FINANCE & BUSINESS

State And Local Tax Refund Worksheet

PUBLISHED
November 25, 2026

REFERENCE
#1795583332163990

Understanding the State and Local Tax Refund Worksheet

Every tax season, millions of Americans who itemize deductions on their federal tax return face a somewhat confusing form: the **State and Local Tax Refund Worksheet**. This worksheet helps determine whether the state or local tax refund you received during the current tax year is taxable at the federal level. While the concept might seem straightforward, the interaction between state and federal tax rules creates nuance that can significantly impact your tax liability. Whether you live in a high-tax state like California or New York, or a no-income-tax state like Texas or Florida, understanding this worksheet is essential for accurate filing and avoiding unexpected tax bills.

In this comprehensive guide, we will walk you through every aspect of the **State and Local Tax Refund Worksheet**, explaining who needs it, how to complete it, common pitfalls, and how it ties into your broader tax strategy. By the end, you'll have a firm grasp on navigating this often-overlooked piece of tax compliance.

What Is the State and Local Tax Refund Worksheet?

The **State and Local Tax Refund Worksheet** is an IRS tool used to calculate the taxable portion of a refund you received from state or local governments for taxes you previously paid. Its purpose is rooted in the fundamental tax principle known as the "tax benefit rule." Under this rule, if you claimed a deduction for state and local income taxes (or general sales taxes) on your federal return in a prior year, and you later receive a refund of those same taxes, you may need to include that refund as income on your current year's federal return. However, if you did not receive a tax benefit from the deduction—for instance, because you used the standard deduction instead of itemizing—the refund is generally not taxable.

The worksheet walks you through a series of comparisons to determine whether you actually benefited from the deduction. It accounts for factors such as whether you itemized in the prior year, the amount of state and local taxes you deducted, any alternative minimum tax (AMT) adjustments, and the standard deduction for your filing status.

Where Does the Worksheet Appear?

You won't find the **State and Local Tax Refund Worksheet** as a standalone form. Instead, it is incorporated into the instructions for **Form 1040**(specifically in the instruction booklet for line 1 of Schedule 1, or directly in the Form 1040 instructions for the line addressing taxable refunds). Additionally, tax preparation software such as TurboTax, H&R Block, or TaxSlayer automatically performs these calculations based on your prior-year data. However, if you prepare your taxes manually, you must use the worksheet provided in the IRS Form 1040 instructions to compute the correct taxable amount.

Who Needs to Complete the State and Local Tax Refund Worksheet?

Not everyone who receives a state or local tax refund needs to complete this worksheet. Here are the key scenarios that trigger its use:

- You itemized deductions in the prior year: If you claimed a deduction for state and local income taxes (or sales taxes) on your federal Schedule A in the previous tax year, and you later receive a refund for those taxes, you generally must determine if part or all of that refund is taxable.
- You paid state and local taxes that exceeded the standard deduction: Even if you itemized, if your total itemized deductions (including state and local taxes) were less than the standard deduction available to you, then you derived no tax benefit from the deduction. In that case, the refund is not taxable. The worksheet helps you prove this.
- You were subject to the Alternative Minimum Tax (AMT) in the prior year: AMT rules limit the benefit of certain deductions, including state and local taxes. If AMT applied, the worksheet adjusts the taxable refund amount to reflect only the benefit you actually received.
- You repaid state or local taxes that were previously deducted: This is less common, but if you had to repay a refund due to an amendment, the worksheet can help compute a deduction for the repayment.

If you claimed the standard deduction in the prior year, you generally do not need to complete this worksheet because your refund is not taxable. However, there are exceptions if you also had a net operating loss or other special circumstances.

How to Obtain the State and Local Tax Refund Worksheet

The official **State and Local Tax Refund Worksheet** is published annually by the IRS in the **Instructions for Form 1040**(and sometimes in the instructions for Schedule 1). You can download the current year's instructions from the IRS website (IRS.gov) as a PDF. The worksheet is typically found in the section under "Line 1 – Taxable Refunds, Credits, or Offsets of State and Local Income Taxes."

Tax preparation software will ask you to enter the refund amount you received and then automatically pull data from your prior year's return to complete the worksheet. For manual filers, it's crucial to have your prior year's federal tax return (Form 1040 and Schedules A) and the actual refund amount from the state or local tax notice.

Step-by-Step Guide to Filling Out the Worksheet

Let's break down the typical structure of the worksheet. While the exact line numbers change each year, the logic remains consistent. We'll use a hypothetical prior tax year (e.g., 2023) to illustrate, assuming you are filing your 2024 federal return and reporting a 2023 state refund received in 2024.

Step 1: Gather Your Prior Year Information

- Your prior year's federal Form 1040.
- Your prior year's Schedule A (Itemized Deductions).
- The amount of the state or local refund you received in the current year (from your state tax notice or bank deposit).
- Your prior year's standard deduction amount (based on your filing status).
- Any AMT computations from the prior year (Form 6251).

