A crash scrambles the week you thought you were going to have. You might be sore, worried about work, and trying to decipher insurance calls. Then the tow truck drops your car at a shop and a whole new set of questions appear. Who decides how the car gets fixed, you or the insurance company? Can the shop put used parts on a car that was nearly new? Why is there a second estimate, and what is a supplement? If you are also pursuing an injury claim, mistakes at the repair stage can ripple into the legal case. I have seen clean cases go sideways because someone signed the wrong authorization at the counter, or because a bumper with radar sensors was repaired instead of replaced, causing weeks of delay and a stack of disputed charges.

This is the part of the process where clear steps and calm decisions save money and stress. Below are the strategies I give clients when I am wearing my car accident lawyer hat, drawn from years of handling property damage alongside injury claims.

## Who actually controls the repair process

The owner controls where the vehicle goes and what authorizations are signed. The insurer, whether yours or the at-fault driver’s, controls only what it agrees to pay under the policy or liability law. The shop controls how it performs the work but must follow what you authorize. That triangle gets messy when a “preferred” shop and an insurer make side conversations about what they will accept. Keep the triangle simple. You pick the shop, you approve the work, and any deal about payment goes through you.

Insurers often steer claimants to partner facilities. Direct repair programs can be fine, especially for simple cosmetic damage. The convenience is real: faster scheduling, electronic claims, sometimes lifetime warranties. The trade off is leverage. DRP shops agree to certain pricing rules and parts preferences. That can mean more aftermarket and recycled parts, fewer hours allowed for procedures the manufacturer recommends, or pressure to repair a component that should be replaced. Good shops push back, but I have seen subtle shortcuts slip in.

The law in most states gives you the right to choose your own repair facility. You do not owe any insurer loyalty on that decision, even if your policy is with them. If anyone suggests you must use a certain shop to be covered, ask for that in writing. It tends not to arrive.

## The first decisions within 48 hours

Two practical issues matter in the opening stretch: storage and evidence. Towing yards and some shops start daily storage fees immediately, often 30 to 100 dollars per day, sometimes more in cities. Insurers usually pay reasonable storage for a reasonable time, but I have had to fight over days that could have been avoided. Pick a destination promptly, and get the car to a repair facility or your driveway if it is drivable and safe.

Evidence matters because property damage proves force of impact, points of contact, and whether airbags or sensors were affected. If there will be an injury claim, ask the shop to keep all replaced parts tagged and available for inspection. Photograph the vehicle before teardown, during teardown if you can, and after repairs. Keep your own copy of the initial estimate, supplements, and final invoice. If a dispute later *Check out this site* arises about whether a radar sensor was ever damaged, a photo is worth more than your memory.

## Documents to gather before you call a shop

- Insurance claim number and adjuster contact info
- Registration, VIN, and current mileage

- Photos of the vehicle from all sides, including damage close ups
- Any prior repair records, especially if the same panel was previously fixed
- Your coverage details, including rental and deductible

Having this on one page calms the conversation and shortens the dance with the adjuster. If you are pursuing a bodily injury claim, share this same packet with your attorney so estimates and invoices can be tied to the injury file.

## Estimating, supplements, and why the first number is usually wrong

The first estimate is almost always light. Estimators write what they can see with the bumper and covers on. The real story appears during teardown when clips break, brackets reveal bends, or ADAS sensors require factory calibration after removal. Those changes become a supplement, which the shop submits to the insurer for approval.

Insurers often slow walk supplements with requests for more photos or by shaving labor hours. A capable shop documents every added step, from corrosion protection to seam sealer, and uses the manufacturer’s procedures to justify operations. If the shop cannot articulate why something is necessary, that is a yellow flag. I prefer shops that print or link the OEM procedure for any structural or safety related repair. Calibration steps for blind spot monitors, adaptive cruise, and cameras are non negotiable on late model cars. Skipping them can turn a gentle lane change into a scary drift.

On timing, expect the first approval within three to seven business days. Supplements can add anywhere from a few days to a few weeks, depending on part availability and negotiation. If your rental coverage is limited to 30 days, you need a plan early to avoid hitting the limit mid repair. That plan might be pressing for total loss evaluation sooner, authorizing the shop to order long lead parts while paperwork is pending, or switching to the at-fault carrier for broader rental rights if liability is not contested.

