

Move-in photos and getting your deposit back

Easy • 45 min at move-in • Free

YOU'LL NEED

- ☐ Your phone (photos and video with dates)
- ☐ Your lease
- ☐ The move-in checklist, if your landlord has one
- ☐ An email address your landlord has

WHAT TO KNOW

- 1 **Before you bring anything in, walk every room and take photos and a slow video.** California's official guide suggests taking your own photos before your things go in, and asking the landlord for copies of theirs.
- 2 **Get close-ups of anything wrong: stains, scratches, holes, chips, broken blinds, burns on the counter, the inside of the oven and fridge, and under the sinks.** If it's damaged, it needs its own photo.
- 3 **Fill out the move-in (inventory) checklist with the landlord or manager, room by room.** Both of you sign and date it, and you keep a copy. It's best done before you move in, or within two or three days if the landlord agrees.
- 4 **Email the photos and the signed checklist to your landlord the same week.** Now there's a dated record you both have, and nobody has to remember who scratched the floor.
- 5 **While you live there, report damage in writing as it happens, and keep the replies.**
- 6 **Before you move out, ask for a walk-through.** In California, the landlord must do an initial inspection if you ask, so you can fix problems before the final check.
- 7 **Give your forwarding address in writing.** In Texas, you must give one to get your deposit back.
- 8 **Clean, then photograph every room again from the same angles as your move-in photos.** Return all keys and get a receipt for them.
- 9 **Watch the deadline.** The landlord has to return the deposit, or send an itemized list of deductions, within your state's limit: 14 days in New York, 21 days in California, 30 days in Texas.

Watch out Normal wear and tear isn't damage. In Texas, a landlord can't deduct for normal wear and tear, only for damage beyond it. Faded paint and light scuffs from living there are normal. A hole in the wall isn't. Rules here vary by state, and some cities add their own. The examples come from the official tenant guides for California, New York and Texas. Find yours in the list of state guides below, or call legal aid.

DAD NOTE *Photos are cheap and memories are bad. Take a hundred pictures on day one and you'll get your money back on the last day.*

Full lesson: aptkeys.com/your-place/moving-out/move-in-photos-and-getting-your-deposit-back/

Checked October 3, 2026. Sources: California Department of Real Estate; New York State Attorney General; Texas Attorney General; Legal Services Corporation.