

If you collect Social Security before your **full retirement age (FRA)** and keep working, SSA's **retirement earnings test** may hold back some of your benefits. This sheet helps you keep a simple monthly record of your earnings and estimate what SSA might withhold, so a letter from SSA isn't a surprise. Information and record-keeping only. Not advice.

The 2026 limits

Your situation in 2026	Annual limit	Monthly limit (first-year rule)	SSA withholds	Which earnings count
Under full retirement age all year	\$24,480	\$2,040	\$1 for every \$2 over	All of 2026
You reach full retirement age in 2026	\$65,160	\$5,430	\$1 for every \$3 over	Only months before your FRA month
At or past full retirement age	No limit	–	Nothing	None, from your FRA month on

Full retirement age is 66 and 2 months to 66 and 10 months if you were born in 1955–1959, and 67 if you were born in 1960 or later. Born on the 1st of a month? SSA figures it as if your birthday were in the previous month.

How to use the monthly log

1. Fill in the top of page 2: year, your FRA month, your status, the limit that applies, and your monthly benefit.
2. Each month, write your **gross wages for the month you did the work**, not the month you were paid. A paycheck on Feb 5 for January work goes on the January line.
3. Self-employed? Write your **net profit** in the self-employment column.
4. Keep a running total. In the year you reach FRA, stop adding at your FRA month.
5. At year end (or any time), use the worksheet at the bottom of page 2 to estimate withholding.
6. Log every call, letter, and estimate change with SSA on page 3.

What counts (and what doesn't)

Counts: wages from a job, including bonuses, commissions, and vacation pay; net earnings from self-employment.

Doesn't count: pensions, annuities, investment income, interest, capital gains, veterans benefits, and other government or military retirement benefits.

Timing: wages count when earned, not when paid. Self-employment income generally counts when received. In your FRA year, SSA spreads net self-employment earnings evenly over the months you were self-employed.

How SSA collects it

SSA usually holds back **whole monthly checks**, starting with the first month you get benefits in the year, until the amount is covered. If it holds back more than needed, SSA pays the difference back after the year ends. Withheld benefits aren't lost: at full retirement age SSA recalculates your benefit to credit the months withheld. (Spouses and survivors who get benefits because they care for a minor or disabled child don't get that increase.)

Special first-year rule. For one year, usually your first year of retirement, you can get a full check for any whole month you're "retired," no matter what you earn for the year. That means wages at or under the monthly limit (\$2,040, or \$5,430 in your FRA year) and no substantial self-employment work. SSA's guideline: more than 45 hours a month self-employed generally isn't retired, and under 15 hours generally is. Between 15 and 45 hours depends on the job.

Reminders. Tell SSA right away if your earnings estimate for the year changes. If you were under FRA, got benefits, and earned over the annual limit, SSA requires an **annual report of earnings, typically due by April 15** of the following year (April 15, 2027 for 2026). SSA may use your W-2 and self-employment tax return as that report, but you're still responsible for making sure the earnings SSA uses are correct.

Different rules apply to disability benefits (SSDI/SSI), work outside the U.S., and family members' benefits. If family members get benefits on your record, your excess earnings can reduce their benefits too.

Monthly earnings log

RetireTally · Year: _____

My FRA month / year _____

Monthly benefit \$ _____

First benefit month this year _____

My status: ☐ Under FRA all year (2026 limit \$24,480, \$1 per \$2) ☐ Reaching FRA this year (2026 limit \$65,160, \$1 per \$3, only months before my FRA month) ☐ This is my grace year (first-year rule)

Write wages in the month you DID THE WORK, not the month you were paid. Gross wages before deductions, including bonuses, commissions, and vacation pay.

Month	Wages earned (month worked)	Self-employment net profit	Total for month	Counts? (before FRA month)	Running total (counted only)	At/under monthly limit?	Non-service month? (grace yr)	Notes
January								
February								
March								
April								
May								
June								
July								
August								
September								
October								
November								
December								
Year total						Counted total goes on line A below		

Estimate worksheet

Line	So far	Full-year estimate
A. Earnings counted toward the test (FRA year: only months before your FRA month)		
B. Annual limit (2026: \$24,480 under FRA all year, or \$65,160 in your FRA year)		
C. Over the limit: $A - B$ (if zero or less, stop: estimated withholding is \$0)		
D. $C \div 2$ (under FRA all year) or $C \div 3$ (FRA year). Drop any cents.		
E. Monthly benefit $\times$ months on benefits before your FRA month (skip grace-year non-service months)		
F. Estimated amount SSA would withhold = the smaller of D or E		
G. Whole checks likely held = $F \div$ monthly benefit, rounded <i>up</i> . Extra held ($G \times$ benefit $- F$) is usually repaid after year end.		

Worked example · SSA contact log

RetireTally · 2026

Worked example (SSA's own 2026 examples)

Under FRA all year. Benefit \$800/month (\$9,600 for the year). Earns \$33,400.

A \$33,400 · B \$24,480 · C \$8,920 · D \$8,920 ÷ 2 = **\$4,460**

E \$800 × 12 = \$9,600 · F = **\$4,460** · G = 6 checks held (\$4,800); \$340 repaid after year end.

SSA: benefits reduced by \$4,460; receives \$5,140 for the year.

Reaching FRA in August 2026. Benefit \$800/month.

Earns \$72,000, of which \$66,000 is January–July.

A \$66,000 (Jan–Jul only) · B \$65,160 · C \$840 · D \$840 ÷ 3 = **\$280**

E \$800 × 7 = \$5,600 · F = **\$280**.

SSA: receives \$5,320 of \$5,600 for Jan–Jul, then the full \$800 a month from August.

Sources: SSA, "Receiving Benefits While Working," and SSA Publication 05-10069, "How Work Affects Your Benefits." SSA's Publication 05-10069 example: \$600/month, \$26,080 earned → \$800 withheld → January and February checks held, payments resume in March, and SSA pays back the extra \$400 in 2027.

SSA contact & estimate log

Date	Phone / office / letter / online	Who / confirmation #	Earnings estimate given to SSA	What was said or decided	Follow-up (by when)

Contact SSA: ssa.gov · your *my Social Security* account · 1-800-772-1213

Sources (ssa.gov)

- Exempt Amounts Under the Earnings Test: ssa.gov/oact/cola/rtea.html
- Receiving Benefits While Working: ssa.gov/benefits/retirement/planner/whileworking.html
- How Work Affects Your Benefits (Pub. 05-10069): ssa.gov/pubs/EN-05-10069.pdf
- 2026 COLA Fact Sheet: ssa.gov/news/en/cola/factsheets/2026.html
- Normal Retirement Age: ssa.gov/oact/progdata/nra.html
- Annual report of earnings (20 CFR 404.452): ssa.gov/OP_Home/cfr20/404/404-0452.htm