## Parts choices, and why they are not all equal

There are four common categories: new OEM, new aftermarket, recycled OEM, and remanufactured. Each can be appropriate, but the details matter.

New OEM parts usually fit right and carry the vehicle maker’s warranty. Insurers resist them on older cars for cost reasons. Aftermarket parts range from poor to very good. A reputable shop will trial fit and reject panels that do not meet lines or crash standards. Recycled OEM parts, often called LKQ, can be excellent if sourced from a low mileage twin and if corrosion and prior repair are ruled out. Remanufactured bumpers and wheels vary widely.

Safety parts should be OEM new or OEM recycled in excellent condition. That list includes airbags, seat belts and pretensioners, crash sensors, radar modules, structural rails, and steering components. I push hard when an insurer tries to place an aftermarket crash sensor on a car with lane keep assistance. The few hundred dollars saved is not worth the risk.

Cosmetic parts are where compromise might be reasonable. A fender that needs a little massage to fit is not great, but it is not a threat to your family. In practice, many shops mix parts sources to meet budget and maintain safety, but that blend should be discussed openly with you, not applied by default.

Paint is its own world. The correct color code is the starting point, then the finish is blended onto adjacent panels so your eye does not pick up variation under sunlight. Some carriers balk at paying for blend time, but on most

vehicles it preserves resale value. A good shop will document the need to blend based on the paint manufacturer’s process guides.

## Contracts and forms that deserve your full attention

When you drop a car off, the counter staff presents a stack of papers. Slow down. The key documents are the repair authorization, the assignment of proceeds or assignment of benefits, and the power of attorney for titling if a total loss occurs. Read each, and do not hesitate to strike clauses you do not accept.

The repair authorization should limit work to collision related repairs and should not give the shop blanket authority to do additional work without your written or recorded approval. Assignment of proceeds allows the shop to receive payment directly from the insurer. That can be convenient, but some forms also assign your rights to pursue the insurer for underpayment, sometimes in your name. I prefer narrow language that simply directs payment to the shop for approved work, without waiving your right to dispute charges. If the shop balks at edits, ask why.

Be cautious with storage and teardown fee clauses. Reasonable documentation fees and pre estimate teardown charges are normal. Excessive daily storage rates or administrative fees with no cap are not. If the shop wants a diagnostic fee to write a thorough estimate, that can be fair if the vehicle is not repaired there, but you should know the amount before they start and who is paying it.

If the car is potentially a total loss, never sign title or power of attorney documents until the settlement figure is agreed in writing. Once the insurer has title, your leverage drops.

## Total loss thresholds, salvage questions, and the math behind the call

Whether a car is totaled depends on the repair cost, supplemental damage likely to emerge, and its actual cash value. States set different thresholds for when a vehicle must be branded salvage, often around 70 to 80 percent of value. Some carriers use lower internal thresholds to decide it is not worth repairing. If the repair looks borderline, ask the adjuster to run a total loss evaluation early. I have seen eight days of rental and storage evaporate on a vehicle that was always going to be totaled after the quarter panel came off.

If your car is declared a total loss, study the valuation report. Comparable vehicles should match year, trim, engine, drivetrain, mileage, and condition. Push back on deductions for options you actually have or on inflated adjustments for minor wear. If the car had new tires or a recent transmission replacement, provide receipts. You will not usually get full dollar credit, but strong evidence often nudges the offer.

Some clients ask about retaining the salvage. Keeping the vehicle can make sense when the damage is cosmetic, you love the car, and you accept the branded title. The insurer will deduct the salvage value from the payout, and you take on rebuilding and inspection costs. Resale value drops sharply for branded title cars, often 20 to 40 percent. If you plan to keep the car long term, the math can still work. For financed vehicles, the lender must consent.

## Diminished value, even after a flawless repair

A repaired car, especially one with structural or airbag deployment listed in the report, can be worth less than an identical undamaged car. That is diminished value. Many states allow claims against the at-fault driver’s carrier for that difference. Few allow it against your own insurer under collision coverage. The strongest cases involve late model vehicles with significant repairs that show up on vehicle history reports. Start by getting the final invoice

and photos, then an opinion from a qualified appraiser. Not every case pencils out, but on a two year old SUV with 15,000 miles and a rear body panel replacement, I have seen diminished value settlements in the four figures.

