

Modern United States coins live in a different world than older rarities. The dates are plentiful, the mintages are usually large, and the difference between a “good” coin and a “great” coin often comes down to surfaces and finishing details that most people never notice until they start paying for grading.

That is where MS69 and MS70 become more than numbers. They turn into a real inspection problem, a buying decision, and sometimes a cost driver that feels frustratingly random at first. I have watched collectors chase a single point only to realize they were comparing the wrong things, or that they were evaluating the coin under the wrong light. If you are trying to understand MS70 vs. MS69, the key is to stop treating them like a trophy level and start treating them like a specific, repeatable standard for surface quality.

The grading numbers are not emotions, they are surfaces

“Mint State” starts at the idea that the coin has no wear, meaning it has not moved through circulation. Within mint state, the grading scale tries to quantify the quality of the coin’s surfaces: how clean they are, how strong the strike is, and how appealing they look overall.

MS69 and MS70 sit close enough that a newcomer expects the difference to be invisible. It usually is to the naked eye. The split is about what a grader sees after training their eyes on the tiny contact marks and how those marks interact with light.

A useful way to think about it is this: MS70 is for coins that present like they were finished yesterday and released without abrasions from handling. MS69 is for coins that are very close, but show one or more small flaws that keep them from being “as perfect as the standard allows.”

That phrasing matters because neither grade is a comment on rarity, demand, or how historic the design is. Both are comments on condition.

What actually separates MS70 from MS69

If you have handled a lot of modern coins, you know that “no scratches” is never literally true. Even a coin that looks flawless under bright daylight can show a faint hairline under a certain angle. Most of the time, the difference between MS69 and MS70 comes from the presence, location, and severity of contact marks, plus how obvious they are when the coin is tilted.

In practical terms, the grading gap tends to come down to a few recurring categories.

- **Contact marks from handling.** These can be tiny nicks or scuffs, often on high points or in the fields where light travels.
- **Minor surface imperfections.** Some look like wispy lines, others like small planchet marks, or faint spots that only show up with the right magnification.
- **Luster and overall eye appeal.** A coin can be technically “clean” but still not look as lively as the best examples because of subtle breaks in reflectivity.
- **Strike and surface definition.** With modern coins, strike issues exist, but many of them show up as weak detail rather than as “surface dirt.” Still, a poor strike can influence the final grade when the finish is also underwhelming.

The part that surprises people is that you can have two coins that both appear “super clean,” yet one gets MS70 because the remaining imperfections are positioned or shaped in a way that stands out more under the grader’s

view.

Modern coins add a twist: production lines and bag life

Modern US coins are often produced in large volumes, and that changes what you should expect on the surfaces. The minting process involves multiple stages, and after the coin is struck it still has to be packaged, moved, and handled before it reaches you. Even if a coin never sees circulation, it can still collect micro-abrasions during mint packaging, warehouse handling, or later movement by collectors and dealers.

So while the older mindset says “wear is the enemy,” modern grading adds “handling marks are the real story.” That story shows up as:

- faint swirls in the fields,
- tiny interruptions of luster,
- and tiny contact points that look like dust until you view them as actual marks.

On many modern coins, the true contest is between two nearly identical slabs. The MS70 coin just wins the surface battle by a narrow margin.

What you see with your eyes is not the whole picture

I cannot count the number of times I have seen someone bring a coin to the table, hold it flat under a strong lamp, and say it looks perfect. Under that lighting, it might be perfect. Then the same coin, tilted under a different angle, suddenly reveals a set of <https://www.forbes.com/sites/dougmelville/2025/04/06/new-bills-propose-trump-on-the-100-bill-and-new-250-option-but-where-is-tubmans-20/> thin lines on the field or a small spot near a focal area.

Coins are optical objects. The grade is not issued from a single view, it is issued from many. When you learn to evaluate like a grader, you shift from “Is it flawless?” to “Where does it break?”

Here is a more practical mindset that helps with MS69 vs. MS70. Instead of hunting for a scratch, search for a problem the coin can't hide. Those “problems” are usually small but consistent: a cluster of marks in one region, a tiny dull patch that kills reflectivity, or a set of lines that becomes obvious at an angle.

