instead

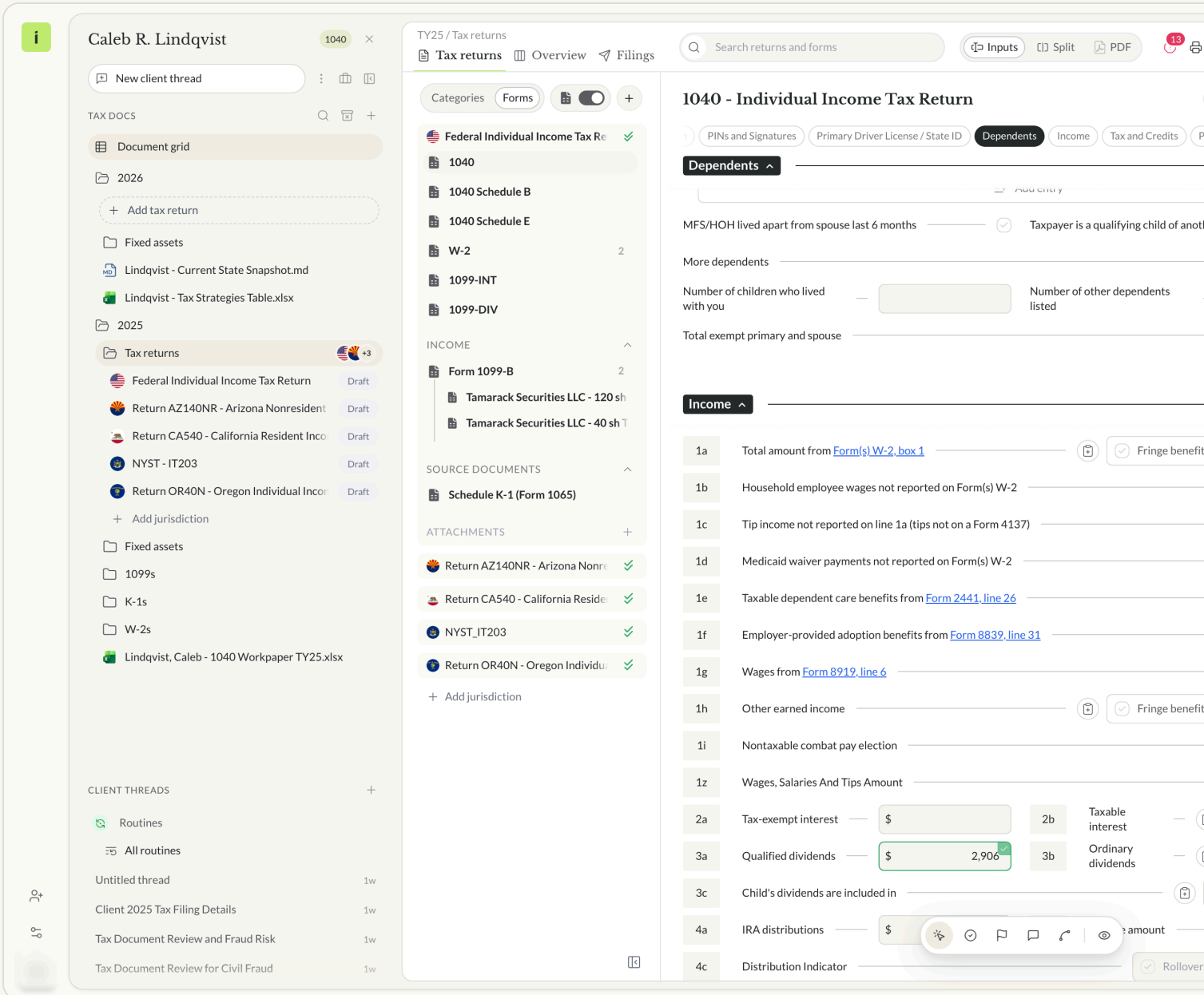
WHITE PAPER

Sign-off levels and the e-file gate

How Instead holds a return until the sign-offs of the firm are in

November 2026

instead.com



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INTRODUCTION

Your review process, enforced.

This paper shows how sign-off levels work in Instead. It covers the settings, sign-off on single fields, sign-off on the whole return, the gate on e-file and e-signature, team setups and the limits today. It is written for firm owners, tax partners and the reviewers who sign off on the work.

Labels in quotes are the words on screen. The screens come from a Sandbox demo firm.

01

The review rule

Most firms already have a review rule. A checklist cannot hold a return back.

Most firms have a rule for who checks a return before it goes out. A preparer finishes, a reviewer checks, and a partner signs off. The rule often lives in a checklist or in habit.

A checklist records the review. It cannot stop a return from going out.

Sign-off levels in Instead put the rule inside the return. The firm sets how many approvals a return needs. Reviewers sign off on single fields and on the whole return, each at their own level.

The return cannot go out until the required level signs off. Until then, it cannot be sent for signature or e-filed. The client is never asked to sign a return the firm has not approved.

The return cannot go out until the required level signs off.

02

The model

Four rules describe the whole feature.

The firm requirement	A firm owner sets how many approvals a tax return needs before it can be sent for signature or e-filed. None, or one, two or three.
One level per person	Each team member holds one approval level, Level 1, Level 2, Level 3 or None. Owners set it.
Each sign-off carries a level	When a reviewer signs off on a field or on a return, the sign-off carries the level of that reviewer.
Higher covers lower	A higher level covers every level below it. A Level 2 sign-off clears a return that needs Level 2.

There is no fixed order. Whoever holds the required level can clear the return alone. A preparer can still sign off first, and the return then shows that the higher level is still needed.

A sign-off is capped at the requirement of the firm. A Level 3 member in a firm that requires Level 2 signs off at Level 2.

A member with no level set holds Level 1. An owner with no level set holds the top level of the firm.

