That matters when an estate contains a mix of property, such as household goods, a boat and some machinery, because the analysis of each category does not depend on where the house is.

Factors that favor an in-person appraisal

- **Identification depends on physical examination.** Marks on silver, construction of antique furniture, repairs to rugs and the backs of paintings sometimes cannot be read from photographs.
- **Condition is uncertain.** Water damage, pests or long storage may affect value in ways a camera does not capture well.

- **The estate expects a dispute.** When beneficiaries already disagree about what an item is or what it is worth, firsthand examination can narrow the disagreement.
- **No one is available to photograph the property thoroughly.** A visit moves the photography and identification to the appraiser.

These are factors an executor can raise. The decision about how much inspection credible results need belongs to the appraiser, and the report describes the scope that was used.

Where an informal sale estimate fits in estate administration

An informal sale estimate is useful for practical decisions about disposing of property: whether an estate sale makes sense, whether a buyer's offer for a whole household is reasonable, or which items to sell separately. It is not a substitute for an appraisal of the property as of the date of death, and it does not provide the documentation an executor relies on in a filing or in answering a beneficiary. Estates that obtain informal estimates for liquidation planning typically keep them separate from the valuation file, so that the two kinds of figure are not confused.

One practical caution: if a buyer or estate sale organizer will be clearing the house, the executor should have the property photographed or appraised before the clearing begins. Once the house is emptied, the date-of-death record depends entirely on whatever was captured beforehand.

Executor's preparation checklist for an estate contents appraisal

Whichever appraisal method is used, the following items make the work go more smoothly. Each corresponds to something described earlier in this comparison.

1. The decedent's legal name.
2. The date of death.
3. For estate tax, whether the alternate valuation date may be elected, as discussed with the estate's tax adviser.
4. A record of anything already sold, distributed or donated since the death, with dates.
5. For a photo-based appraisal, photographs that show every room, closet and shelf, plus one clear photograph per item or group of household goods.
6. For artwork, photographs of the front, back, signature and frame.
7. For vehicles, photographs of the outside and inside, and the mileage.
8. For boats, photographs of the outside with the cover off, the helm, the engine and the inside, plus the HIN and engine hours.
9. For machinery, a few photographs of each machine, the hours and whether it runs.
10. Titles, receipts, certificates and other records the estate holds.
11. For an in-person appraisal, the address and arrangements for access.
12. Any earlier photographs of the house or of specific items, which can help show condition closer to the date of death.

Hypothetical example: matching the method to the estate

A hypothetical estate attorney represents an executor who lives in another state. The decedent's apartment contains furniture, books, kitchenware, a few framed prints and a small jewelry collection, and the building requires the apartment to be emptied soon. The executor asks a neighbor to photograph every room, closet and shelf before any movers arrive and gathers the jewelry receipts found in a desk drawer. A photo-based appraisal is prepared with the date of death as the effective date. If, in reviewing the photographs, the appraiser concludes that one piece of jewelry cannot be identified credibly without examination, the appraiser decides the scope accordingly, and the report describes it. Separately, the executor obtains a buyer's offer for the furniture to decide whether to sell it or ship it to family. The offer informs that decision and does not enter the valuation file. Whether the jewelry and prints fall within the estate tax rule on articles of marked artistic or intrinsic value is left to the attorney and the estate's tax adviser.

Review questions for executors and estate attorneys

1. What is the effective date of an estate contents appraisal for probate, and how does the report show it?
2. If the executor may elect the alternate valuation date, what record of sales and distributions should be kept from the date of death onward?
3. What does a report need to say when the property was photographed or inspected some time after the death?
4. Who decides whether an appraisal requires an in-person inspection, and where is that decision recorded?
5. What does the estate tax rule on household and personal effects say must be filed with the return, and who determines whether it applies to a given estate?
6. Why does an informal sale estimate provide weak support for a sworn statement about the list and the appraiser?
7. What should be photographed before an estate sale organizer or buyer clears the house?
8. Which paperwork, such as titles, receipts and certificates, does the estate still hold, and where is it?

Answering these questions before choosing a method gives the executor a clear view of the property, the dates that matter and the record the estate will need to stand on.