

How Do I Get Started? Estimating at Ducere, and the First-Conversation Checklist

How Ducere prices a project: the estimate classes and accuracy ranges behind every number we publish, the inputs the methodology needs, and a short checklist that makes your first conversation produce a real estimate instead of a guess

Executive summary

"What will it cost?" is the first question every client asks, and most of the construction industry answers it badly - either with a confident single number that ignores everything not yet known, or with "it depends" and no path forward. Ducere answers it with a methodology. Every Ducere estimate is built on published estimate-class standards (the AACE International classification), priced from Atlanta-localized cost data (BNi costbooks, and Xactimate on carrier price lists in the insurance lane), and labeled in writing with its class and accuracy range - so the client always knows not just the number, but how tight that number is. The accuracy of an estimate is a direct function of its inputs: a concept conversation with no drawings can honestly support a range, not a price, and complete permit-ready drawings can honestly support a tight fixed number. This brief explains that methodology in plain English, then simplifies it into the part clients actually use: a short first-conversation checklist. Bring what you have from the list - even half of it - and Ducere can turn the first conversation into a Class 5 concept range immediately, and tell you exactly which inputs are needed to tighten it to a Class 4 or Class 3 number. That is what "getting started" means here: not paperwork for its own sake, but the shortest honest path from first conversation to a number you can fund.

3

estimate classes Ducere works in - every estimate states its class and range in writing

±40 to ±15%

the accuracy range, depending on how complete your inputs are

30 days

standard estimate validity while material prices hold

15-25%

contingency carried separately and visibly - never hidden in the base number

FIGURE 1 - ESTIMATE ACCURACY NARROWS AS PROJECT DEFINITION IMPROVES

The AACE estimate classes, simplified. Every Ducere estimate states its class and range in writing.

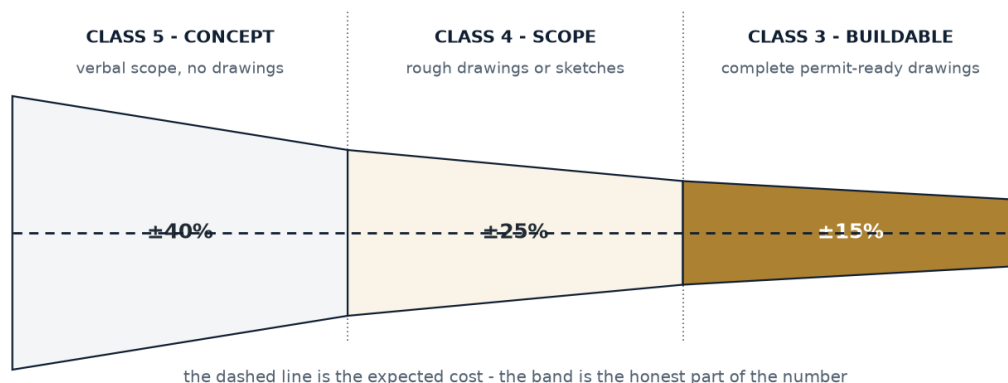


Figure 1 - The estimating funnel. A verbal concept supports a Class 5 range; sketches and a defined scope tighten it; complete permit-ready drawings support a Class 3 number. Ranges shown are simplified for illustration; Ducere declares the specific accuracy band on each estimate.

1. The methodology: an estimate is only as honest as its inputs

Ducere estimates follow the AACE International estimate classification, the standard used across heavy commercial construction, because it forces the one thing residential estimating usually hides: an explicit statement of how much is actually known. **Class 5 (concept):** a verbal scope, a site look, or a set of photos. The deliverable is a broad range - typically roughly -30% to +50% - honest enough to answer "is this a \$50K project or a \$250K project," which is the real question at the concept stage. **Class 4 (scope defined):** a written scope of work and rough drawings or sketches exist. The range tightens (roughly -20% to +30% on Ducere estimates) and the number starts being useful for financing conversations. **Class 3 (buildable):** complete, permit-ready drawings with selections identified. This is the class a fixed price is actually made from. The critical discipline: Ducere does not present a lower-class number as if it were a higher-class one. A Class 5 range dressed up as a firm quote is the single most common origin of construction disputes - the number was never wrong, it was mislabeled.

Where the prices come from. Ducere prices from published, Atlanta-localized cost data (BNI building-news costbooks, adjusted to the metro), cross-checked against current subcontractor quotes for the significant trades. For insurance restoration projects the estimate is built in Xactimate line-by-line against the carrier-accepted price list for the property's ZIP code and date of loss, because in the insurance lane Xactimate is the negotiating currency. Contingency - 15-25% depending on class and risk - is carried as a separate, visible line the owner controls, not padding buried in the base price. Estimates are valid for 30 days while material prices hold, and every estimate document states its class, its range, and its exclusions.

2. The inputs the methodology needs

Every class of estimate is built from the same eight inputs - the classes differ only in how complete each input is. This is why the first conversation matters so much: it is not a sales call, it is the input-gathering step of the estimating process.