03

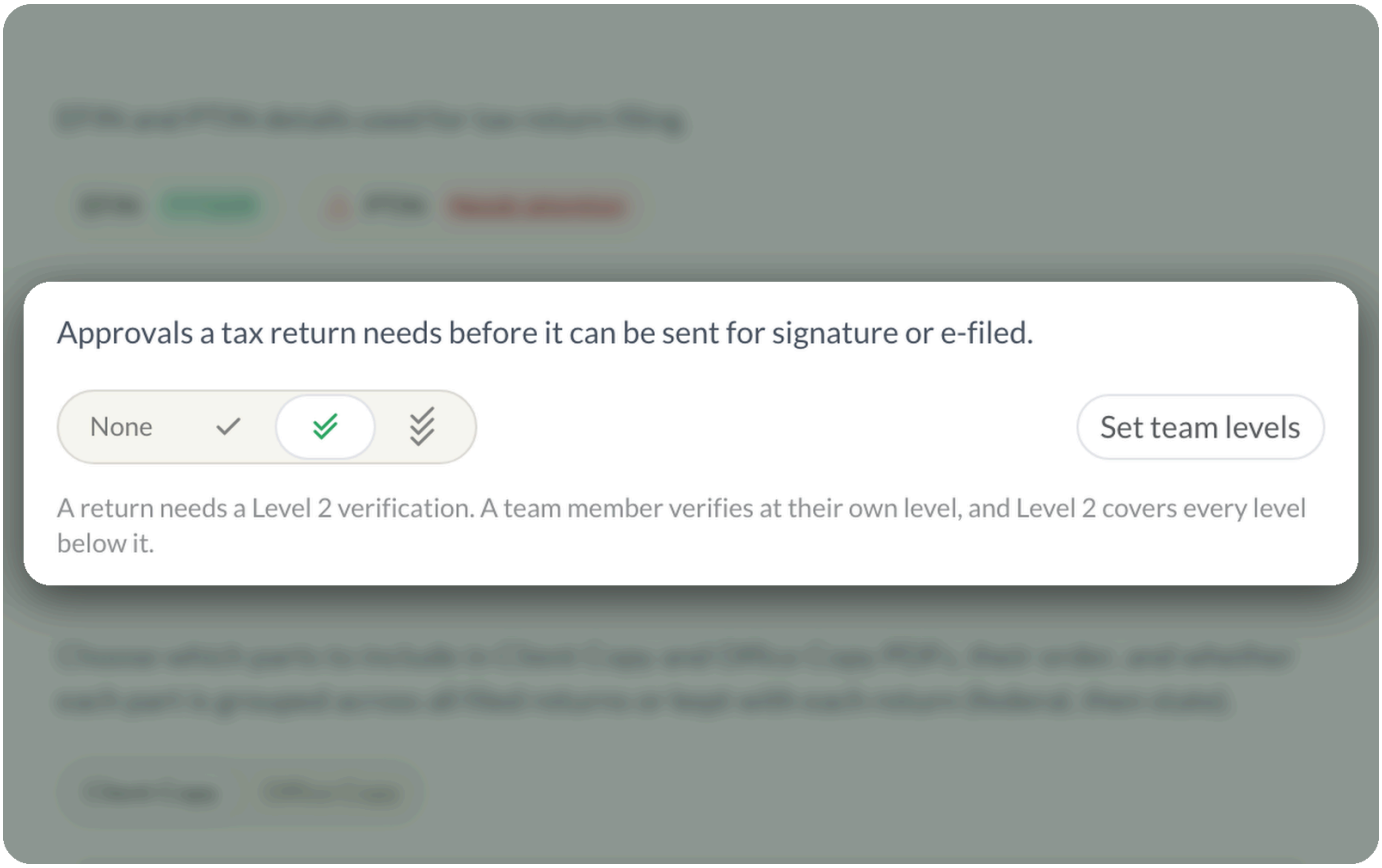
Setting it up

Two settings, both set by firm owners.

Approvals. In Firm settings, under Tax return filing, the row reads “Approvals a tax return needs before it can be sent for signature or e-filed.” The picker shows None and then one, two or three checks.

The rule in words. At two checks, the line under the picker reads “A return needs a Level 2 verification. A team member verifies at their own level, and Level 2 covers every level below it.”

Figure 1 Firm settings, Tax return filing. The Approvals card on two checks.

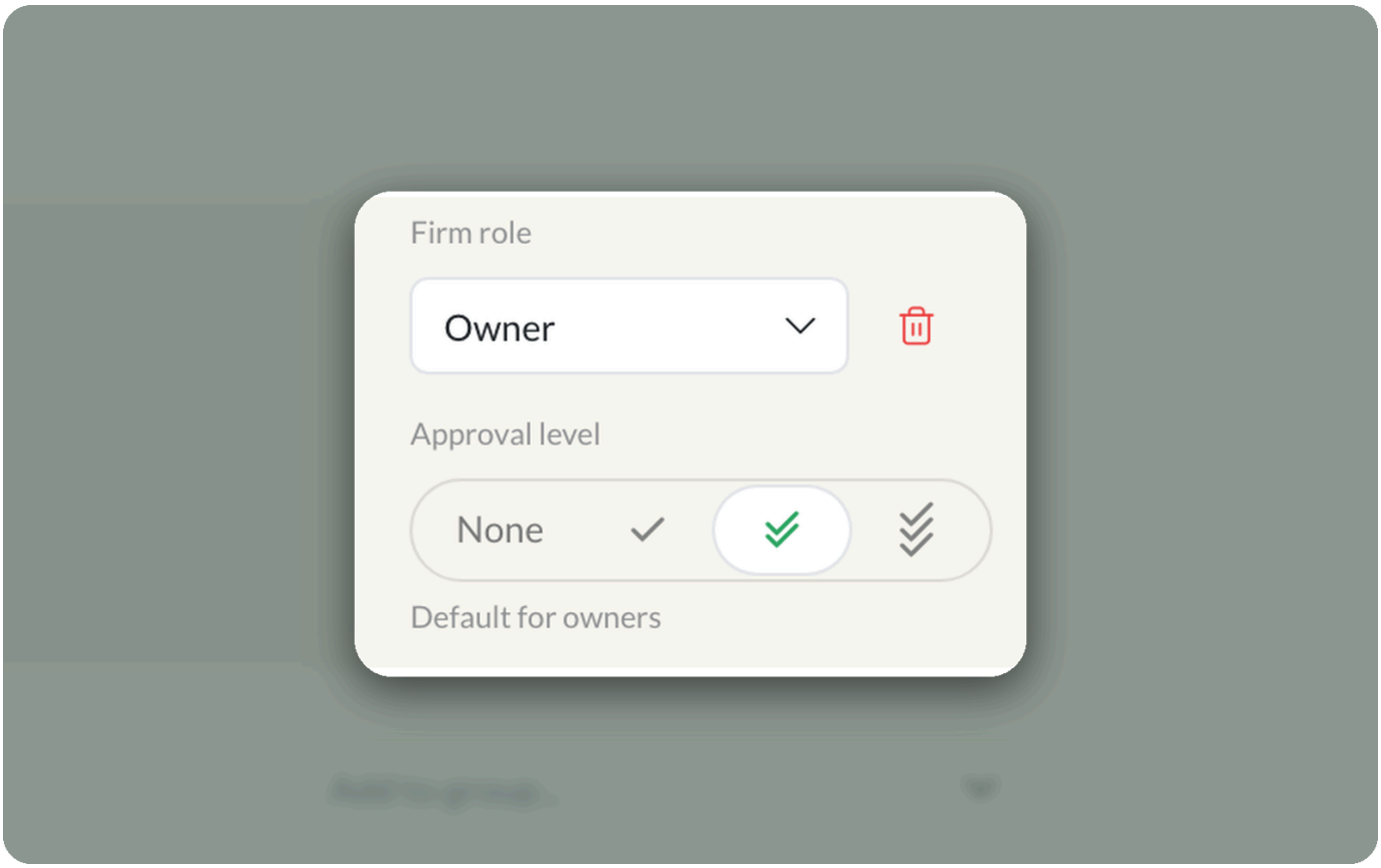


Set team levels. The button opens Team settings. Each member shows a small pill, L1, L2, L3 or None. In the member panel, the “Approval level” picker sets the level. A member cannot change their own level.

