

CHEAT CODE

How to Win with Money
Before Adulting Hits Hard

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Contents

A Word from the Authors	xi
--------------------------------------	-----------

Level Up!	xiv
------------------------	------------

Your Financial Power Starts Here

Why should you care about money, *even if you don't yet?*

Curtis "Wall Street" Carroll: From Illiteracy to Financial Freedom

1: Build a Life You Don't Want to Escape From	1
--	----------

Your Job Is Not Your Identity

The World of Work Has Changed

Job vs. Career vs. Calling vs. Gig

Money Isn't the Goal—It's the Tool

Sara Blakely: Fail Big, Win Bigger

2: Appreciate What Appreciates	9
---	----------

Appreciable vs. Depreciable—Know the Difference

What This Means for *You*

Mike Tyson: From Knockouts to Knocked Out

3: The Real Cost Isn't on the Price Tag	15
--	-----------

Pool or Popcorn?

Max Green Goes to College

The Biggest Opportunity Costs in Life

The Baker Purchase Factor: Why That \$1,000 TV Really Costs You \$1,400

CONTENTS

4: College: Dream, Detour, or Deal? 22

Choosing a Major: Starting Salaries & ROI Insights

College Isn't the Only Path Anymore

Choosing College

5: Launch Your Career 37

Networking: Your Hidden Superpower

Networking Future-Focused Tips

How to Apply for Jobs (The Smart, Professional Way)

6: No Trust Fund? No Problem. 47

The Millionaire Next Door (Still Exists)

Want to Build Wealth? Start Here.

7: What Is the Cheat Code? 53

What Is Compound Interest?

Let's Meet Three Savers

A Quick Word on *Negative* Compound Interest

8: Where to Put Your First Paycheck 60

Checking vs. Savings: What's the Deal?

Debit vs. Credit

Opening a Bank Account

Your Emergency Fund: The Ultimate Backup Plan

9: Budget Like a Boss 70

Why You Actually Need a Budget (Yes, *You*)

Budgeting Plans: Pick Your Money Map

Budgeting Apps: Easy, and Gen Alpha/Z-Approved

10: Let's Talk Debt 80

So, Is *Any* Debt Okay?

The Types of Debt You Might See After High School

The Ripple Effect of Debt

11: Credit: Swipe Now, Regret Later? 87

Real-Life Stuff Credit Affects

So, What's a Credit Score?
 Credit in Action: The Expensive Car Mistake
 How to Build Credit *Without* Getting into Debt

12: Cool Car, Empty Wallet? 94

Which Ride Sets You Up Best?
 Top 5 First Car Tips (From People Who've Been There)
 Car Buying Prep Checklist

13: Investing: How to Grow Your Dough 99

The 3 Basic Types of Investments (a.k.a. Choose Your Fighter)
 Mutual Funds & ETFs: The Snack Packs of Investing
 Your Money + Time = FIRE
 Stocks: Owning a Piece of the Action
 Risky Business

14: Think Like a Scholar, Borrow Like a Strategist 111

The Reality: A Debt Crisis Disguised as Opportunity
 What Even *Is* a Student Loan?
 Common Student Loan Traps (and How to Dodge Them)
 FAFSA, Grants, & Scholarships = Free Money First
 Need-to-Know Loan Lingo
 Your Before-You-Borrow Checklist

15: Retire in Style 124

What Even *Is* Retirement?
 The Rule of 72
 Enter the Roth IRA: Your Teen Superpower
 Your Quick Start Plan
 Tools to Help You Start Investing

16: Reinvention: Your Secret Weapon 133

Future-Proof Skills That Will Make You Unstoppable
 Where to Learn and Hone Skills
 Reinvention = Your Career Survival Skill
 Lifelong Learning in Action

CONTENTS

Glossary	142
Acknowledgments	147
About the Authors	148

A Word from the Authors

Joe Baker

I grew up on a little farm just outside of Emerson, Arkansas. If you've never heard of it, don't feel bad—there were only about 393 people living there at the time! Life on our farm included me, my family, a bunch of dogs, some chickens, a few cows, and a couple of horses. And just for the record, yes, we had an outhouse instead of a real bathroom until I was 9 years old. Fun fact: It had *two* holes. Fancy, right?

