

the first apartment checklist

a lease is not a test you can fail — **it's five clauses, one viewing routine, and one photo habit.** this page is the whole game, from application to deposit-back.

the three questions before you sign

1. "what can the deposit be used for, and when do i get it back?"
2. "does this lease auto-renew, and what's the notice date?"
3. "how do i report repairs, **in writing**?"

any landlord worth renting from answers all three without blinking. one who gets weird about them **just answered a fourth question you didn't ask.**

the five clauses that can hurt you

- 1 deposit** — how much, what they can deduct, how many days until it's back. **"normal wear and tear"** is time passing, not damage — you don't pay for time.
- 2 auto-renewal** — some leases quietly renew a full year unless you give notice by a date (often ~60 days before the end). find the date the day you sign, set a phone reminder.
- 3 the fee list** — late, amenity, "administrative", move-out cleaning. compare apartments on the *real* monthly price.
- 4 repairs** — who fixes what, and how to report. **"in writing"** is the load-bearing phrase: an emailed repair exists, a hallway remark doesn't.
- 5 guests & subletting** — the lease has opinions about partners and summer subletters. know them before your circumstances change.

day one: the photo routine

walk the **empty** apartment. one continuous video narrating the date, then photos of every flaw — wide for location, close for detail. twenty minutes, thirty pictures. then the step people skip: **email everything to the landlord** ("for both our records, the condition at move-in"). now it's dated, and at move-out it's timestamps, not memory-vs-invoice. same routine in reverse on the way out.

if you remember one thing: the folder wins the line, the photos win the deposit, and the three questions cost you nothing but tell you everything.

the folder

prepare once, apply on the spot while others dig through phones:

- ☐ **pay stubs / offer letter** — landlords look for gross income $\approx 3 \times$ **rent** (a filter, not a law — co-signers fix it)
- ☐ **photo id**
- ☐ **one-paragraph reference** — old landlord or employer
- ☐ **filled-out application**

renters insurance $\approx$ **\$13/mo** on average — covers your stuff, often required anyway. get it, forget it.

the 10-min viewing check

- 1 water**
shower full hot — how long? flush while it runs — does it flinch?
- 2 power & signal**
test outlets with your charger; check phone bars in the back rooms.
- 3 corners**
windows open/close/lock; ceiling corners & under sinks: stains, bubbly paint, musty smell = water was here.
- 4 noise**
stand still one minute. what does this sound like at 11 p.m.?
- 5 two questions**
"why did the last tenant leave?" · "how do i report a repair?" — the pauses count.

your rights

- ☐ **livable** — essentials work; fixing them is their job
 - ☐ **private** — notice before entry (commonly ~a day), except emergencies
 - ☐ **deposit protected** — held in trust, deductions need reasons + deadline
- look up: **"[your state] tenant rights"**