THE LOW-BID RED FLAG CHECKLIST

How to Tell Whether a Low Painting Estimate Is a Good Deal or a Risk

You got three estimates and one is noticeably cheaper than the others. Part of you wants to take it, but something feels off. That instinct is worth listening to.

A lower price is not always a problem. Some contractors are simply more efficient. But in residential painting, a price that is significantly below the others usually means something was left out, and what gets left out is almost always prep work, material quality, or job scope. Those are exactly the things that determine whether your paint job looks great in two years or starts failing in six months.

Use this checklist to review any estimate that looks too good to be true. If you check off more than two or three of these flags, ask the contractor to explain before you sign anything.

SECTION 1 · PREP WORK RED FLAGS

✘ No prep process described

WHY THIS MATTERS

Surface preparation (cleaning, scraping, sanding, caulking, and priming) is what makes paint last. A contractor who does not mention it is likely skipping it, and skipped prep is the number one reason paint peels, chips, or bubbles ahead of schedule.

ASK THIS:

"Can you walk me through exactly how your crew preps the surfaces before they start painting?"

✘ Priming is not included

WHY THIS MATTERS

Bare wood, patched areas, stained surfaces, and previously unpainted drywall all require primer before topcoat. Skipping primer reduces adhesion and often means the paint will not hold evenly or last as long.

ASK THIS:

"Does your estimate include primer, and which surfaces will be primed?"

✘ Caulking and crack repair not mentioned

WHY THIS MATTERS

Gaps around trim, windows, and door frames let moisture in and make paint fail faster. A complete job includes caulking these areas as part of prep, not as an upgrade or add-on.

ASK THIS:

"Is caulking included in your prep process, or is that priced separately?"

✘ No mention of cleaning or pressure washing

WHY THIS MATTERS

Paint applied to dirty, chalky, or mildew-covered surfaces will not bond properly. Washing is standard for exterior work and important on many interior surfaces as well.

ASK THIS:

"How do you clean the surfaces before painting, and is that included in this price?"

SECTION 2 · MATERIALS RED FLAGS

✘ No paint brand or product line specified

WHY THIS MATTERS

Contractors who do not name the paint they use are often purchasing the cheapest available option. Professional-grade paints like Sherwin-Williams Duration or Benjamin Moore Aura cost more, and deliver better coverage, durability, and color retention.

ASK THIS:

"What brand and product line of paint will you be using, and why do you use it?"

✘ Only one coat included

WHY THIS MATTERS

Most surfaces require two coats for proper, even coverage. One coat may be offered to lower the price, but single-coat results often look thin, uneven, and begin showing wear much sooner.

ASK THIS:

"Does this estimate include two coats, and does that apply to all surfaces?"

✘ Paint is supplied by the homeowner

WHY THIS MATTERS

When a contractor asks you to supply the paint, they are reducing their cost and removing their accountability for the material. A professional contractor knows which products perform best and takes responsibility for the materials they apply.

ASK THIS:

"Why does this estimate not include the paint, and what happens if the product performs poorly?"

✘ No finish or sheen specified

WHY THIS MATTERS

Different sheens (flat, eggshell, satin, semi-gloss) are appropriate for different surfaces and uses. An estimate that does not specify sheen may result in the wrong product being used in bathrooms, kitchens, or high-traffic areas.

ASK THIS:

"What sheen or finish will you be using in each area, and why?"

SECTION 3 · SCOPE OF WORK RED FLAGS

✘ Estimate is a single number with no breakdown

WHY THIS MATTERS

A professional proposal lists every surface being painted, the number of coats, what is included in prep, and what materials will be used. A single number with no detail makes it impossible to know what you are actually getting, or to hold anyone accountable for it.

ASK THIS:

"Can you give me a written breakdown of exactly what is included in this price?"

✘ Trim, doors, or ceilings are not mentioned

WHY THIS MATTERS

Some low bids only cover walls, leaving trim, doors, ceilings, or window frames for a future "add-on" charge. Make sure the estimate defines every surface clearly.

ASK THIS:

"Does this price include trim, doors, and ceilings, or are those separate?"

✘ Exclusions are vague or not listed

WHY THIS MATTERS

A complete estimate tells you not just what is included but what is not. Hidden exclusions become surprise charges once the project starts.

ASK THIS:

"What surfaces or work are NOT included in this estimate?"

