

There is a moment in every fence project when the owner realizes the quote they are holding describes a fence they cannot picture. The paper says "cedar fence, six feet, two gates," and that could describe ten different fences, ranging from a structure that will lean after one winter to one that will outlast the mortgage. The difference is not magic. It is materials and workmanship, and the time to learn about both is before you request a quote, not after the panels are up.

Contractors price what they intend to build, and they build what the quote describes. An owner who cannot tell a pressure-treated post from a cedar one, or who has never thought about what holds the rails to the posts, is an owner who will receive exactly the fence the contractor decided to sell. Checking workmanship and materials starts on your side of the table, before the first site visit, and this article is the preparation: the material knowledge, the installation details, and the decisions to make in advance so the quotes you request are quotes you can actually evaluate.

Know the Materials Before You Ask for a Price

Start with the big families, because most fence quotes are built from one of them. Cedar is the classic GTA choice: naturally rot resistant, easy to work, and available in grades that range from knotty and rustic to clear and uniform. The grade you specify changes what the fence looks like and how long it holds up, and it is worth learning the difference before you ask a contractor to price "cedar." Pressure-treated pine or spruce costs less and resists decay, but it moves more in the weather and usually gets painted or stained rather than left natural. Vinyl and composite need little maintenance and shrug off the freeze-thaw cycle, but they are priced differently and behave differently in extreme cold, and not every installer has equal experience with them. Steel and aluminum offer strength and clean lines, with aluminum resisting rust while steel usually arrives coated; chain link remains the workhorse for commercial yards and pool enclosures, where function matters more than appearance.

Learn the vocabulary of each family before you call: what a gauge is for metal, what a grade is for wood, what a profile is for vinyl. You do not need to become a materials expert. You need to recognize a specific specification when you see one, because a quote that says "wood fence" and a quote that says "cedar, #2 grade or better, 1x6 pickets" are not the same document, and only one of them can be priced honestly.

The Parts of a Fence Worth Knowing

A fence is four systems working together, and each one fails on its own schedule. The posts carry the load, so their species, treatment, and installation method matter most. The rails connect the posts and carry the pickets, and their number and attachment determine whether a section sags. The pickets or panels are what you see, and their thickness, spacing, and material determine the look and the wind load. The gates and hardware are where most long-term complaints begin, because hinges, latches, and framing see daily use that fence sections never do.

Know which parts rot first, which parts rust first, and which parts get replaced. In a GTA climate, the ground line is where wood dies: moisture wicks up from soil and snow sits against the base of the fence all winter. That is why post material and the way posts are set matter more than the prettiness of the pickets. An owner who understands that will ask the right question at the quote stage, which is not "what does the fence look like" but "what are the posts, and how will they be set."

What Good Installation Looks Like

Workmanship is harder to specify than materials, but it is just as observable. Learn the markers of a fence built to last. Posts set deep enough to stand clear of frost heave, in a soil and climate that shift through the seasons. Concrete or another stable backfill around the base, or a setting method suited to the soil type, rather than loose dirt packed back into the hole. Rails attached with hardware that does not rely on a single nail, and fasteners rated for outdoor use, because the wrong fastener rusts and stains in one season. Pickets or panels spaced consistently and attached so they can breathe and shed water. Gates framed so they do not sag, with hinges and latches sized for the weight of the gate. These are checkable details, and checking them starts with asking the contractor to describe their method, not just their price.

Ask how the crew handles the spots that [residential security fence installation](#) are hard to see: the back of the fence, the bottom of the posts, the joints. A contractor who can describe how they waterproof post tops, or why they space pickets a particular way, or what they do on a slope, is a contractor who has thought about the work. A contractor who answers with "we've been doing this twenty years" without any specifics is asking you to trust instead of verify.

Learn the shortcuts to watch for, because workmanship is mostly a question of what is not done. A post set in a hole that was not dug deep enough, and then buried with whatever came out of the ground. A rail nailed once instead of screwed twice. A picket line that was not leveled because the ground was not measured first. A gate hung on hinges meant for a lighter door. None of these shortcuts is visible from the driveway, and all of them are visible to someone who knows where to look before the fence is closed up. When you walk the site during installation, which most contractors will welcome if you ask, you are not hovering. You are learning the workmanship language that the quote was written in.

Questions the Quote Should Answer About Materials

When the quote arrives, it should read like a materials list, not a slogan. Ask whether it names the wood species and grade, the thickness and width of the pickets, the post material and size, the number of rails, the type and finish of the fasteners, the gate hardware, and the finish or treatment included. Ask whether the quantities match your property: linear footage, number of posts, number of gates. And ask what is not in the quote, because exclusions are where surprises live. A quote that leaves out the old fence removal, the disposal, the concrete, or the finish is a quote that will grow, and an owner who knows what to look for will spot the hole before signing.

Ask the contractor to explain the difference between the material they recommend and the cheaper alternative they could quote. A good estimator will tell you what the extra money buys: a better grade of cedar, thicker metal, posts that will not twist. The explanation itself is the test. A contractor who cannot explain the difference in materials does not understand the difference, and that understanding is exactly what you are paying for.

Decisions to Make Before You Call

Arrive at the quoting conversation with decisions made, not questions pending. Decide the material and the grade you are willing to pay for. Decide the height, within what your municipality allows, and verify the current rules for your property before you commit, because fence height and placement rules vary across Toronto and the surrounding municipalities. Decide whether you want a finish applied and who maintains it, because a stain that needs renewing every few years is a decision, not a default. Decide how many gates and where, and whether the gate hardware should match the fence or the house. Decide what you will do about the old fence, and about the shared fence on the boundary, and about the slope, the clay, and the access problems a crew will face. Every decision you make in advance is a decision the contractor does not make for you.

Then set your inspection plan. Decide what you will check at the walkthrough: post depth where visible, fastener quality, gate swing, picket alignment, and whether the fence matches the materials in the contract. Decide when you will check it again, because some problems only show up after a season of weather. The [pool enclosure contractor](#) owner who plans the inspection before the contract is signed is the owner who gets the fence they paid for.



What to Photograph and Measure Before the Visit

Finally, build a small file for the estimator. Photograph the existing fence, the grade changes, the gate openings, the access points, and any spot where the ground looks wet or the soil looks like it moves. Measure the rough run of each line if you can, and count the gates you want. Note where utility boxes, spigots, and downspouts sit, because posts and lines do not mix. Note the neighbor's position on the boundary fence. Hand this file to every contractor you ask for a quote, and ask each one to price the same scope. Checking workmanship and materials is only possible when the quotes are comparable, and comparable quotes come from owners who prepared the comparison.

The fence you build this year will be judged by weather you cannot control, soil you cannot see, and details you cannot check once the panels are up. That is why the checking has to happen before the request for a quote: the materials named in the document, the method described in the conversation, and the decisions made in advance. Do that preparation once, and the rest of the project is a comparison between contractors who know you are watching, which is exactly the position you want to be in when you sign.