Even though life was simple and we didn't have much money, it never really crossed my mind that we were "poor." It was just normal life. I do remember once asking my granny about the fancy country club we drove by. She laughed and said, "Honey, you have to have a bathtub full of money to go there." That stuck with me for a long time.

College wasn't really a thing in my family, and no one expected me to go. But I didn't want to work construction with my dad or haul hay for six cents a bale forever. Yes, six cents. And no, my dad didn't pay me for working for him. He said, "You're getting paid every time you eat at my table!" Classic dad move.

Luckily, there was a small college just 15 miles away. I became a first-generation college graduate by juggling two or three jobs at a time while staying actively involved on campus. I wasn't at the

top of my college class, but I was elected Student Body President my senior year!

Fast forward and I earned my MBA, spent over 20 years teaching personal finance as an adjunct instructor, retired from a successful career in insurance and financial services, and traveled the country as a speaker, promoting financial literacy to both academic and corporate audiences.

This is what I tell my students: You do not have to come from money to build a great life. You do not have to be the smartest person in the room. You do not have to get everything perfect the first time. But if you learn a few key lessons about money early, and stick with them, you'll be amazed where you can go.

That's what this book is all about—making sure you have the tools to build a future you're proud of. Let's get started!

Lindsey Baker

Back in college, I didn't have a car, bills, or much responsibility to my name. I had a little savings from working at a daycare and picking up odd jobs during high school, but all my basic needs were covered while I was at school. The real world still felt pretty far away.

One of my required college classes was Personal Finance. I remember sitting there, half-listening to a professor drone on about financial terms, completely unable to connect with anything he was saying. His lectures were dry, full of technical jargon, and felt miles away from anything happening in my life. Somehow, I squeaked out a B in that class.

It wasn't until after college that I realized how important that class actually was, not just for what it taught me but for everything it didn't. Looking back, I had never taken a single class in high school that taught me how money really works. Not budgeting. Not credit. Not investing. Nothing. And that gap followed me into adulthood.

That's when I started to see the bigger issue. In many schools across the country, young people aren't being taught about money in a way that actually prepares them for life.

It hit even harder when I finally started listening to my dad. I had heard his advice for years, but I never truly listened. Not until I had to. And once I did, everything started to click.

With over a decade of experience teaching middle and high school students, I've learned how to make tough concepts feel relatable and practical. That's exactly what I set out to do with this book. Just remember, your report card doesn't determine how well you'll handle money in the real world. Financial success isn't about your grades; it's about your habits.

Financial literacy is a lifelong class. And you have the chance to pass it with flying colors.

LEVEL UP!

Your Financial Power Starts Here

Let's get one thing straight: We teach *a lot* of stuff in school. Some of it's important. Some of it's . . . **throws hands up**

You've probably had to:

- Memorize the parts of a volcano
- Study ancient civilizations
- Convert Fahrenheit to Celsius

But you know what most schools *haven't* taught?

- How credit cards really work
(spoiler: they're not free money)
- How to apply for jobs
- How to make your money *make more money*
- How to become financially independent so you can live life on *your* terms

We teach about the Silk Road, but not how to budget.

We teach Shakespeare, but not how to open a bank account.

We teach the square root of 144, but not how to pay rent.

Like . . . hello?

Financial literacy in the US has hovered around 50% for the past eight years, showing little to no improvement.¹

1. Michelle Meineke, "Can You Answer These 3 Questions About Your Finances? The Majority of US Adults Cannot," World Economic Forum, April 24, 2024, <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/04/financial-literacy-money-education/>.