None. A member at None can check fields inside a return but cannot verify a return.

The red warning. If no one on the team holds the required level, the settings say so in red. Returns cannot be sent for signature or e-filed until an owner sets a team member to that level.

Figure 2 Firm settings, Team. The Approval level picker of a member on two checks.



04

Sign-off on fields

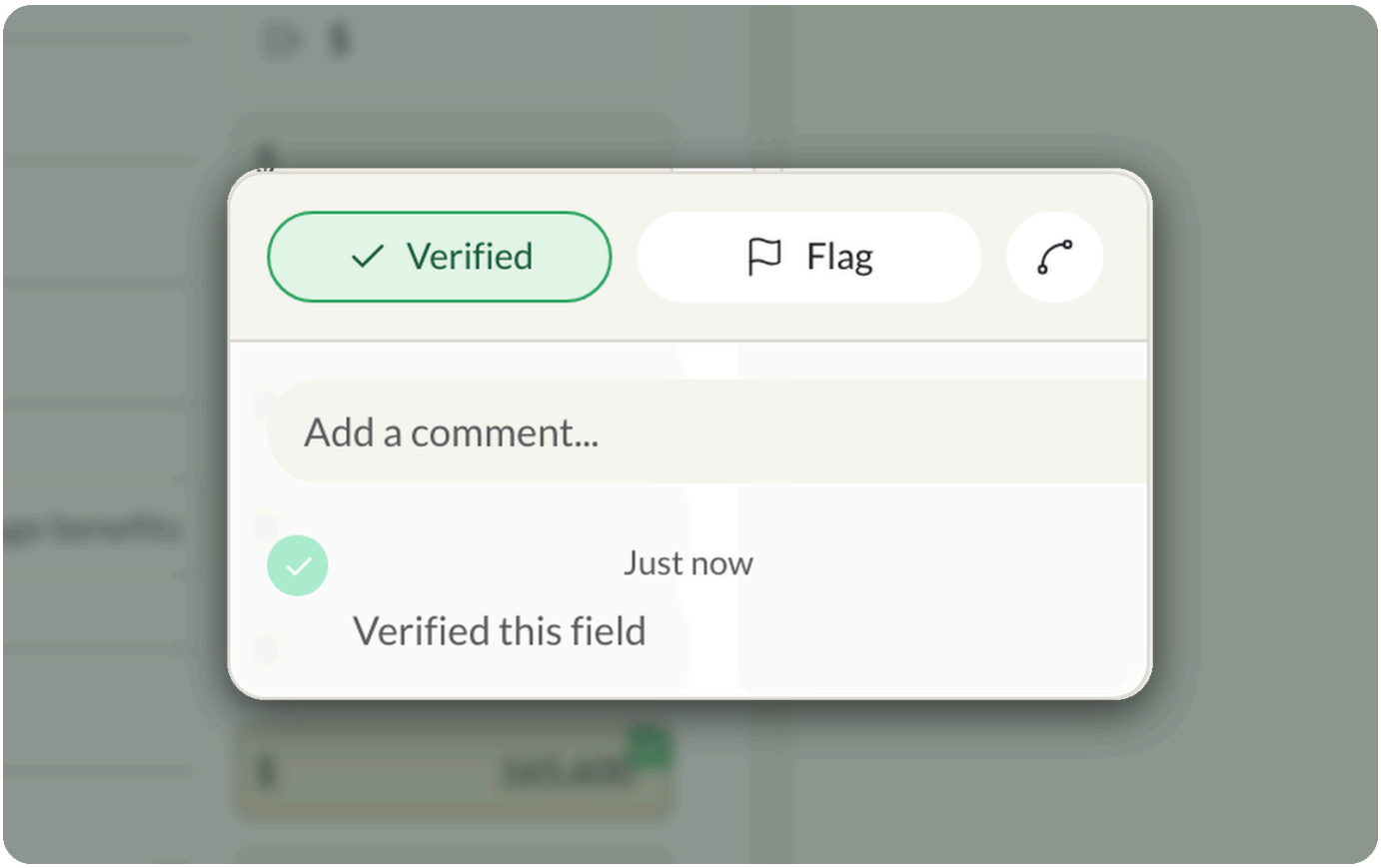
Inside the return, reviewers sign off on single fields.

Open a return in the Inputs view and open the review card of a field. The card has “Verify” and “Flag” at the top, a comment box, and the trail of the field below.

Click Verify and the button reads “Verified”. The trail adds the row “Verified this field”. On the form, the field gets a green outline and a check tag.

Each field sign-off carries the level of the reviewer, capped at the requirement of the firm.

Figure 3 A Level 1 sign-off on a field. The card reads Verified, and the trail lists Verified this field.

