

Ten Tips for Tenants

Know your rights when you rent a house or apartment. This information is available through the HUD website www.hud.gov under Rental Assistance, More About Renting, Ten tips every tenant should know or you may access these tips directly at www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/ten-tips-tenants-29446.html.



Tip 1: Bring your paperwork.

The best way to win over a prospective landlord is to be prepared. To get a competitive edge over other applicants, bring the following when you meet the landlord: a completed rental application; written references from landlords, employers, and colleagues; and a current copy of your credit report.

To Get a Copy of Your Credit Report

You can order your credit report by mail, phone, or online at www.annualcreditreport.com or directly from the websites of the three major national credit bureaus:

- Equifax: www.equifax.com
- Experian: www.experian.com
- TransUnion: www.transunion.com

Tip 2: Review the lease.

Carefully review all of the conditions of the tenancy before you sign on the dotted line. Your lease or rental agreement may contain a provision that you find unacceptable -- for example, restrictions on guests, pets, design alterations, or running a home business. Ask questions; make sure you fully understand the lease.

Tip 3: Get everything in writing.

To avoid disputes or misunderstandings with your landlord, get everything in writing. Keep copies of any correspondence and follow up an oral agreement with a letter, setting out your understandings. For example, if you ask your landlord to make repairs, put your request in writing and keep a copy for yourself. If the landlord agrees orally, send a letter confirming this.

Tip 4: Protect your privacy rights.

Next to disputes over rent or security deposits, one of the most common and emotion-filled misunderstandings arises over the tension between a landlord's right to enter a rental unit and a tenant's right to be left alone. If you understand your privacy rights, for example, the amount of notice your landlord must provide before entering, it will be easier to protect them.

Tip 5: Demand repairs.

Know your rights to live in a habitable rental unit—and don't give them up. The vast majority of landlords are required to offer their tenants livable premises, including adequate weatherproofing; heat, water, and electricity; and clean, sanitary, and structurally safe premises. If your rental unit is not kept in good repair, you have a number of options, ranging from withholding a portion of the rent, to paying for repairs and deducting the cost from your rent, to calling the building inspector (who may order the landlord to make repairs), to moving out without liability for your future rent.

**Tip 6: Talk to your landlord.**

Keep communication open with your landlord. If there's a problem -- for example, if the landlord is slow to make repairs -- talk it over to see if the issue can be resolved short of a nasty legal battle.

Keep in mind, your first line of contact is the on-site manager. If an issue cannot be resolved at this level, it should be directed to the on-site manager's supervisor. Legal action should be the last course of action.

Tip 7: Purchase renter's insurance.

Your landlord's insurance policy will not cover your losses due to theft or damage. Renters' insurance also covers you if you're sued by someone who claims to have been injured in your rental due to your carelessness. Renters' insurance typically costs \$350 a year for a \$50,000 policy that covers loss due to theft or damage caused by other people or natural disasters; if you don't need that much coverage, there are cheaper policies.

Tip 8: Protect your security deposit.

To protect yourself and avoid any misunderstandings, make sure your lease or rental agreement is clear on the use and refund of security deposits, including allowable deductions. When you move in, do a walk-through with the landlord to record existing damage to the premises on a move-in statement or checklist.

Tip 9: Protect your safety.

Learn whether your building and neighborhood are safe, and what you can expect your landlord to do about it if they aren't. Get copies of any state or local laws that require safety devices such as deadbolts and window locks, check out the property's vulnerability to intrusion by a criminal, and learn whether criminal incidents have already occurred on the property or nearby. If a crime is highly likely, your landlord may be obligated to take some steps to protect you.

Tip 10: Deal with an eviction properly.

Know when to fight an eviction notice -- and when to move. If you feel the landlord is clearly in the wrong (for example, you haven't received proper notice, the premises are uninhabitable), you may want to fight the eviction. But unless you have the law and provable facts on your side, fighting an eviction notice can be short-sighted. If you lose an eviction lawsuit, you may end up hundreds (even thousands) of dollars in debt, which will damage your credit rating and your ability to easily rent from future landlords.