That means half of American adults don't understand the basics of money. This isn't just some boring stat; it's a red flag. If we don't know how to manage money, we can't build strong futures, buy homes, avoid debt, or retire comfortably.

For young people like you, this matters *right now*. Because if your generation doesn't learn how money works, we'll keep repeating the same mistakes. And the cost isn't just personal. A financially uneducated population weakens our economy, widens the wealth gap, and limits what our country can achieve. You can't afford to sit this one out. Learning about money is one of the most powerful things you can do for yourself and for the future of society.

But . . . personal finance is *finally* starting to get the spotlight it deserves. States across the US are waking up and realizing, "Hey, maybe we should teach students how money works before they're 25 and buried in credit card debt." Shocking idea, right?

Some states have made personal finance *required* to graduate. **claps for them** Others are catching up. But no matter where you live, here's the truth:

Money affects *every single part* of your future.

Want to travel the world?

Start a business?

Buy cool stuff without worrying about bills?

Help your family out?

Not live paycheck to paycheck for the rest of your life?

You're going to need money skills to do that.

This book is your launchpad. We're not here to throw boring vocabulary at you. (However, all bolded terms are defined in the glossary at the end of the book.) Instead, we're here to show you how to:

→ **Make money**

→ **Keep money**

→ **Grow money**

And most importantly, we'll teach you how to use it to build the life you want. Not your parents' life. Not your teacher's. Yours.

Whether you want to become a millionaire or just not stress about bills all the time, this stuff matters. You don't need to be a math genius or a Wall Street bro. You just need to care a *little* bit now . . . so your future self can say, "Wow. I'm glad I learned that when I did."

Why should you care about money, *even if you don't yet?*

Because the world runs on it. And you're going to be in the world for a long time.

So let's get to it. Let's unlock your financial power.

Let's level up.

Curtis "Wall Street" Carroll: From Illiteracy to Financial Freedom

In 1996, at just 17 years old, Curtis was sentenced to 54 years to life for killing a man during an armed robbery. Growing up in Oakland, California, he never really had a chance. Raised by drug dealers and surviving on the streets, he was taught one core belief early on: "If you have money, you have power."

But back then, Curtis didn't know how to actually get money and definitely not the right way.

That would all start to change in the most unlikely place: San Quentin State Prison.

Sitting alone in his prison cell, Curtis Carroll made a decision: He would teach himself how to read. It was painful, slow, and frustrating, but through pure willpower, he figured it out.

Once he unlocked the ability to read, he set his sights even higher. Curtis started devouring the financial sections of

newspapers, learning the language of investing, stocks, and the money game.

Other inmates began to notice, and he earned the nickname, “Wall Street.”

But Curtis didn’t stop there. He made it his mission to fight against financial illiteracy, not just for himself but for everyone around him.

In his TED Talk, Curtis says it plain and clear:

“Financial illiteracy is a disease that has crippled minorities and the lower class in our society for generations, and we should be furious about that.”

He asks a powerful question:

“How can 50% of Americans be financially illiterate in a nation built on financial prosperity?”

The truth is, not knowing how money works is a national crisis. It holds people back. It limits dreams. And it hurts the future of our whole society.

Curtis Carroll believes that when people understand money, they unlock freedom. Not just financial freedom but freedom to make better choices, chase bigger dreams, and change their futures.²

He believes that the steps to financial freedom aren’t easy, but they aren’t a mystery either.

Anyone can learn them.

Anyone can change their story.

Widespread financial literacy can transform lives, especially for those who have been forgotten, underestimated, or written off by society.

2. Curtis Carroll “Wall Street,” “How I Learned to Read—and Trade Stocks—in Prison,” TED, January 2016, https://www.ted.com/talks/curtis_wall_street_carroll_how_i_learned_to_read_and_trade_stocks_in_prison.

LEVEL UP!

And it all starts with a decision: To learn. To grow. To take control of your future.