Step 2: Compare Your Itemized Deductions to the Standard Deduction

The first key calculation: On the worksheet, you will compare the total itemized deductions you claimed for the prior year to the standard deduction amount you could have taken. If your itemized deductions were equal to or less than the standard deduction, then you did not receive a tax benefit from the state and local tax deduction, and your refund is generally not taxable. In that case, you can stop—enter zero as the taxable amount.

If your itemized deductions exceeded the standard deduction, you proceed to the next step.

Step 3: Determine the "Recovery" Amount

The worksheet then asks you to enter the refund amount you received. But not all of that refund may be taxable. The IRS allows you to exclude the portion that, if subtracted from your prior year's state and local tax deduction, would not have changed your tax liability. This is where the worksheet gets intricate.

You will be directed to compute the *lesser of*:

1. The total refund received, or
2. The amount by which your itemized deductions exceeded the standard deduction.

This ensures you only include as income the refund that actually provided you a tax benefit.

Step 4: Adjust for Itemized Deduction Limitations and AMT

If you were subject to the overall limitation on itemized deductions (the "Pease" limitation, repealed for tax years 2018–2025 by the TCJA, but may apply in older years) or AMT, additional adjustments are needed. The worksheet incorporates special line items to reduce the taxable refund by the amount of the deduction that was disallowed by AMT or other limits. Without this adjustment, you could end up paying tax on a refund for a deduction you never fully benefited from.

Step 5: Compute the Final Taxable Amount

After all adjustments, you arrive at the taxable portion of your state and local tax refund. You then enter this amount on your current federal return (typically on Schedule 1, line 1, or directly on Form 1040 line 1 for older versions).

Common Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

Assuming the Full Refund Is Always Taxable

Many taxpayers automatically report their entire state refund as income. This is incorrect. Only the portion that provided a federal tax benefit is taxable. For example, if your itemized deductions only exceeded the standard deduction by $500, but you received a $1,000 refund, only $500 is taxable—because the other $500 never reduced your federal tax.

Forgetting About the Standard Deduction Comparison

Some people who itemized still realized no benefit because their itemized deductions were below the standard deduction (e.g., due to the SALT cap limiting state and local tax deductions to $10,000). In that case, no portion of the refund is taxable. The worksheet makes this clear, but many skip the comparison.

Not Considering AMT Impacts

If you paid AMT in the prior year, the state tax deduction was partially or fully disallowed. The worksheet accounts for this by separately calculating a "general tax benefit" and an "AMT benefit." Neglecting to enter AMT data can lead to overreporting income. Tax software handles this automatically, but manual filers must locate their Form 6251.

Using the Wrong Year's Worksheet

The worksheet for the current year's return refers to the prior year's data. Be absolutely certain you are using the correct worksheet version. For example, when preparing your 2024 federal return, you use the worksheet from the 2024 Instructions for Form 1040, but you input data from your 2023 return. Do not use the 2023 worksheet.

State and Local Tax Refund Worksheet and the SALT Cap

The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act (TCJA) imposed a $10,000 cap on the deduction for state and local taxes (SALT) for tax years 2018 through 2025. This cap significantly reduces the tax benefit of paying high state and local taxes.

State and Local Tax Refund Worksheet becomes even more important. If you itemized but your SALT deduction was limited to $10,000, your total itemized deductions may still be higher than the standard deduction (which increased under TCJA). However, the refund you receive in a subsequent year might be partly attributable to taxes that were not fully deducted due to the cap. The worksheet automatically handles this because the total itemized deductions already reflect the capped amount. So if you paid $15,000 in state income taxes but could only deduct $10,000, a refund of $2,000 the next year may be partially nontaxable if your itemized deductions weren't far above the standard deduction. The worksheet simply compares actual itemized deductions to the standard deduction—no separate cap adjustment is needed because the cap was already applied in the prior year's Schedule A.

Special Situations

Married Filing Separately in Community Property States

If you live in a community property state (e.g., California, Texas, Arizona) and file separately, the allocation of state tax refunds can be complex. The worksheet may require you to compute each spouse's separate tax benefit. Consult a tax professional or use software that handles community property rules.

Refunds of Local Taxes

The worksheet applies not only to state income tax refunds but also to refunds of local income taxes (county or city). Property tax refunds, however, follow different rules and are not part of this worksheet. Property tax refunds are generally not taxable unless you deducted them and received a benefit.

Net Operating Loss Carryovers

If you had a net operating loss (NOL) in the prior year, the tax benefit rule becomes more nuanced. The worksheet typically includes instructions for NOL situations. In essence, the refund may reduce the NOL carryover rather than be included as current income. Seek guidance if this applies.

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