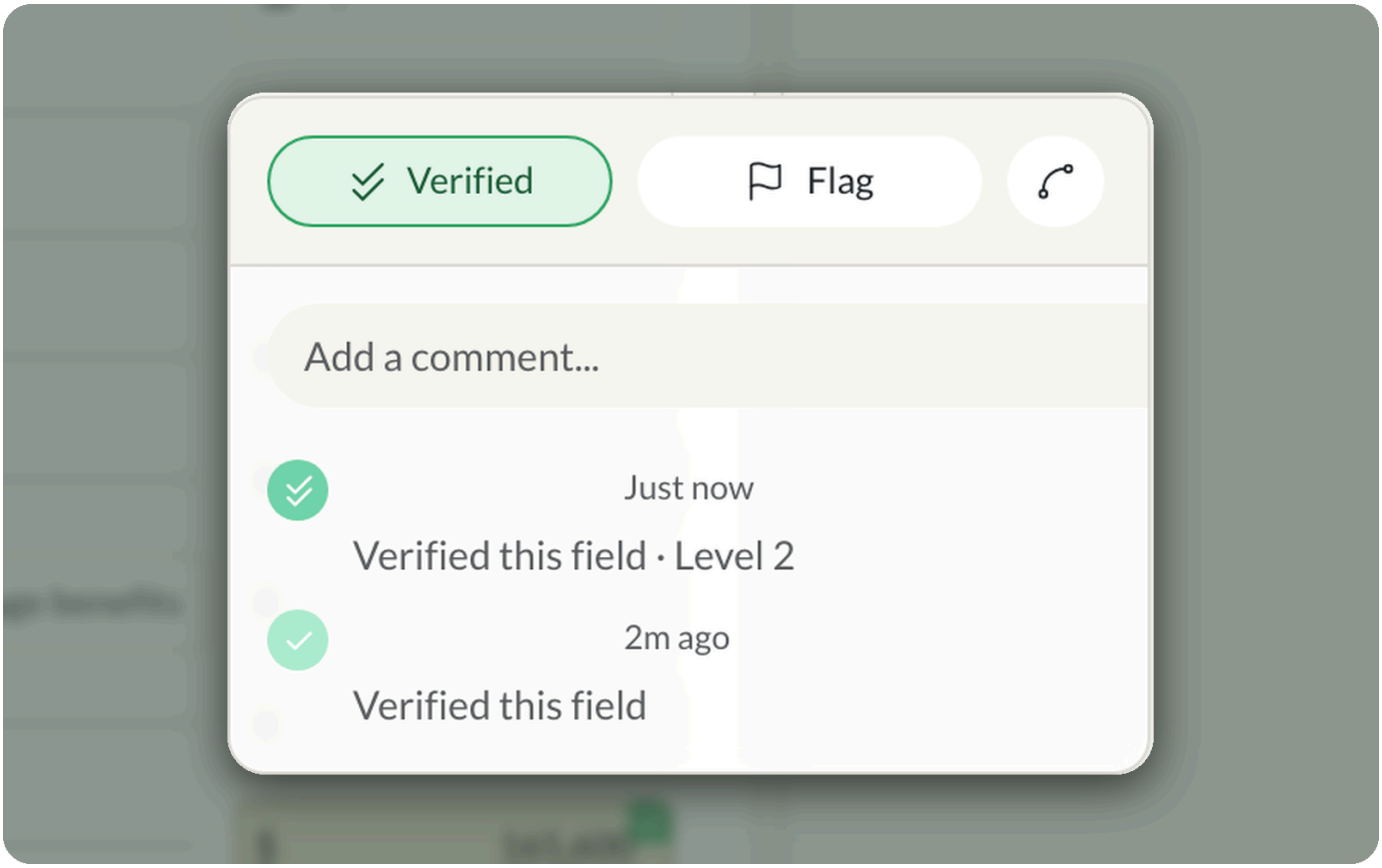


The card and the trail record each level.

When a Level 2 reviewer opens a field that already has a Level 1 sign-off, the Verify button previews the double check before the click.

After the click the trail adds “Verified this field · Level 2” above “Verified this field”. The trail keeps both rows, each with who and when. Open the card of a field to see which levels signed off.

Figure 4 Each level is recorded. The Level 2 row sits above the Level 1 row in the trail.

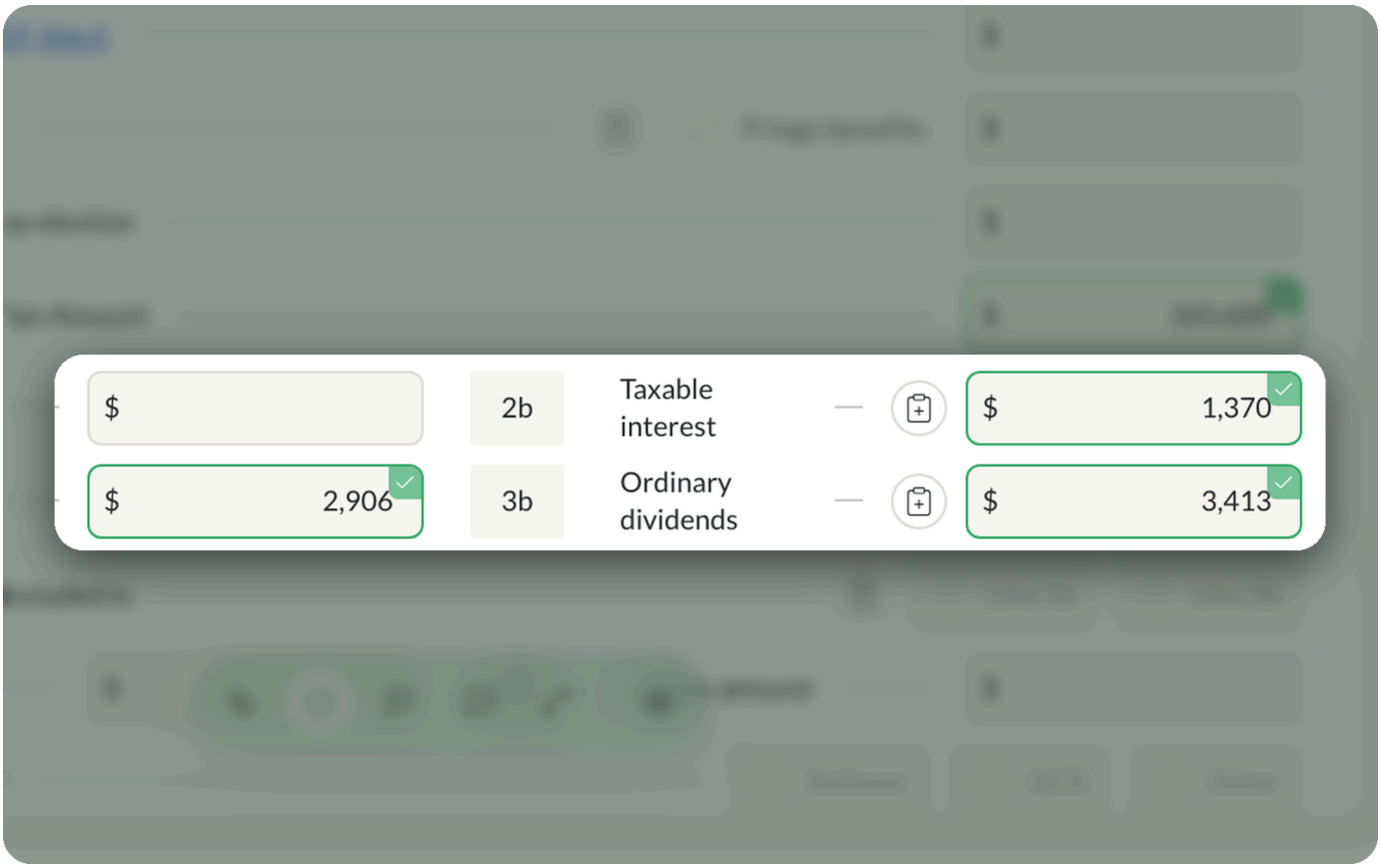


Many fields in a row. The review bar at the bottom of the form has a Verify tool. Its tooltip reads “Rapid click fields to verify”. Each click signs off one field at your level.

Taking a check back. A reviewer can take back their own check. A lower check that someone else gave stays. Nobody can take back a check above their own level.

Fields do not gate. Field checks show the review work. They do not hold the return. The sign-off on the return does.