Luster: the silent negotiator between MS69 and MS70

Luster is one of the most abused words in the coin hobby, mostly because people use it as a catch-all for “pretty.” In grading, luster plays a more specific role. It describes how the surface reflects light, and how evenly that reflection spreads across the coin.

A high grade modern coin often looks “alive.” It does not have to be mirror-like. It just needs to show smooth, coherent reflectivity that is not interrupted by surface contact marks or breaks in the finish.

A coin can be spotless in terms of obvious hits yet still miss MS70 if its luster is dulled or uneven in a way the grader finds distracting. Conversely, a coin with very small marks can sometimes still look strong if the overall reflectivity remains clean and the marks do not dominate the eye.

This is why eye appeal and technical surface details overlap. Grading is not simply tallying scratches. It is judging the finished look of the coin under conditions that imitate careful viewing.

Strike matters, but it usually does not dominate the split

People assume MS70 versus MS69 must be about the strike, especially for modern coins where strike quality can vary. Strike can influence grade, but the MS69/MS70 difference is more often driven by surface cleanliness than by strike alone.

That said, strike and surface can interact. A coin that has weak detail may lead the eye to travel differently across the design, which makes any surface imperfections more noticeable. A coin with crisp detail can hide small distractions better simply because the eye is anchored to the design elements.

In other words, strike can affect how a coin “presents,” but the final point is usually decided by the surface factors that remain after you have done your best look.

The location problem: some marks are worse than others

One reason the difference between MS69 and MS70 can feel inconsistent is that the same type of mark does not always have the same impact. A tiny contact mark in the field can be much less distracting than a tiny contact mark in a focal area.

Grading is a visual experience. If a mark sits where the design demands attention, it tends to pull focus. If it sits in a part of the fields that the light barely catches, it may be present yet not steal the show.

Location also matters for modern coins because many collectors buy them looking for “display” coins, not just technical specimens. The difference between MS69 and MS70 is therefore partly about the coin’s behavior under inspection.

How to evaluate an MS69 or MS70 coin at home

You can get closer to grader-level evaluation without a lab, but you need to change your process.

What helps most is controlled lighting and a consistent method. Use a bright light source you can position, then view the coin while tilting it slowly. Stop trying to catch marks at one angle. Instead, watch how the surface reflects across multiple angles.

If you have a loupe, use it for confirmation, not for panic. When you find a possible defect, check whether it truly exists as a mark, then check whether it disrupts luster or only appears as a reflection artifact. Many “concerns” turn into harmless reflections once you control the light.

Here is the simple routine I recommend when deciding whether you are buying “one point away” from MS70.

1. **Check centering and overall strike first** under neutral lighting, because those affect the coin’s baseline look.
2. **Tilt for luster behavior** across the fields, looking for any dull patches or abrupt breaks in reflectivity.
3. **Scan the main design focal areas** for contact marks, nicks, or tiny scuffs that catch light.
4. **Use magnification only after the scan** to confirm the nature of any suspicious line or spot.

If the coin truly has MS70 potential, your scan usually reveals why the coin does or does not. If it feels like you can’t find anything but the grade still misses, that is often because the “problem” is extremely small, or because the coin’s remaining marks are positioned in a way you have not yet illuminated correctly.

A quick reality check on pricing and value

MS70 coins often carry a premium, sometimes a steep one. But the premium is not always proportional to the visual difference you can easily detect.

From a buyer's perspective, there are three common scenarios:

- you want the nicest coin available in a set,
- you want the best long-term condition for a type you will keep,
- or you are speculating that "perfect grade" demand will outlast other factors.

The most realistic approach is to decide what you are buying. If the coin will be handled and displayed, a coin that grades MS69 but looks exceptional in person can be the smarter choice than paying for MS70 on paper. If you are building a registry-style collection where condition standards matter as a category, then the MS70 label can justify the additional cost.

The trade-off is emotional as much as financial. People get attached to the idea of "one point higher," but coin grading is rarely about a single visible flaw. It is about a set of microscopic realities plus presentation.

When MS70 is worth it, and when MS69 is the better buy

I have bought both, and I will say this plainly: MS70 is worth chasing when the coin actually shows better surfaces to your eyes, not just when the label promises perfection.

MS69 often makes better sense when:

- the coin is visually outstanding,
- the marks are present but not distracting under viewing conditions that match how you will enjoy the coin,
- or the price jump moves beyond what you are comfortable tying up.