Do not let a repair shop promise to “remove the accident from Carfax.” Accurate reporting is not optional. What you can do is make sure the repair is done to manufacturer procedures so you are not hit with a second wave of value loss when a buyer’s mechanic uncovers cut corners.

## Electronics, scans, and calibrations most people never see

Modern vehicles carry a network of sensors for collision avoidance, parking, adaptive headlights, and more. After a collision, even a minor one, pre and post diagnostic scans are often necessary. A pre scan shows what fault codes existed before repair. A post scan confirms that systems operate correctly. Some components require static or dynamic calibration, sometimes both, with targets set at precise distances on a level surface. I encourage clients to ask two questions: what modules will be scanned or calibrated, and who will perform it.

Shops that do not have the equipment will sublet to dealers or specialty calibration centers. That is fine as long as the process is documented and the cost approved. If an insurer tries to deny calibration as unnecessary, ask for the vehicle maker’s published position. Most brands issue bulletins explaining when calibrations are mandatory. A printed bulletin attached to the supplement tends to speed approvals.

## How to dispute an estimate or a repair decision without blowing up the relationship

You do not have to accept a repair plan that seems unsafe or a payment that leaves you with mismatched paint and no explanation. At the same time, turning every interaction into a fight slows the job. Here is a measured path I use with adjusters and shops.

- Ask for the basis: request the OEM procedure, refinish time guide, or photo that supports or denies the operation.
- Offer a compromise: suggest OEM for safety parts, recycled OEM for cosmetic, and aftermarket only where fit is proven by test.
- Request an independent inspection: some policies allow an appraisal clause or a third party review at a neutral shop.
- Put key points in writing: recap agreements by email so memories do not drift.
- Set a short deadline: two to three business days for a response keeps the file moving.

Polite persistence beats sarcasm. Once the adjuster sees you know the vocabulary, approvals tend to appear with fewer quibbles.

## Renting and loss of use, and what to do when the clock runs out

Two clocks run during repairs. One is your rental coverage in days or dollars. The other is the legal concept of loss of use, the reasonable period you are without your vehicle due to another driver’s negligence. If you are working through your own collision coverage, the rental is limited by your policy, often 30 days at a compact rate. If the at-fault carrier has accepted liability, they must generally provide a comparable vehicle for the reasonable repair duration.

If liability is not yet accepted, pay for the rental if you can and keep every receipt. Reasonable loss of use can be recovered later even if you did not actually rent a car in some states, but having a real rental trail simplifies the

claim. If funds are tight, consider pausing non essential driving and using rideshare for key appointments, then documenting those costs. A car accident lawyer can advise what your state allows and what proof will satisfy the adjuster or a small claims judge.

When rental coverage is about to expire and the repair still has a week to go, ask the shop for a written timeline and ask the adjuster for an extension with that timeline attached. If you are dealing with the at-fault carrier, they often extend to match the documented schedule. If they refuse, you still have a record that supports loss of use later.

## Payment, pickup, and the last 10 feet of the process

Shops typically require payment, or written confirmation that payment is issued to them, before releasing the car. If the insurer is paying the shop directly, verify the check cleared. If the insurer issued a check to you and the lienholder, coordinate endorsements early. I have watched cars sit in bays for days while out of state lenders slowly stamped a check. Most lenders offer overnight endorsement services if you ask.

At pickup, walk the vehicle in bright light. Check panel gaps, color match, and the operation of electronics, especially cameras and sensors. Ask for the final invoice with all line items, the paint manufacturer’s warranty details, and any alignment or calibration printouts. If something does not look right, speak up on the spot. A reputable shop will correct oversights. If you discover issues later, document them immediately with photos and a dated note to the shop.

Keep all the paperwork. If an injury case goes to settlement or trial, neatly organized repair records help a jury understand the violence of the crash and the efforts you made to mitigate damage.

## When repairs stall, and what leverage you have

Sometimes repairs stall for no one’s fault, like nationwide backorders. Other times, the stall comes from an insurer resisting a legitimate procedure or a shop juggling too many cars. Your tools are time stamps, clear communication, and gentle pressure.