✘ Price may change once work begins

WHY THIS MATTERS

Some contractors offer a low number to win the job and then introduce additional costs after work starts, claiming the scope changed. A fixed, written price is the only protection against this.

ASK THIS:

"Is this a fixed price, or are there conditions that could change the total?"

SECTION 4 · TIMELINE & LOGISTICS RED FLAGS

✘ No crew size or daily schedule mentioned

WHY THIS MATTERS

A very low bid sometimes reflects a one-person operation with limited capacity, meaning your project takes far longer than expected. Know how many people will be on site and how many days the job should take.

ASK THIS:

"How many people will be on the job each day, and how long do you expect the project to take?"

✘ No daily cleanup process described

WHY THIS MATTERS

A professional crew protects your floors, covers furniture, and cleans up at the end of each workday. A contractor who does not mention this may leave your home in poor condition throughout the project.

ASK THIS:

"What do you do to protect my property each day, and how do you clean up before leaving?"

✘ Unusually fast turnaround promised

WHY THIS MATTERS

Speed can be a red flag if the timeline does not allow enough time for proper prep, adequate dry time between coats, or careful finish work. Rushing through a paint job almost always shows.

ASK THIS:

"How much time are you allowing for prep, and what is the dry time between coats?"

SECTION 5 · ACCOUNTABILITY RED FLAGS

✘ No clear answer about problems after the job

WHY THIS MATTERS

A contractor who stands behind the work can tell you exactly what happens if a problem appears after the crew leaves: who you call, how fast they respond, and what they will fix. A vague promise to "come back if something comes up," with no specifics, suggests they may not.

ASK THIS:

"If something goes wrong after you finish, who do I call, how fast do you respond, and what will you fix?"

✘ License and insurance not confirmed

WHY THIS MATTERS

A low price sometimes reflects a contractor who is operating without proper general liability insurance or workers' compensation. If something goes wrong on your property, you could be financially responsible.

ASK THIS:

"Are you fully licensed and insured? Can you send me a certificate before work begins?"

✘ No references offered or available

WHY THIS MATTERS

A contractor without recent references or verifiable reviews is a contractor without a reliable track record. Professional painters are proud of their work and happy to share references.

ASK THIS:

"Can you give me two or three references from recent jobs similar to mine?"

SECTION 6 · COMMUNICATION & PROFESSIONALISM RED FLAGS

✘ Slow or inconsistent communication

WHY THIS MATTERS

How a contractor communicates before the job is exactly how they will communicate during it. Delayed responses, vague answers, or missed calls at the estimate stage are a reliable preview of the experience you will have once the work begins.

ASK THIS:

"What is the best way to reach you during the project, and how quickly do you typically respond?"

✘ Pressure to decide quickly or pay a large deposit

WHY THIS MATTERS

Reputable contractors do not need to rush you. High-pressure tactics (urgency, discounts that expire today, or requests for more than a modest deposit upfront) are signs of instability or poor business practices.

ASK THIS:

"What is your standard deposit requirement, and why is there a time pressure on this offer?"

✘ Reluctance to put things in writing

WHY THIS MATTERS

Any hesitation to provide a detailed written proposal or a signed contract is a serious warning. Professional contractors welcome written agreements because they protect both parties.

ASK THIS:

"Can you provide a full written proposal that I can review and sign before work begins?"

What to Do If You've Checked Off Red Flags

- **Call and ask the questions listed under each flag.** A legitimate contractor will answer clearly, professionally, and without hesitation. That conversation itself will tell you a great deal about how the project will go.
- **Ask for a revised, detailed written proposal.** If the original estimate was a single number with no breakdown, request a written scope of work that lists every surface, the prep process, the materials, the number of coats, and the total price, all in writing.
- **Compare revised details against the other estimates.** A low bid that gets more detailed often reveals exactly where the savings are coming from, and whether those shortcuts are acceptable to you or not.
- **Do not let price be the only factor.** The cost difference between a thorough job and a rushed one may be a few hundred dollars upfront. The cost difference in repainting in two years instead of seven is far greater.
- **Trust what the process tells you.** If a contractor is vague, resistant, or evasive when you ask reasonable questions, that is your answer. A professional who does quality work welcomes informed homeowners.

A low price is worth investigating, not automatically accepting or automatically rejecting. This checklist gives you the tools to tell the difference.

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