

On a Saturday in late April, three contractors stood in the same Markham backyard and looked at the same sagging cedar fence. Each walked the line, nodded, and promised to "send something over." By Wednesday the homeowner had three emails, and the numbers on them had almost nothing in common. One total was double the other. One quoted a material she had never heard of. The third never mentioned the old fence at all. That is the moment when getting and comparing written estimates stops being paperwork and becomes the entire job. The estimate is the only document that says what will be built, with what, and for how much. Read it well and the hiring decision makes itself. Read it carelessly, and you will meet the difference between the bids again in the fall, when the crew is standing in your yard.

The quality of your estimates starts with your request, not with the contractor. If three companies each hear a slightly different description of the project, you will collect three different fences disguised as three different prices. Write the basics down before you call: the approximate length of the run, the height you want, the material family you are leaning toward, the number of gates, and whether the old fence stays or goes.

Ask every contractor for the same three things: a site visit, a written estimate, and a clear statement of what the price includes and excludes. Some outfits will quote from photos and satellite images without ever setting foot on the property. For a straight panel run on flat ground, that can work. For a ravine lot in Scarborough with a two-foot grade change across the yard, a quote written from a screen is a guess wearing a price tag. Insist on the walkthrough, and treat a refusal as a warning.

A useful request also sets the ground rules for the quote itself:

- Give each bidder the same line to price, marked with stakes or flags where the boundary is clear.
- State whether the old fence needs removal and disposal, and whether you want that cost inside the same number.
- Describe the access, especially if a crew will carry material through the house or down a narrow side yard.
- Ask for the estimate in writing within a set window, and tell each bidder you are comparing three.

Height limits, setback rules, and placement rules vary from one GTA municipality to the next, so confirm what is allowed at your address with your local building or bylaw office before you lock in a design. A fence that fits the rules in Ajax may not pass in Oakville. The estimates you collect should be priced against a design that is legal where you live.

What a Complete Estimate Document Should Show

A complete estimate reads like a small spec sheet, not a text message. The contractor should name the material, the profile, the height, the post size and spacing, the post installation method, the fasteners, the finish or treatment, and the linear footage the number covers. If the word "cedar" appears, the estimate should say what grade, what thickness, and how it will be finished. If the posts go into concrete, the method matters. A poured footing behaves differently from a set-and-backfilled hole on the clay soil that shifts through every freeze-thaw cycle in this region.

Line items should be visible, not buried. A one-line total that says "fence installation" tells you nothing about what you are <https://gta-fencing.b-cdn.net/fence-installation/index.html> buying, and it quietly gives the contractor room to substitute cheaper materials when the order goes in. The more specific the document, the more the contractor has committed to, and that commitment is worth more than a low number.

A strong estimate also tells you how the contractor plans to run the job. It names the crew size or the number of days on site, states who removes the old fence and where the debris goes, and says what happens to the soil from the post holes. Those details are not decoration. They are the difference between a document written from experience and one written to win a number.

Every honest estimate also names what it does not include. Demolition, disposal, gate hardware, extra posts for a corner or a grade change, a lockable latch, the removal of tree roots that block a post hole, and repairs to a neighbor's fence that your new line depends on are all items that sometimes vanish from the total and reappear later as extras. If an estimate is silent on them, ask about each one out loud.

Reading an Estimate Line by Line

Start with the linear footage. All three estimates should describe the same run of fence. If one says 120 feet and another says 150, someone is measuring differently or pricing a different line, and that gap has nothing to do with hourly rates.

Then look at the posts. Post size, spacing, and hole depth decide whether the fence survives a GTA winter. Two fences can look identical from the street and be built very differently underneath, and the two versions do not cost the same to build or to maintain. The estimate that names the spacing and the depth is telling you how the fence will behave a decade from now. The one that says only "posts included" is telling you to guess.

