

Before You Lease

- Check the furnace, plumbing and any appliances that come with the apartment.
- Are there enough electrical outlets and lights?
- Is the wiring adequate to handle several appliances?
- Are storm windows, screens and shades provided?
- Are the floors solid, without holes or splinters?
- Are the walls and ceilings painted, papered and without cracks?
- Are the doors, windows and entrances to the building secured?
- Are the stairs safe and well lit?
- Are the fire escapes easily accessible?
- Are there fire alarms and/or sprinklers?
- Are there at least two means of egress from the second floor and above?
- Is the apartment quiet or can you hear those next to, above or below you?
- Is there evidence of rodents or insects?
- Who pays for an exterminator?
- Ask others in the building about any negative aspects of living there.
- Ask previous occupants about aspects of living there.
- If the apartment is furnished, check for, record and save a list of all defects in the furniture.
- What is the cost of any utilities you may be responsible for paying? You may want to ask others in the building or previous tenants rather than accepting a landlord's estimates.
- Is the apartment currently rented out to someone else or is being offered to someone else?
- Have all of your potential roommates read the lease?
- How safe is the area?
- Make and keep a list of all existing damages or repairs that need to be made.
- Keep a copy of the list of existing damages or repairs and then give one to your landlord and attach a copy to the lease if you sign one.
- If possible, the list of damages should be signed and dated by the landlord.
- When you move out, such records will assure that your security deposit will only be applied to damages for which you are responsible.

Signing a Lease

A lease is an oral or written contract between a landlord and a tenant. **Your best protection is a written lease signed by both parties.** Make sure your lease contains:

- The specific address, including apartment number, of the property.
- The lease must contain an adequate description of the property.
- The length of the lease.
- An explanation of the rent payment procedure, including late penalties and rent increases.
- A list of any utilities you are responsible for paying.
- Termination or renewal terms.
- The amount of security deposit.
- Who will be responsible for the taxes on the property?
- The correct name and address of the party to whom rent shall be paid.
- Whether you as the tenant are waiving or limiting any notice requirements before the landlord can evict you.
- What repairs you will be responsible for.
- What you will be responsible for when you move out i.e., cleaning carpets, painting, etc.
- Whether there are any limitations and/or restrictions upon what you can do with the property, i.e. having pets, noise, certain appliances, etc.
- Whether the landlord is reserving any part of the property for his or her use.
- When and under what circumstances the landlord may enter your premises.
- The name, phone number and complete address for the party you should contact for repairs or problems with the property.
- A listing of all the tenants for the property.
- What will happen if one of your roommates leaves?
- The name, complete address and phone number of the landlord.
- Who will be responsible for the upkeep and damage to the common areas?
- Who will be responsible for injuries suffered by persons who use the common areas of the property?
- Who will provide insurance to cover injuries that are suffered in the common areas?

Fire Safety

Much of fire safety and protection is common sense. Keep in mind the following to protect yourselves and your belongings:

- Accumulated mail, newspapers, garbage, and other combustibles are very real fire hazards. Try to keep things neat and away from heat sources.
- Keep space heaters and halogen lamps away from flammables, such as clothing, paper, and curtains, and never leave them unattended. Halogen lamps should have a cover over the top to prevent objects from falling on the bulb.
- If you or your roommates smoke, make sure to extinguish and dispose of your cigarette butts in an appropriate container. Cigarette butts that are not extinguished can smolder for hours in couches, beds, and trashcans before igniting. Never smoke in bed!
- Develop a fire escape route, and familiarize yourself with all exits and windows. Know two exits accessible from where you sleep. Each bedroom should have at least one window that opens to the outside. Those of you who have created improvised sleeping areas in windowless rooms, like closets, attics, and basements, could be trapped with no exit in the event of fire. Landlords are violating the law if they allow such arrangements.
- Put out candles and incense when unattended.
- Firing up the grill? Be sure to place your barbecue at least 10 feet from any structure, including your porch.
- Make sure your address is clearly visible from the street so that fire and rescue response teams can quickly identify your house in an emergency.
- Annoyed that your smoke detector keeps beeping even though there's no smoke? It's probably the batteries. Don't just remove the batteries -- replace them! If your detector is defective, let your landlord know immediately.
- Overloading electrical outlets creates a dangerous fire hazard, particularly in some of the older homes. If you use power strips, plug them directly into outlets, not into extension cords. Using too many extension cords can overload wiring and spark a fire.
- Holiday lights should be hung appropriately and decorations should be non-flammable.