On the other hand, MS70 becomes more compelling when:

- the coin has that "glass-like cleanliness" across the fields,
- the luster is unusually smooth,
- and any potential flaws appear absent or so minor that they do not disrupt the coin's overall look.

A lot of collectors underestimate how much their own viewing matters. Some people use strong desk lights and do quick flips. Others examine with a softer lamp and take their time. The coin that dazzles under one person's method can look merely good under another.

Submitting for a higher grade: the part nobody wants to gamble on

Many modern coin holders are "chances" in the sense that a different grading event, with a different set of humans and lighting, can shift the outcome. Resubmissions are never a guaranteed path, and the expense can erase the upside fast.

If you are considering cracking a slab or submitting a raw coin, treat the process like an insurance decision, not a shortcut. You are paying for the probability of a grade, and the probability depends on the coin you already have.

Raw modern coins also present another practical issue. Even if you buy from a reputable dealer, you may not be aware of the smallest contact marks until you get the coin under your own light. Those marks are usually already there. They are not going to vanish just because the coin is now in your hands.

Still, if you are determined to pursue MS70, use a disciplined submission approach to reduce surprises.

1. **Buy the coin you want to keep, not the grade you hope for**, then decide whether MS70 is a realistic target.

2. **Handle with clean gloves and minimal contact**, because re-marking the surface after purchase is all too easy.
3. **Document the coin's condition before submission** with consistent photos and magnification views.
4. **Avoid cleaning**. Any cleaning attempt can do irreversible harm to luster and surfaces.
5. **Factor in costs and time**, because the cheapest path is rarely the best one once fees and shipping are counted.

This is not about being cautious for the sake of caution. It is about protecting what you paid for, then making sure the attempt is grounded in the coin's actual look.

How graders think, and why "perfect" is a moving target

There is a reason two experts can disagree on the same coin. The grading process involves trained judgment, and the judgment is tied to what a given coin presents at inspection time.

Even when two coins appear similar in photos, viewing in hand under real angles often changes the story. That is also why online images can exaggerate or hide tiny marks. A good photo can make an MS69 coin look like MS70 by catching the luster while avoiding the angles where small contact marks show. The reverse happens too, where an MS70 coin looks rough in a photo because glare or lighting introduces artifacts.

When you are chasing the difference between MS69 and MS70, prioritize in-person evaluation or extremely consistent images shot under a standardized setup. If you cannot do that, assume the gap you care about is still real, but you may not be able to see it reliably from a single view.

Buying advice that actually helps

If your goal is to collect modern coins with the strongest condition possible, your buying strategy matters more than any single grading label.

When you are choosing between an MS69 and an MS70 example, ask yourself a few grounded questions:

- Does the coin show smooth, even reflectivity when tilted slowly?
- Can you find any distracting marks in the fields or near the design focal areas?
- Does the coin feel "clean" in hand, not just in one glance?

If the MS69 coin looks genuinely superior to the MS70 coin you were considering, do not dismiss it just because the label is lower. The MS69 coin may be the one with the better overall presentation, and that can matter more over time than chasing the highest possible number.

At the same time, if the MS70 coin clearly outclasses the rest in surface cleanliness, luster behavior, and eye appeal, paying for MS70 can be less about ego and more about getting what you will still appreciate years later.

The long view: what the labels mean after the excitement fades

Coins are often bought quickly and evaluated intensely, then set aside or displayed for years. Over time, the market tends to reward the most consistent examples of condition, especially for modern runs where supply is abundant.

MS70 is the most stringent label, and in many market segments it becomes a shorthand for "as close to perfect as the industry allows." But MS69 coins can remain strong holding coins too, particularly when they are genuinely

clean and attractive.

The best approach is not to treat MS70 as a magic spell. Treat it as a specific standard for surface perfection, then decide whether the coin you are holding matches what you personally consider "display quality." If it does, MS69 can be exactly the right grade. If it does not, MS70 may be the only buy.

If you want one simple takeaway: stop thinking of MS69 vs. MS70 as a single mark you can locate. Think of it as an entire viewing experience, surfaces behaving under light, and tiny imperfections that either stay hidden or break the spell. That is where the real difference lives.