

# Apartment Renting 101: What Every First Time Renter Should Know

You've saved up some money and landed a good job. Now you're ready to become a first time renter and move out of your relatives' home. If you want to leave the nest on strong footing, there are some important things to consider.

Keep in mind that moving out of the house means learning to pay bills on time, and the rent bill should be your highest priority when it comes to spending your money.

## Budget smart to avoid hassles

Know what you can afford to pay for rent up front. Ideally, rent should make up less than 30 percent of your income. Being certain you can afford the rent is important.

In most states, there is no grace period to pay rent. If your landlord allows one, it will be written into your lease. A landlord may also charge "reasonable" fees for late rent. Usually, it's a small percentage of the rent which kicks in around three days after the due date.

Our [pre-rental checklist](#) can help you budget monthly overhead costs for each rental you're considering. Carry this worksheet whenever you're apartment or house hunting. Make notes about deposits, policies, and which utilities each landlord pays. Remind yourself of the amenities and drawbacks for each unit before making a commitment.

## Make a good impression on landlords

You may have heard that the rental market is competitive across the country. It's true. So, when you're ready to rent, bring all the paper work you need with you.

If you have no credit or rental history, start with this 4-step plan:

1. Be ready to show income and dates of employment. Provide contact information for at least one work reference.
2. Have at least one bank account, preferably two, a checking and a savings. Demonstrate financial planning by having the first three months of your rent covered.
3. If someone who is qualified is willing to co-sign for you, bring him or her along. Have [aco-signer agreement](#) ready, so that all you need are signatures and dates.

4. Bring along contact information for two or more character references, such as teachers, mentors or friends.

Most of this information can be used to fill out a [rental application](#), a standard form most landlords require. This allows the landlord to conduct background and credit checks.

In many cases, you'll have to pay a fee of \$10 to \$50 for the landlord to run a credit check. A landlord can only legally charge this fee if he or she runs the credit check. Always get a receipt for any fees, deposits, or rent you pay.

If you're in a rental market where people line up for open houses, you may need to move quickly. Ask how many people have put in rental applications before you go to a showing. If it's quite a few, and you're unlikely to get the apartment, you may want to pass. Whenever possible, take a night or two to weigh the pros and cons of each rental.

## Securing your first apartment

A lease is a legally binding document. Be certain that you understand [what's covered in a residential lease agreement](#). Ask your landlord, [or a lawyer](#) any questions before signing a lease.

One-time fees such as security, pet, and utilities deposits can add up. Your first month in a new apartment can easily reach \$4000, [according to MSNBC](#). The good news: If you take care of the property, and abide by the lease, you should get some, or all, of your deposits back when you move.

After everyone has signed or co-signed the lease agreement with the landlord, it's a good idea for you and any roommates to sign a [co-tenancy agreement](#). Spelling out responsibilities and liabilities for each person can prevent legal problems down the road.

## Moving In

Inspect your new apartment. Write down any concerns or necessary repairs on a [renter's inspection worksheet](#). This allows you to notify the landlord about problems, and get them fixed right away.

As a tenant, it's your right to live in a safe and habitable environment. Both you and your landlord have certain [maintenance responsibilities for the apartment](#).

To be on the safe side, it's a good idea to put your [tenant repair requests](#) in writing. Within a reasonable length of time, your landlord has an obligation to respond. If you need to make

a [complaint to your landlord](#), again, do it in writing.

Never let a structural defect, health hazard, or community concern just sit. Telling your landlord about problems immediately can protect you from liability when you move out.

Even if you do everything right, sometimes the landlord-tenant relationship isn't straightforward. If you ever need help protecting your rights as a tenant, we'll help you [find a lawyer](#) in your area.