

Renter's Step-by-Step *Guide*

SEARCH TO MOVE-OUT
FIVE STAGES

A walkthrough of every stage of renting — from your first apartment search to getting your full deposit back — with what to do and why it matters at each step.



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Search & Apply

Before you fall in love with a place, do the groundwork that protects your time, your money, and your credit.

1

Set your budget first

A common rule of thumb is spending no more than 30% of gross income on rent. Factor in utilities, parking, renters insurance, and moving costs before you start touring.

2

Search verified listings

Use reputable rental sites or a licensed agent. Be wary of listings priced well below market or landlords who refuse a video call or in-person tour.

3

Tour in person (or live video)

Check water pressure, cell signal, natural light, street noise, and how appliances sound when running. Ask current tenants about their experience if you can.

4

Verify the landlord is legitimate

Search the property address alongside the landlord's name, or check county property records to confirm who actually owns the unit.

5

Gather your application documents

Most applications ask for proof of income (pay stubs or offer letter), photo ID, references, and a credit/background check authorization. Having these ready speeds things up in a competitive market.

6

Never wire money or pay via gift card

Legitimate landlords use traceable payment methods. Application and deposit fees should go through a verifiable platform, check, or in-person payment with a receipt.

Watch for: pressure to pay before viewing the unit, listings copied from other sites, and landlords who are conveniently "out of the country" and can only communicate by email.

Sign the Lease

The lease is a binding legal contract. Slow down here — it's far easier to negotiate now than to fix a problem later.

1 Read the entire lease, not just the highlights

Pay close attention to renewal terms, early termination penalties, subletting rules, and any clauses about rent increases.

2 Confirm the money details

Know the exact rent amount, due date, accepted payment methods, late fees, and grace period. Ask what happens if a payment is a day late.

3 Understand the security deposit

Confirm the amount, what it can legally be used for, and the timeline for its return after move-out (this varies by state, often 14–30 days).

4 Clarify who handles what

Get clear on maintenance responsibilities, pet policies and fees, parking, and which utilities are included versus billed to you.

5 Get every promise in writing

If the landlord verbally agrees to a repair, a rent concession, or an exception to a policy, ask for it as a signed addendum before you sign the lease.

6 Ask about renters insurance

Many leases require it. Even if not required, it's inexpensive and covers your belongings and liability in ways the landlord's insurance does not.

Tip: Keep a signed copy of the full lease (PDF or physical) somewhere you can find it instantly — you'll refer back to it more than you expect.

Move In

Your move-in walkthrough is your best protection for getting your deposit back later. Be thorough — future you will be grateful.

- 1 Do a documented walkthrough**
Photograph or video every room, including close-ups of existing scuffs, stains, or damage, with a timestamp visible (a phone with the date displayed works).
- 2 Get a signed move-in condition report**
Many landlords provide a checklist form — fill it out together and keep a signed copy for your records.
- 3 Test everything that plugs in or turns on**
Appliances, faucets, water pressure, light switches, outlets, and heating/cooling. Report anything not working right away, in writing.
- 4 Check safety equipment**
Confirm smoke detectors and carbon monoxide detectors are present and functioning. Ask about the fire escape plan for the building if applicable.
- 5 Set up insurance and utilities**
Activate renters insurance and transfer or open utility accounts (electric, gas, water, internet) in your name before or on move-in day.
- 6 Update your address**
Mail forwarding, ID/license, bank accounts, subscriptions, and anyone who might need to reach you.

Tip: Store your walkthrough photos and condition report in the same folder as your lease. You'll want them side by side at move-out.

During Tenancy

Good habits during your lease term keep small issues from becoming disputes — and build a track record that helps with future rentals.

1

Pay on time, every time

Keep receipts or bank records of every payment. If you pay in cash, always get a signed receipt.

2

Report issues in writing

Even if you call or text first, follow up with an email or written message describing the issue and date. This creates a paper trail if repairs are delayed.

3

Keep every piece of communication

Save emails, texts, and notices from your landlord in one place. If a dispute ever arises, this record is your best evidence.

4

Know your rights

Tenant protections vary significantly by state and city — covering things like notice periods, habitability standards, and eviction procedures. A quick search for "[your state] tenant rights" is worth the ten minutes.

5

Track your lease renewal date

Set a reminder 60–90 days before your lease ends so you have time to negotiate, plan a move, or review any changes to terms.

Tip: If your landlord isn't addressing a habitability issue (like no heat or a serious leak), check your local tenant rights office — many cities have free resources for exactly this situation.

Move Out & Get Your Deposit Back

Move-out is where all that documentation from day one pays off. Follow the process closely to avoid unnecessary deductions.

1 Give proper written notice

Check your lease for the required notice period (commonly 30 or 60 days) and submit your notice in writing, keeping a copy for yourself.

2 Clean and repair before the walkthrough

Deep clean the unit and repair anything you damaged (nail holes, scuffs beyond normal wear). "Normal wear and tear" is not deductible — but genuine damage usually is.

3 Document the final condition

Photograph or video every room again, the same way you did at move-in. Compare against your move-in report to show the unit's true condition.

4 Do a move-out walkthrough with the landlord

If possible, walk through together and get a signed move-out condition report. This gives both sides a shared record.

5 Return keys and provide a forwarding address

Return all keys, fobs, and openers, and give your landlord a forwarding address in writing so your deposit has somewhere to go.

6 Track the deposit deadline

Know your state's legal deadline for deposit return. If deductions are made, request an itemized list — you're generally entitled to one.

7 Dispute unfair deductions in writing

Use your photos and condition reports to contest anything that looks like normal wear and tear rather than actual damage. Many disputes are resolved with a clear, documented letter — no lawyer required.

Bottom line: The documentation habit you build on day one — photos, written notices, saved messages — is what makes move-out simple instead of stressful.

Pair this guide with the Renter's Checklist for a quick-reference version of every stage.