

Understanding Your Lease

A lease is a legal written agreement between the landlord and the tenant. Not all landlords will require a lease, but having the lease in writing allows you and the landlord to refer to the written lease in the event of a dispute. Some things you need to consider before you sign a lease:

- Everything must be in writing! Don't rely on oral promises from the landlord to clean, make repairs, etc. before you move in. If you or the landlord makes any changes to the lease, both you and the landlord should initial them.
- Make sure you get a copy of your lease. Make sure your copy is dated, and shows your signature and the landlord's, and any changes made with both of your initials.
- Make sure the name and address of the owner and the contact information for maintenance are included in the document.
- Find out what is included in the lease. Certain appliances, utilities, parking, and other maintenance fees may not be included in the rent.
- Find out if you are permitted to sublet. If you will not be in the apartment during the summer, you must follow the terms of the lease for subletting. Some leases do not permit subletting at all, while others place few restrictions on sublets.
- Make sure you understand how long the lease will last, when payments are due, and any penalties for late payments.
- If you will have roommates, you need to know if you are jointly or individually responsible for the rent. If you are jointly responsible, and one roommate doesn't pay their share, the landlord can require the other roommates to pay. If you are individually liable, you are only responsible for your share of the rent.
- Get renter's insurance. In the event of fire, burglary, or other damage, the landlord's insurance will not cover damage to your property. Renter's insurance is relatively inexpensive, particularly when compared to the cost of replacing computers, electronics, and clothing.
- Read your lease! If there are provisions in the lease that you don't understand, don't sign until you are comfortable with what you are signing.
- View the actual apartment that you will rent, not a model, but your actual apartment. If there are any problems, or the landlord makes any promises, make sure they are included in the lease.
- Talk to other tenants and people that live nearby.
- Check with the police department and Better Business Bureau to see if there have been any complaints against the landlord.
- You are the "lessee," the landlord is the "lessor."
- Find out if the lease will automatically renew if you don't provide notice in advance, and find out how far in advance you have to provide notice.
- Make sure you understand how utilities are handled, and which ones you must pay for, and whether or not you are responsible for activating service.

- Find out if there is a security deposit. Find out if any charges are automatically deducted from the security deposit. (Such as carpet cleaning, painting, etc., that is done for every tenant.)
- Find out if there are any restrictions on guests, parties, or noise.
- Make sure the lease includes a provision that requires the landlord to give you reasonable notice (generally 24 hours) before entering the apartment for non-emergency situations. Without this clause, a landlord could enter (for example, to show the apartment) at any time.