

Rental GUIDE



Avoid Common Mistakes

What to avoid, whether you are a veteran or a first-timer

The stress of finding just the right place at just the right price can be overwhelming. Here's what to look out for as you search.

OVERSPENDING

Leases are a legally binding commitment with your landlord that sets both how long you'll stay — and how much you'll pay. The first item on any comprehensive plan to rent shouldn't be the location, important as that might be. Instead, it should be an outline of your monthly budget. If you can't afford your rent, details like proximity to work and added amenities won't mean anything. Begin by subtracting projected monthly expenses from your take-home pay, including utilities, water, trash, internet, TV and phone. Estimate your commuting costs, if possible.

Remember that you'll often be asked for first and last month's rent as a security deposit, so a good amount of money needs to be set aside in advance. Allow for an emergency fund of some sort too, in case the inevitable mishap occurs. Once you've run these numbers, you should be able to narrow your search to places that fit within your budget. Better still, if you arrive with a set price range in mind, there's less danger that you might sign



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something that's out of reach after a high-pressure sales pitch.

MAKING ASSUMPTIONS

Renters don't typically contract with a real estate agent when looking for a new place, and that can put them at a dis-

tinct disadvantage since a local pro would already be familiar with these properties. Protect yourself by asking plenty of questions, rather than making easy assumptions. It might be tempting to simply sign on the dotted line if the price seems to be in line with your expecta-

tions, but don't be afraid to ask for time to go over the lease contract.

Consult with a real estate expert if you don't feel comfortable evaluating a legal document. Keep in mind that you may have concerns which aren't spelled out there. Are

you worried about noise or safety? How many people have previously rented the space? Arrive with questions like those in mind, or write them out as they occur to you. Then compare your notes after visiting several places to see which property is your best fit.

Preparing for Upfront Costs

Renting can be cheaper than owning, but be ready for initial expenses

The amount of upfront security money needed for things like first and last month's rent, pet deposits and other fees might come as a surprise, in particular for first-time renters. Here's a checklist of things to prepare for.

FIRST AND LAST MONTH

The beginning of many rental transactions isn't limited to paying a month's rent. Many require both your first and last month's rent before you can move in as a form of security deposit. With apartment costs typically running into the thousands per month, these initial costs can really add up. If you have concerns about how you may be impacted financially, discuss the property's individual requirements with any potential landlord before moving forward with a showing. Sometimes, the information is even available on their website. You may be able to save time instead of viewing a string of apartments that aren't in your price range.

PETS AND DAMAGES

There may be additional costs relating to move-out cleaning and repair, or in order to share the space with a pet. Dog- and cat-friendly spaces will typically charge a



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single initial fee to cover the cost of fixing up the space should your pet leave behind a mess or damage. Others may add a fee to each month's bill for renters with pets, and that might ultimately be outside of your budget. In short-term cases, including those finishing school or between home

sales, renters might consider boarding their pets with a friend or family member in order to avoid these built-in costs. Landlords also build in fees in case work needs to be done once you leave, including holes or scratches in the walls, worn flooring and other assorted mishaps.

ADDITIONAL FEES

Landlords have a lot of unseen work to do before presenting a lease for you to sign, and they'll often build those costs into the process by charging an application fee. This fee also ensures that they only receive applications from people who are actually inter-

ested in moving onto the property. The fees may vary, so inquire before you go to the showing. You should also ask if the fee is refundable, though it usually is not. Some landlords provide utility, water or internet service as part of the lease, and there may also be a first-month payment requirement.

One Size Doesn't Fit All

Staying within your means usually comes down to square footage

The bigger the space, the bigger the bills — and not just with what you pay in rent. Larger units also have higher utility costs.

When you begin researching, it's important to consider potential rentals on several levels — including length of your lease, upfront costs, and commute times. But the biggest cost consideration of all will always be your monthly rent, and that can be directly impacted by decisions you make on how much space you actually need.

Of course, situations can change. So it might be financially advantageous to sign a shorter lease on a smaller place, and then trade up in the future. Here's a look at typical housing types so you can decide which one makes the best financial sense.