Check the gates. A gate is not a section of fence with a hinge. It is a moving assembly that takes framing, hardware, and installation time, and it usually carries its own line item. If your plan includes two gates, the estimate should show two. If it shows one, the missing gate will surface as an extra before the crew packs up.



Finally, look at the finish. Pressure-treated posts, a stain schedule, galvanized hardware, and post caps all change both the price and the lifespan. An estimate that says "wood fence" without naming the wood is not finished yet.

A proper estimate carries two dates as well: how long the price stays valid and when the work is expected to start. Material prices and crew calendars move, so a number quoted during the spring thaw may not hold into July, and a start date that exists only in conversation is not a schedule. Ask what happens if the schedule slips toward the first freeze, when concrete and backfill behave differently and the work window shrinks.

Getting and Comparing Written Estimates Fairly

Here is the step most owners rush, and it is the step that saves the most money. Before you compare totals, compare documents. Lay the three estimates side by side and check them against one another item by item.

1. Confirm all three cover the same footage, height, and number of gates.
2. Confirm all three include demolition and disposal, or that all three exclude it, so the totals are comparable.
3. Compare the named materials. Cedar, composite, aluminum, and chain link are different decisions, not different flavors of the same one.
4. Compare post size, spacing, and installation method, because those decide the fence's future.
5. Ask each bidder to price the items the others exclude, then compare totals that include everything.
6. Check the payment schedule and the timeline, and make sure both are written down.

Once the scopes line up, the price differences become meaningful. A higher number for the same specified work usually reflects more labor, better materials, or a crew that plans to do the job properly. A much lower number for identical work should worry you more than it pleases you. Nobody builds the same fence for dramatically different amounts without cutting something, and what gets cut is rarely visible on day one.

A vague estimate is information in its own right. A contractor who cannot or will not write down the details is telling you how they handle surprises, which is loosely. The fence business runs on surprises, from buried rocks to utility lines to a neighbor who changes their mind, and you want the person who accounts for them on paper rather than the one who absorbs them silently or bills for them late.

When Two Estimates Still Do Not Match

After you align the footage, the materials, and the exclusions, a gap can still remain. That gap is the most interesting number on the page. Go back to each bidder and ask them to explain the difference between their number and the others. The contractor who can account for the gap line by line, without hand-waving about quality, understands the job. The one who says the other guy "must be cutting corners" is guessing about work they have not seen. You are allowed to ask for that explanation. You are paying for the thinking either way.

The Follow-Up Questions That Decide It

Go back to each contractor with the same short list of questions. Ask what would change the price: a grade change across the yard, a rock shelf under the lawn, a utility line in the run, a neighbor who wants to split the cost. Ask how the crew handles a post hole that hits a buried rock or a root the size of a thigh, because that is not a question of if but of when. Ask who marks the utility lines before anyone digs, and confirm the process with the local utility locator service rather than assuming.

Ask to see the insurance and WSIB paperwork, and verify the details with the insurer instead of accepting a photocopy at face value. Ask for a realistic finish date in writing, and ask what happens if rain eats a week of the schedule. Ask who is responsible for protecting the work along a shared boundary, and get the neighbor's agreement in writing if the fence will sit near or on a property line. None of these questions cost anything, and the answers reveal more about the contractor than the total ever will.

Finally, ask to see a recent installation, not a photo of one. A contractor who is proud of the work will happily point you to a fence they built two seasons ago, and the visit will teach you more about post stability, gate function, and finish quality than any conversation. If a bidder hesitates, take note. The work they cannot show you is the work they do not want you to see.

Making the Call

Getting and comparing written estimates is a few hours of tedious work that pays off for the life of the fence. By the time you have read three documents line by line and put the same questions to all three bidders, the choice usually makes itself. The one who specified the materials, listed the exclusions, and answered without hedging is the one who will show up prepared. The fence will still cost what it costs, but you will know exactly what you bought, and that is the difference between a project you manage and a project that manages you. And if anything in the winning document still does not make sense, ask until it does, because the only bad question at this stage is the one you do not ask.