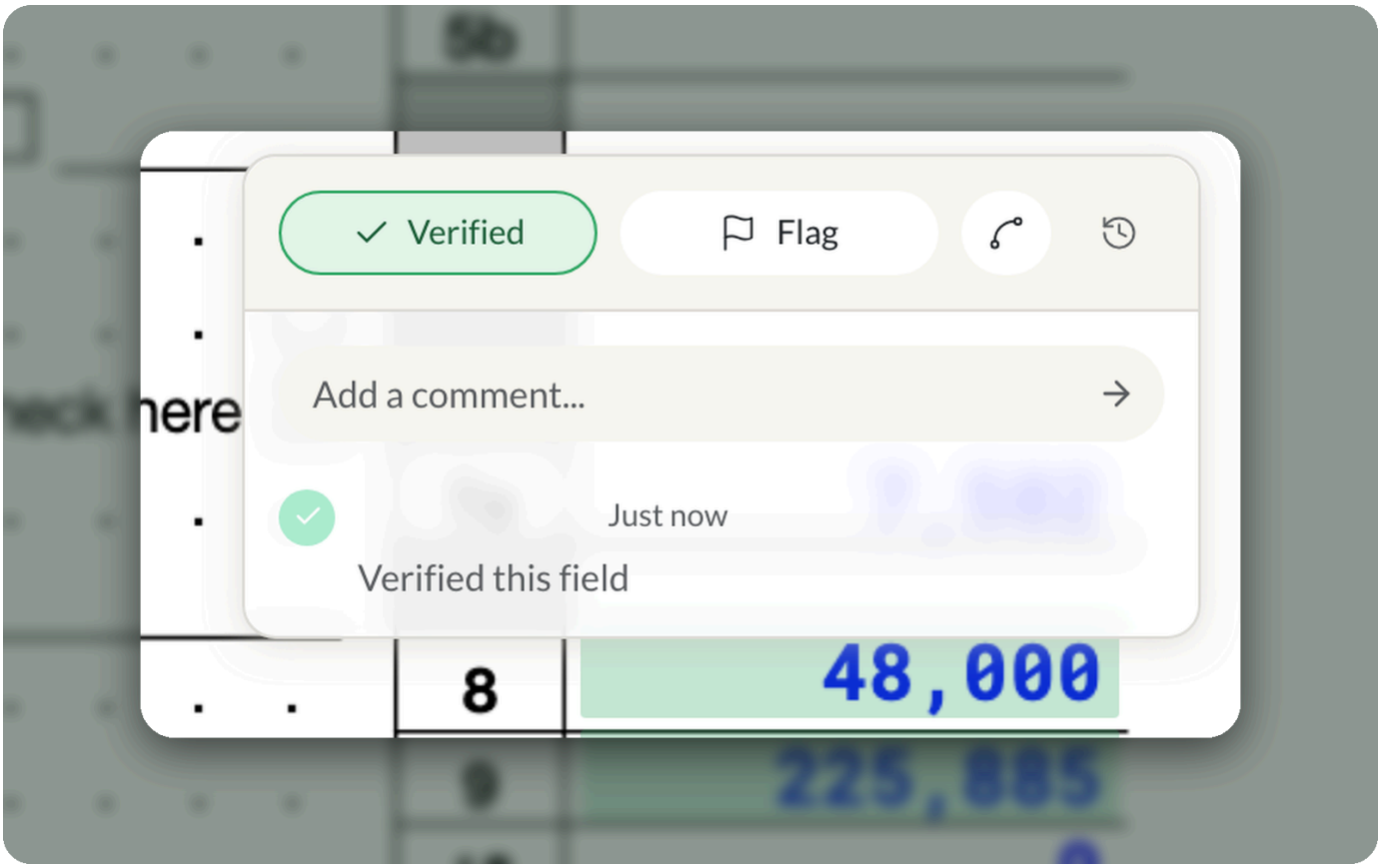
Figure 5 Fields signed off in a row. Each checked field has a green outline and a check tag.



Verify fields right on the face of the return PDF.

The same card opens on the face of the return PDF. In the PDF view, a right-click on a field opens its card, and Verify signs it off at the level of the reviewer. Verified fields turn green on the PDF. The level shows in the card and the trail, which are the same as in the inputs.

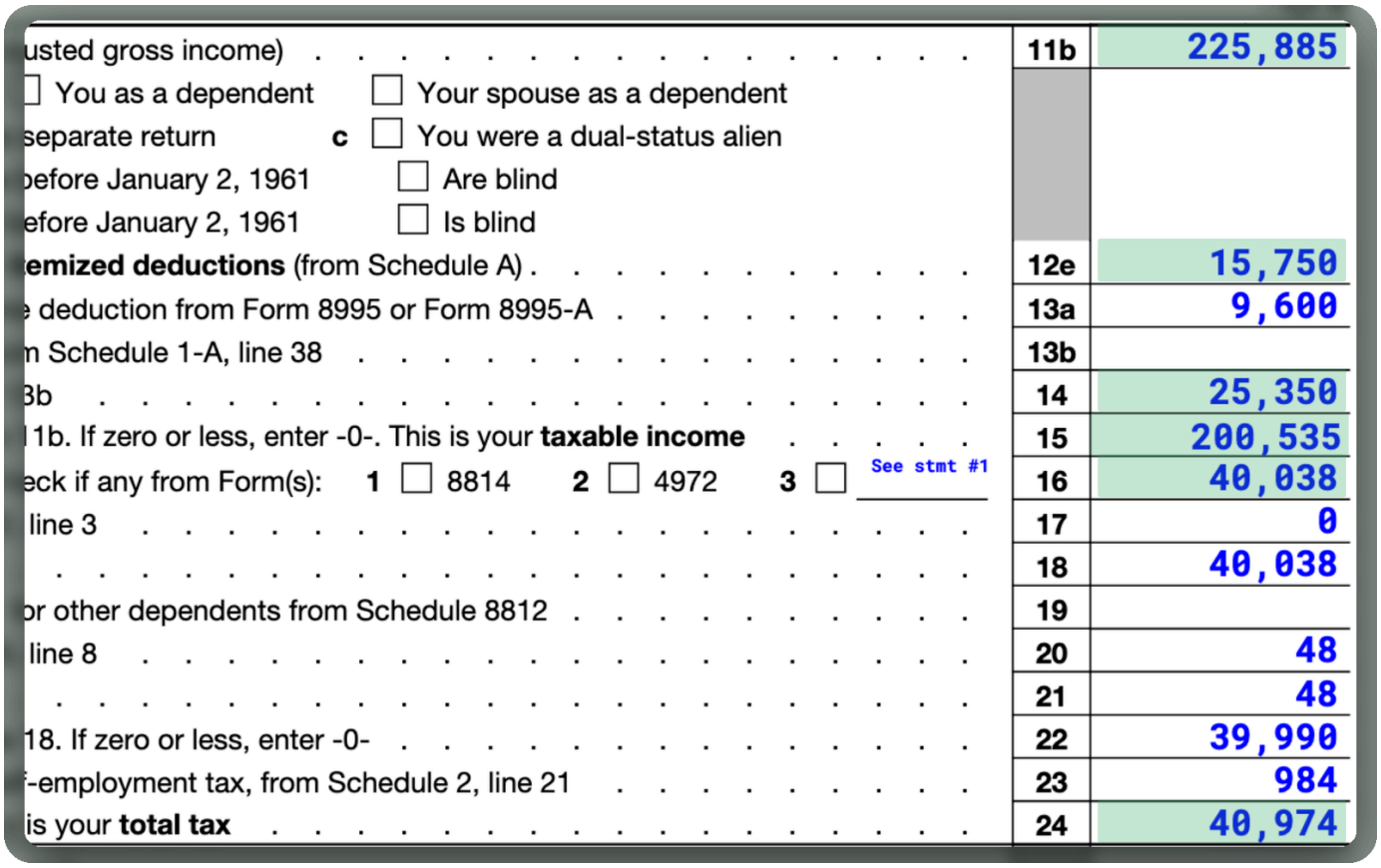
Figure 6 A field signed off on the PDF. The review card reads Verified, and the field turns green on the form.



