

Your first lease

Moderate · 1 hour to read and check · Free

Before you sign, pin down ten things in writing: rent and due date, lease length, deposit amount and return deadline, every fee, which utilities you pay, who fixes what, entry notice, subletting, the cost of leaving early, and renewal. Then photograph every room on move-in day, before you unpack.

YOU'LL NEED

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| ☐ A complete copy of the lease, plus any rules or addenda it mentions | ☐ Your phone, for dated move-in photos and video |
| ☐ A pen and a highlighter | ☐ The move-in checklist below, printed or on your phone |

WHAT TO KNOW

- 1 Get the whole lease before you pay.
- 2 Find the money terms.
- 3 Find the length and the end.
- 4 Find the security deposit rules.
- 5 Find every other fee.
- 6 Find who pays which utilities.
- 7 Find who fixes what, and how you ask.
- 8 Find the entry rules.
- 9 Find the subletting and roommate rules.
- 10 Find the early-exit cost.
- 11 Get changes in writing, then sign.
- 12 Do a move-in walkthrough before you unpack.

Watch out Never pay a deposit or first month's rent for a place you haven't seen in person or by live video with someone you've verified actually controls it. The FTC says scammers copy real listings, then ask for money by wire transfer, gift card or cryptocurrency. Paying that way is like sending cash.

DAD NOTE *Ten things on paper before you sign, and a photo of every scratch before you unpack. That's how you get your deposit back.*

Full lesson: aptkeys.com/your-place/moving-out/your-first-lease/

Checked October 3, 2026. Sources: California Department of Real Estate; New York State Attorney General; Texas Attorney General; USA.gov; U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development; Federal Trade Commission; George Washington University Off-Campus Housing.