Ask the shop for a status update twice a week, ideally by email. If the hang up is parts, get the vendor’s estimated ship date. If the hang up is approvals, ask the adjuster for a written explanation and the name of the reviewer. If the stall is within the shop’s control, remind them that extended delay risks storage disputes with the insurer, which do neither side any good. Offering to pay for an early diagnostic step that clarifies scope can also break a stalemate, with reimbursement sought later.

If weeks pass with minimal movement, involve your attorney. A short letter that cites manufacturer procedures and potential safety issues can unlock approvals. In one case, a client’s crossover needed a radar bracket welded to spec. The insurer refused, calling it cosmetic. A formal request with the automaker’s bulletin attached shifted the answer within 48 hours.

## Privacy and claims data, a quiet issue that matters later

Many shops use estimating systems that can share data with insurers and third parties. That can be harmless, but it can also leak more than you expect, including when and where the car was repaired. If your case involves disputed liability or a potential product claim, ask the shop not to destroy photos or records for at least one year, and avoid authorizations that allow unlimited data sharing beyond the insurer involved in the repair. If your vehicle has a data recorder and a serious injury occurred, discuss with your attorney whether to preserve that data through a formal notice to the other side. Evidence that vanishes can sink a good liability case.

## How a lawyer fits alongside the body shop

You do not need a car accident lawyer to get a bumper painted. You might need one when the estimate does not match the reality of the damage, when the insurer delays a safety critical repair, or when the vehicle value and repair costs are close. Lawyers in this space do three practical things well. We keep records aligned so the injury side and property side tell the same story. We press insurers with the right language, using statutes and procedure guides rather than opinions. And we shield clients from signing away rights in routine shop paperwork.

I tell clients to call me if any of the following occurs. A shop asks for a broad assignment of benefits that includes the right to sue your insurer in your name. An adjuster insists on aftermarket safety components against the manufacturer’s written position. The insurer refuses loss of use when liability is clear and the rental period is reasonable. The car is declared a total loss at an unreasonably low actual cash value and the adjuster will not consider real comparables. A long delay risks additional fees that someone will try to pin on you.

## A brief story from the trenches

A young family brought me a case after a side impact at a four way stop. The minivan took a hit to the sliding door and quarter panel. The kids were shaken but unhurt. The shop wrote an initial estimate around 3,800 dollars, which the at-fault insurer approved in two days. During teardown, the shop found a bent B pillar and damage to the side curtain airbag mounting points. Suddenly the supplement added 5,600 dollars plus a mandatory calibration for blind spot sensors.

The insurer balked, allowed partial repairs, and denied calibration. The shop offered to “do its best” and warned storage would kick in at the end of the week. We paused and reset. I asked the shop for the OEM procedure and photos, copied the adjuster, and cited the state’s unfair claims rule that requires insurers to consider manufacturer recommendations for safety systems. We proposed OEM parts for the B pillar reinforcement, recycled OEM for the exterior panel, and laid out the calibration step with the dealer’s price quote. Two days later the supplement was approved in full. The shop waived storage because we kept communication clear and prompt. The post repair scan printed clean. On the injury side, the robust repair records later supported a fair settlement because they showed a significant transfer of force even though airbags did not deploy. The family kept their rental within coverage and returned to a safe vehicle.

## A short checklist for calmer shop conversations

- Decide on your shop, not the insurer’s, and make that choice early to curb storage fees.
- Ask for OEM procedures for any structural or safety related repair, and for calibration plans on ADAS components.
- Read the repair authorization and assignment forms, and limit any assignment to directing payment only.
- Photograph the vehicle before, during, and after, and ask the shop to retain replaced parts until you see them.
- Keep timelines in writing, including parts backorders and supplement approvals, to protect rental and loss of use claims.

A steady hand through the repair phase sets the tone for the rest of the claim. You do not have to be a body technician or an adjuster to get this right. You only need to slow down at a few moments that matter, ask for the basis behind decisions, and keep your documents tidy. Do that, and you will come out with a car that is safe, a paper trail that supports your broader claim, and fewer frayed nerves. If any step feels off, a brief call with a seasoned car accident lawyer can realign the players before small problems become expensive ones.