Levels on the PDF. A Level 2 sign-off on a PDF field adds "Verified this field · Level 2" above "Verified this field" in the trail. The field keeps the same green.

Many fields on the PDF. Pick "Rapid click fields to verify" and click each field on the form, one click each. Verified fields turn green on the PDF.

Figure 7 Fields verified on the PDF. Each verified field has a light green fill on the form.



usted gross income)	11b	225,885
☐ You as a dependent ☐ Your spouse as a dependent		
separate return c ☐ You were a dual-status alien		
before January 2, 1961 ☐ Are blind		
efore January 2, 1961 ☐ Is blind		
emized deductions (from Schedule A)	12e	15,750
e deduction from Form 8995 or Form 8995-A	13a	9,600
m Schedule 1-A, line 38	13b	
3b	14	25,350
11b. If zero or less, enter -0-. This is your **taxable income**	15	200,535
eck if any from Form(s): 1 ☐ 8814 2 ☐ 4972 3 ☐ See stmt #1	16	40,038
line 3	17	0
	18	40,038
or other dependents from Schedule 8812	19	
line 8	20	48
	21	48
18. If zero or less, enter -0-	22	39,990
-employment tax, from Schedule 2, line 21	23	984
is your **total tax**	24	40,974

05

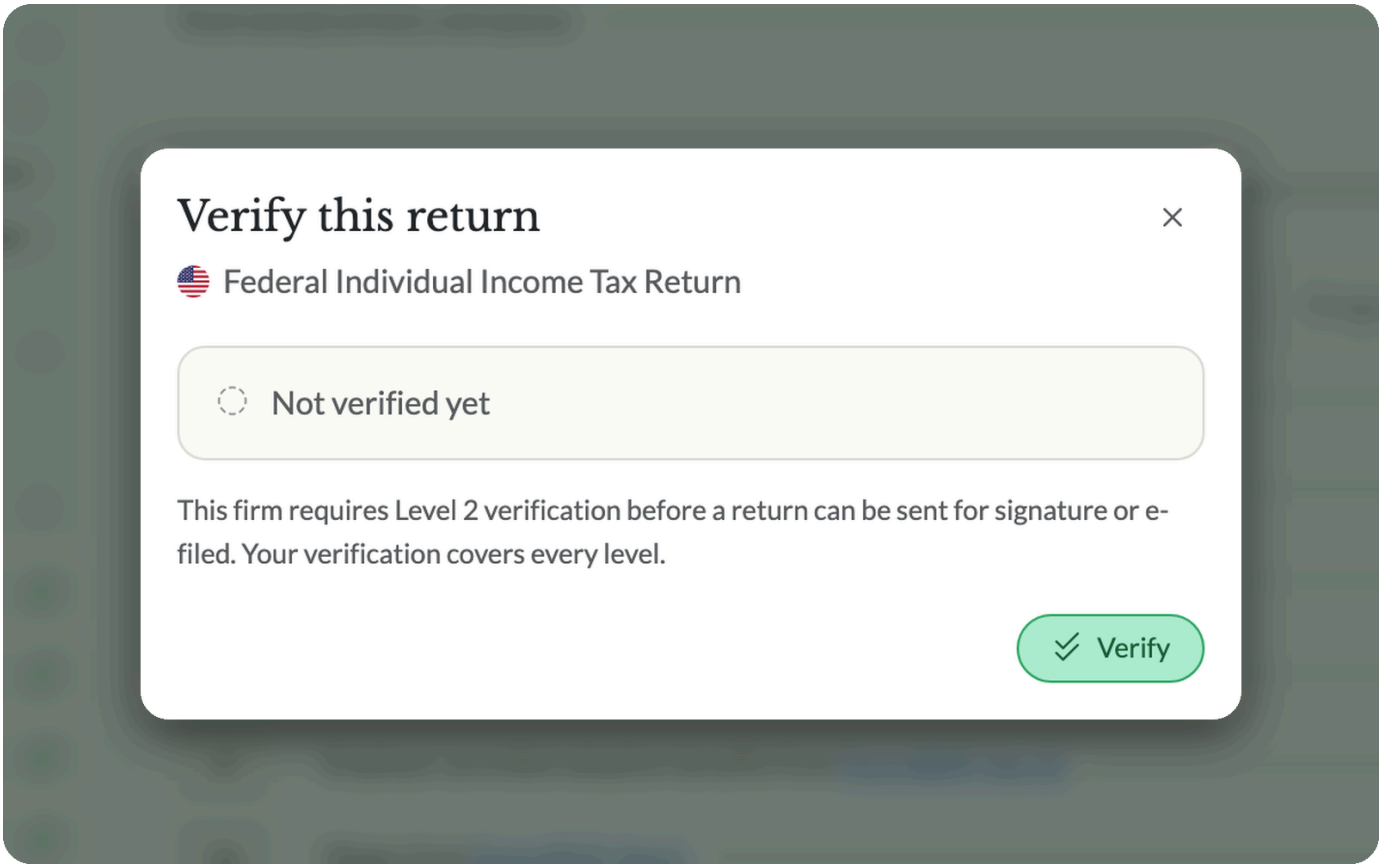
Sign-off on the return

Each return has its own row in the Tax returns sidebar.

Hover the row and a check appears. Its tooltip reads “Verify this return · Level 2 required”. Click it to open “Verify this return”.

The dialog shows the return, the sign-offs in place and the rule of the firm. The requirement line reads “This firm requires Level 2 verification before a return can be sent for signature or e-filed.” Then it says what your click covers. A Level 2 reviewer reads “Your verification covers every level.”