STUDIO

If you're living alone or with a small pet and space isn't a particular concern, the straight-forward style of a studio apartment might be perfect for your cozy lifestyle. It's essentially one room that's been broken up into separate living spaces. This is the very definition of "open floor plan." In many cases, the bathroom is the only room with surrounding walls and its own door. A studio layout usually translates



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into a more budget-friendly rent, but those who are downsizing or tend to keep a large trove of keepsakes might end up saddled with the added expense of a storage unit.

APARTMENT

If you're renting as a couple or small family, or simply require more storage and pri-

vacy, the next step up can be found in apartment homes. They run one bedroom and up, with corresponding rent increases. Pricing will also be pegged to extras like larger living rooms, more sought-after balcony views and spacious, updated kitchens. Singles can take advantage of the extra bedroom to create a

home office, workout space or crafting area — and there's room to grow should your living situation change.

CONDO

Condominiums are often owner-managed rentals, giving you a more personalized leasing experience. They are otherwise very similar to

apartments in their layout, features and amenities. They'll also sometimes have an active social scene and on-site property managers who can help with repairs or small emergencies. In some cases, landlords may be willing to establish a rent-to-own model that one day transfers the property over to you.

How to Reduce Your Rent

If you're willing to chip in, your monthly bill might not be fixed

Some landlords will happily reduce your rent to cover the expense and labor of doing small jobs ranging from interior painting to updating fixtures or countertops to offering professional services.

Just keep in mind that you may be the first — or only — one to suggest this arrangement, since many choose to rent specifically so they won't have to worry about maintenance issues. So be professional in your approach, and keep your composure throughout the negotiation. The better you explain your skills, the better the talk will go.

Here's a look at a few key ways to potentially reduce your monthly expenses.

HOME IMPROVEMENTS

If you're handy, consider approaching your landlord with a proposition to fix up a few things in exchange for consideration on your bill. Discuss your skills, especially if they include electrical, plumbing or carpentry. Make sure to factor in all of your costs, including material and labor. Your expertise can save a landlord the time and expense of hiring a contractor, and the unit will be improved as each of these everyday household projects is completed. You'll be saving on rent in the meantime, while improv-



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ing his investment for the future.

YARD WORK AND LANDSCAPING

Property managers typically contract with a landscaping company, but there may still be smaller jobs that need to be taken care of between their regular visits. Offer to trim

hedges or bushes, edge around sidewalks, prune flowers or sweep up. These things may be particularly needed if your landlord doesn't live on site and is unaware of exterior issues. Ask about other outdoor projects that you could chip in with, including mulching or seasonal plantings. They may be willing to lower your

rent in exchange for these boosts in the property's curb appeal.

PROFESSIONAL HELP

Are you an accountant, an attorney or otherwise involved in professional services? Landlords often must sort through complicated financial and legal situations on an regu-

lar basis, opening the door for a positive negotiation. Trade out tax preparation services or offer to help sort through particularly complicated paperwork involving things like permitting or local regulations in exchange for lowering the rent. This could turn into a win-win situation for both of you.

Senior Apartments

Looking to downsize, or perhaps to join a more active community? These specially designed properties can accommodate either impulse — or both.

Just be prepared to do your research, have frank conversations with friends and family, and then take part in a series of visits.

After all, there are more options than ever, depending on your interests and income. Here are some important considerations before selecting a senior apartment:

SETTING PRIORITIES

Are you looking to connect more closely with others in your age group, creating a social environment that encourages new friendships and adventures? Or do you need assistance with daily-living activities like cleaning, shopping or cooking? These needs will help narrow your prospects in what has become a very fast-growing housing sector. There are a broad range of options, from retirement communities to age-restricted properties to assisted-living facilities. Some are designed around activities and group-focused outings, while others provide more direct health care. Visit a series of potential senior apartments first to get a sense of which fits your partic-

ular needs, in terms of social interaction, quality-of-life care and unique programming.

FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

Older residents must contend with living on a fixed income, so cost can be a principal concern when looking for a new apartment. Those who are downsizing can enjoy a

lower monthly note, while also making new acquaintances that can be harder to come by in a sprawling neighborhood. Higher-end senior communities may offer a series of luxurious amenities, but at a much steeper cost. So take a careful look at your retirement or pension income and remaining nest egg before committing to any move. Develop a cost

range that fits your own financial situation before beginning any apartment tour. That will also help you scratch off properties that are simply too expensive.