INPUT	WHY IT CHANGES THE NUMBER	WHAT "COMPLETE" LOOKS LIKE
1. The goal	A project defined by what it must do for you (space, function, resale) prices differently than one defined by a photo.	One or two sentences in your own words, plus the problem you are solving.
2. The property	Age, construction type, and existing conditions drive scope more than square footage does.	Address, and photos if you have them - exterior, interior, and any problem areas.
3. Documents	Drawings, surveys, and prior permits shorten the path by whole estimate classes.	Whatever exists: plans, sketches, inspection reports, warranty or claim documents. None yet is fine - that is normal at concept.
4. Scope boundaries	What is in and, just as important, what is out. Open edges become change orders.	A written list, even rough. Ducere helps draw the boundary.
5. Budget range	A budget is a design constraint that keeps the estimate useful, not a commitment.	The number you can actually fund, plus whether financing is involved.
6. Timeline	Start dates and hard deadlines affect sequencing, permit timing, and pricing.	Desired start, and any immovable dates (events, lease ends, school year).
7. Finish level	Builder-grade versus custom selections can swing interior budgets enormously.	A general sense now; selections get priced as drawings develop.
8. Insurance / carrier docs	Restoration work prices on carrier rules - date of loss, carrier name, claim status determine the lane.	Carrier name, claim number, and any adjuster correspondence, if applicable.

3. The first-conversation checklist

This is the methodology simplified to the step clients actually take. Nothing on this list is a prerequisite - the first conversation itself fills most of it in. The items are ordered by how much they tighten the estimate.

THE FIRST CONVERSATION - WHAT TO BRING OR BE READY TO DISCUSS

1. The goal, in your own words - what must this project do for you? **2.** The property address, and photos if you have them. **3.** Any documents that exist - plans, sketches, inspection reports, surveys. **4.** Rough scope boundaries: what is in, what is definitely out. **5.** Your honest budget range. **6.** Your timeline - desired start and any hard dates. **7.** Finish level you are picturing (builder-grade to custom). **8.** If insurance is involved: carrier, claim number, and date of loss. **9.** Who decides - the people whose sign-off the project needs. **10.** Your questions, especially the ones you think are too basic to ask. They are usually the important ones.

4. What happens after the first conversation

Step 1 - Site walk (if needed). For renovations and existing-structure work, an in-person look at conditions moves the estimate a full class. There is no substitute for seeing what is actually there.

Step 2 - The estimate, classed and ranged. Ducere returns a written estimate stating its class, its accuracy range, what is included, what is excluded, and the contingency carried separately. If the inputs support only a Class 5 range, it says so - and lists exactly what is needed to tighten it. For carrier projects, this step produces the Xactimate estimate and the compliance documentation for the claim file.

Step 3 - The decision conversation. With an honest range in hand, the client decides: tighten the number (by completing drawings or selections), adjust scope to fit the budget, or pause. All three are acceptable outcomes. The one unacceptable outcome is proceeding on a mislabeled number - that is the outcome the methodology exists to prevent.

Step 4 - Contract. When the class is right for commitment, the estimate converts to a contract scope, and the project moves into preconstruction and permitting as described in Ducere's project-lifecycle brief.

5. Why Ducere prices this way

A deliberately low "get the job" number is not an estimate - it is a marketing instrument that converts to change orders after the project starts. Ducere's classed-and-ranged method is the opposite trade: a slightly less satisfying answer in the first week ("a range, pending these inputs") in exchange for a number that holds for the life of the project. The 30-day validity, the visible contingency, the named data sources, and the written exclusions all serve the same purpose - an owner should be able to compare Ducere's number to another bid and know exactly what is and is not inside each one. In Ducere's experience the cheapest bid and the honest bid are rarely the same document, and the difference between them is usually just labeling.

6. Quick reference: frequently asked questions

QUESTION	ANSWER
Can you just give me a ballpark over the phone?	Yes - and we will label it what it is: a Class 5 concept range, typically -30% to +50%, based on the goal, location, and rough size you describe. It answers the first real question (what order of magnitude is this?) without pretending to be a quote.
What if I do not have drawings?	That is normal at the start. Ducere prices a Class 5 concept range from your inputs, then tells you exactly which documents would tighten it. If the project needs design work, we scope that as its own step - design is an input to the estimate, and paying for complete drawings is the cheapest accuracy upgrade available.

QUESTION	ANSWER
What is a Class 3 estimate?	The "buildable" class: priced from complete, permit-ready drawings with selections identified. It carries the tightest range (roughly -10% to +30% depending on project risk) and is what fixed pricing is actually made from.
Why does the estimate expire after 30 days?	Material and labor prices move. An estimate that never expires is an estimate no supplier is honoring anymore. 30 days keeps every number current and re-quotation is straightforward.
Why is contingency separate instead of built in?	Because it is your money, spent at your discretion as the project reveals unknowns. Hiding it in the base price removes your control and makes every estimate non-comparable. Visible and separate, it is a decision, not a mystery.
Do you use Xactimate for everything?	No. Xactimate is the right instrument for insurance restoration claims, where the carrier expects line-item pricing on its own price lists for your ZIP and date of loss. For capital projects, Ducere prices from BNi Atlanta-localized cost data and subcontractor quotes. The instrument matches the audience; the discipline is the same either way.
How is this different from any other bid?	The label. Other bids give you a number; a classed estimate gives you a number, a stated accuracy range, written exclusions, a visible contingency, and named data sources - everything needed to compare it to another bid honestly.

References: AACE International Recommended Practice No. 18R-97 (Cost Estimate Classification System); BNi Building News costbooks, Atlanta metro localization; Xactimate carrier price lists (insurance restoration lane); Ducere Construction Services estimating standards (class declaration, 30-day validity, 15-25% separate contingency, written exclusions). Accuracy ranges in Figure 1 are simplified for illustration; each Ducere estimate declares its own specific range. Informational only - every project's estimate is governed by its own written document.