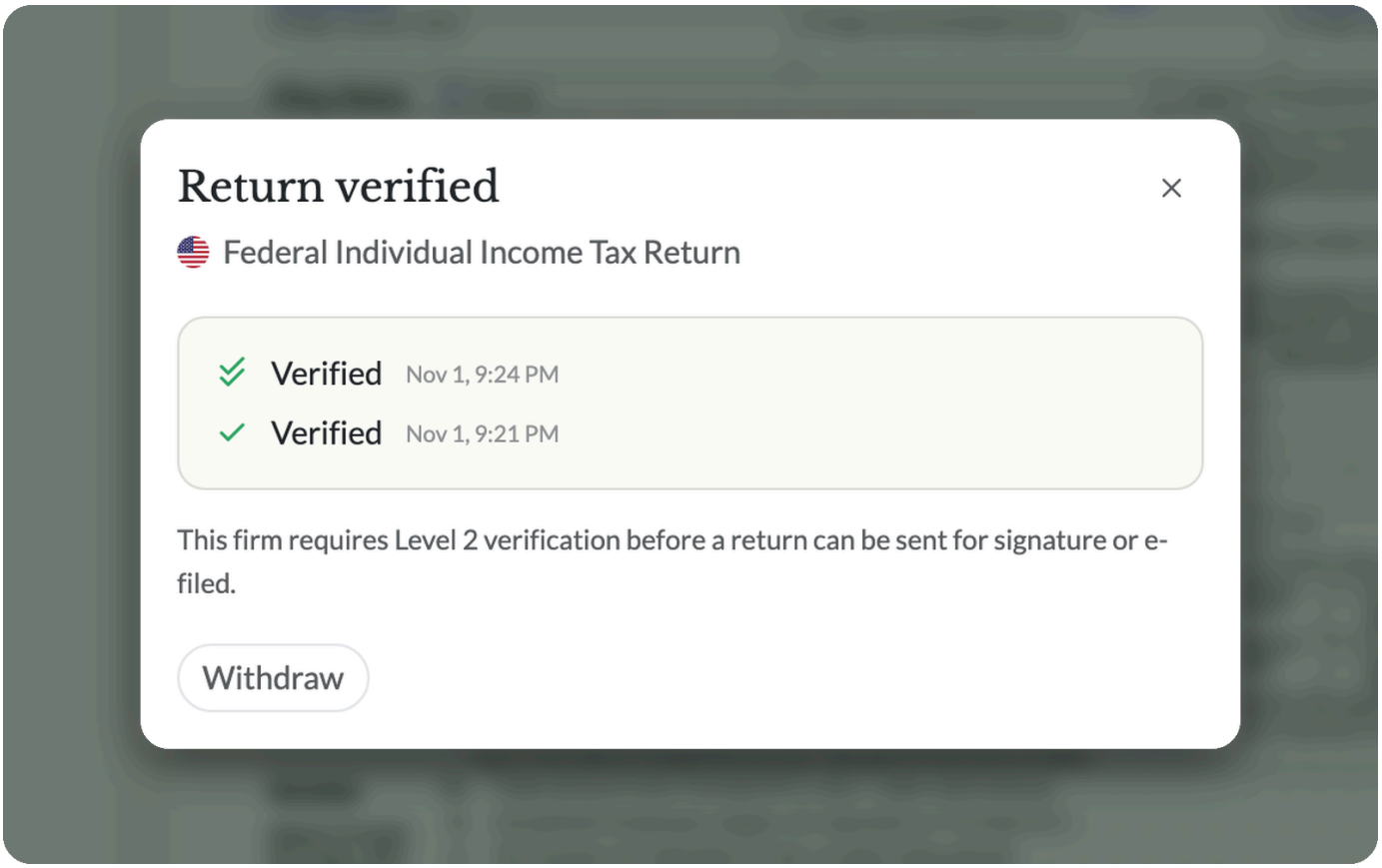
Figure 8 Verify this return. The federal return, not verified yet.



After a Level 1 sign-off the row keeps one green check. Its tooltip names the reviewer and says that Level 2 is still needed. After the Level 2 sign-off the row shows two stacked checks.

Withdraw. A reviewer at or above the level of the sign-off in place can withdraw it from the same dialog. A return sign-off stays in place if the return changes later.

Figure 9 The required level signs off. The Level 2 sign-off sits above the Level 1 sign-off.



06

The gate

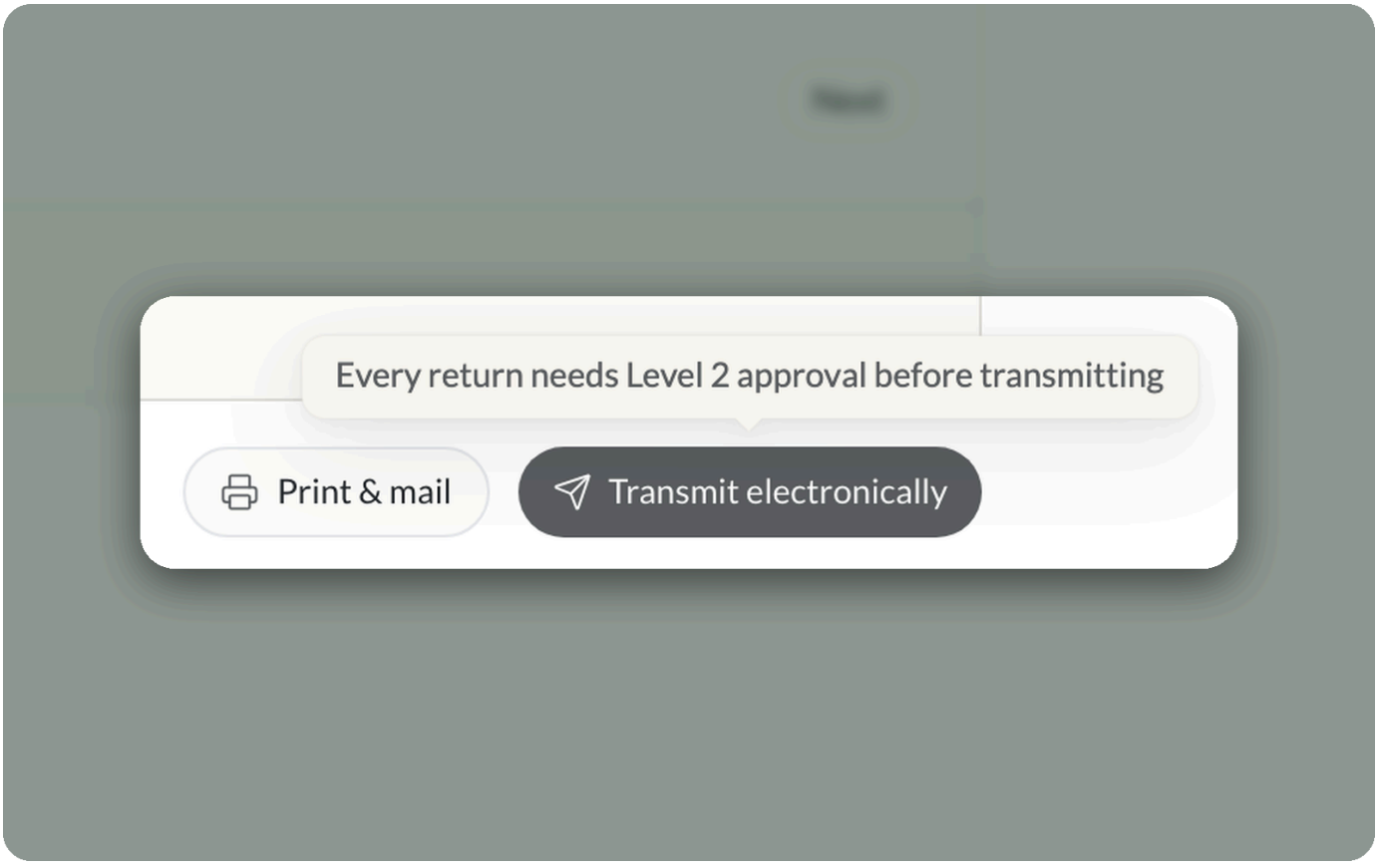
Until every return in the filing has the required sign-off, it cannot go out.