CONTINUING CARE

Larger facilities may incorporate a blend of independent-living units, assisted-living options and nursing-home care on a

single campus. This is particularly appealing for seniors who want to remain connected to their neighbors, friends and caregivers as they age into new living situations. Costs usually increase with each level, however, since more direct health management is involved. So be sure to ask relevant questions about how your monthly bills will change.



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Inspect Before You Sign

Renters can save some stress by making sure everything is working

One of the benefits of renting is that the landlord usually covers the cost of repairing or replacing air-conditioning systems, plumbing and broken appliances. Still, the process can take time, as they buy parts and contract out the job to a local contractor.

Best to know in advance if there's going to be an issue with your new place. A good accounting of the conditions at move in will also ensure that you don't have to answer for any pre-existing problems. Here's what to look for:

APPLIANCES

When you make your initial walk through on a prospective rental, test all appliances to make sure they are in good working order. Be sure to look at their manufacturer build dates too — since that can give you a better idea of where each is in its particular life cycle. Ask the property manager about the history of maintenance and repair on everything inside. Be particularly vigilant about the refrigerator and dishwasher, since their failures can lead to huge expenses and inconvenience. Broken refrigerators lead to the loss of a valuable amount of food, while problems with a dishwasher can lead to extensive water damage. Older mal-



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functioning appliances are also a fire risk.

HVAC

This is another situation where a careful examination of the manufacturer's build date is essential. The U.S. Department of Energy recommends replacing heating and air-conditioning systems

every 10 to 15 years. If you're considering a move into an apartment with equipment that dates further back, you might also be looking at a period where the air doesn't meet your comfort standards — and then a possible malfunction that plunges your new apartment into very hot or cold conditions until the

unit can be replaced.

ELECTRICAL

Turn on the light switches in every room during your showing, testing ceiling fans and kitchen and bathroom ventilation systems. You probably won't have the time to make sure that every outlet is operational, but you can turn

on lamps in furnished apartments as an easy test for some of them. Look for the circuit breaker, and be sure every switch is clearly marked and that the access door isn't obstructed. If you find problems, immediately report them to the landlord. These issues are often also associated with fire hazards.

Getting Your Deposit Back

This works as a kind of insurance policy against any problems you leave behind

The key to reimbursement is paying in full and then moving without having caused any damages. These security deposits can run to hundreds or thousands of dollars, depending on the size of your apartment and the length of your lease.

Doing what you can to get that money back makes good financial sense. Following are a few helpful hints on how to do that, beginning well before you leave:

MAKING SMALL FIXES

In the weeks before moving day, carefully inspect your unit for imperfections that you've caused, like chipped paint or holes from wall hangings. Now is the time to fix these, if you intend to be fully reimbursed. Match the paint color, purchase some filler and brushes, and you can cheaply correct these problems in a matter of moments — while saving lots of cash down the road. Take the time to look over your lease once again and closely follow any other exit stipulations you find in the document.

PACKING UP

This sounds obvious, but make sure you've collected all of your things. Don't leave behind stray items, food in the refrigerator or trash. These



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are among the most common mistakes made by renters who don't get their deposit back. You'll end up paying for the landlord's inconvenience, since he'll have to hire someone to come in behind you. If you have purchased things like window treatments, decor or shower curtains that are no

longer needed, ask your landlord if he's interested in retaining them in your old unit. Don't simply leave them.

LEAVE IT SPOTLESS

Departing as soon as the last box is loaded onto the truck is not an option. Neither is a short tidying-up session or

brisk sweep. You'll need to leave the unit spotless if you hope to get your security deposit back, since cleaning up after a tenant costs money. The deposit is designed, in part, to absorb unexpected costs like these. Leave time the day before your move to scrub the tub or shower, mop

the floors and wipe away any grime or dust. Then make another run through the entire place before the keys change hands, making sure the movers haven't left anything behind — including dirty footprints. Note that in some cases steam cleaning the carpets may be required.