When the firm requires one or more approvals, the Filings tab adds an “Approvals” step. It sits after “Preparer review & declaration” and before “Taxpayer authorization”. It lists one row per return in the filing.

Transmit. “Transmit electronically” stays disabled. Its tooltip reads “Every return needs Level 2 approval before transmitting”.

Signature request. The request for the signature of the client is held the same way. Its tooltip reads “Every return needs Level 2 approval before sending for signature”.

Figure 10 The return waits. The disabled Transmit electronically button and its tooltip.

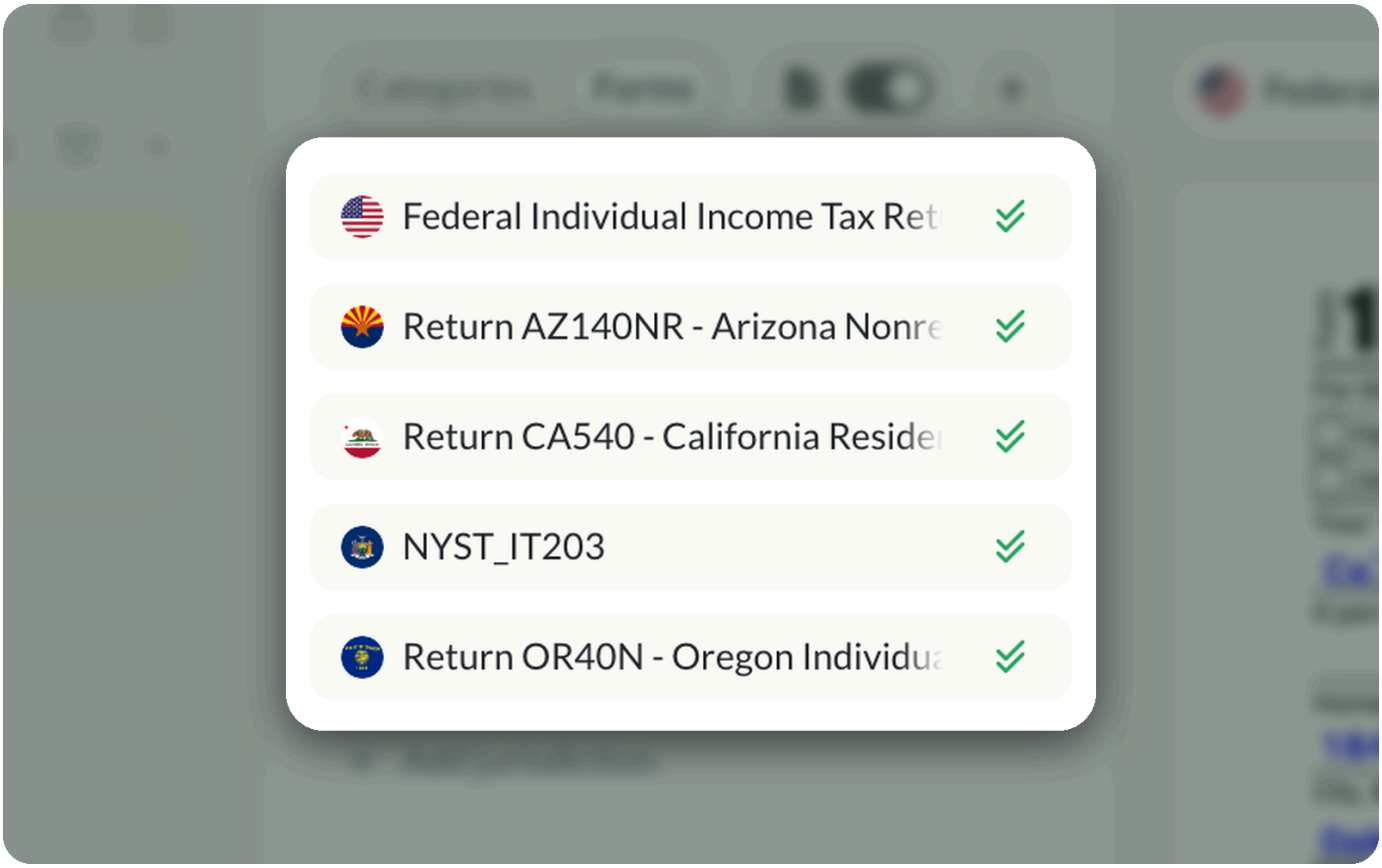


Each return counts. The federal return and each state return need their own sign-off. A filing with a federal return and three state returns shows four rows. Each row needs its own sign-off at the required level.

Level 1 is not enough. While a row is missing its sign-off, the step reads "Each return needs a Level 2 verification before this filing can be sent. Verify a return from its row in the Tax returns sidebar." A return signed off only at Level 1 still reads "Not verified" here, because Level 2 is required.

Fields do not open it. Field checks do not open the gate. Only the sign-off on the return does that.

Figure 11 Each return counts. Two stacked checks on each return row after the Level 2 sign-off.



07

Team setups

One firm setting, mapped to your people.

The requirement is one setting for the whole firm. It is not set per form or per client. The setups below show how a firm can map people to levels.

Solo owner	An owner with no level set holds the top level and clears returns alone.
Preparer and partner	Two checks. Preparers at Level 1, the partner at Level 2.
Three-tier firm	Three checks. Staff at Level 1, managers at Level 2, partners at Level 3.
Seasonal staff	Set to None (“Cannot verify returns”). They can check fields without clearing a return.
A new level	If no one holds the level yet, the settings warn in red until an owner sets a team member to it.

Field checks work the same way in each setup. A reviewer at Level 2 leaves a Level 2 sign-off on each field they check, and the trail of the field shows it.

Set the levels once. Every return follows them.

08

Limits today

What sign-off levels do not do.

One firm-wide setting. The requirement applies to every return in the firm. There is no rule per form or per client.

Returns only. Tax planning, research memos and resolution work have no e-file step, so the gate does not apply to them.

Field checks do not gate. Only the sign-off on the return holds the signature request and transmit.

Not in the public API. The public Instead developer API has no approval level fields today. Levels are set in the app.

09

Getting started

Set the levels once and every return follows them.

1. Open Firm settings, then Tax return filing, and set “Approvals”.
2. Click “Set team levels” and give each person a level.
3. Sign off on fields from their review card, and on each return from its row in the Tax returns sidebar.

Sign-off levels are rolling out to Instead firms.

Start your trial at instead.com

Your review rule belongs inside the return.

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Sign-off levels in Instead

Your review process, enforced. Sign off on each field and on the return, at your level. The return cannot go out until the required level signs off.

Get started with sign-off levels

Start your trial at instead.com