



# Tips Before You Rent

**Finding a safe and affordable place to rent takes time.  
Here are some important factors to consider:**

## PLANNING AHEAD

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- Look at your budget. How much can you afford to pay for rent and utilities each month?
- Check your credit report for errors and request corrections if you find any mistakes.
- If you put money down, ask for a written receipt which has the landlord's name, business address and phone number.

## THE PROPERTY

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- Ask other tenants who rent from the landlord whether *they* are happy.
- Check the neighborhood during the day and at night. Will you feel safe there?
- Check the utility costs for the rental for the last 12 months by calling the utility provider (for example, JEA).
- Check to see if the rental has code violations and/or is condemned by calling local code compliance.
- See the exact unit you will be renting, not just a model, before you agree to rent.

## THE LANDLORD

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- The landlord should provide you with a business address and phone number. Be cautious of landlords who refuse to give this information.
- Ask to look at a blank lease so that you can decide if the landlord's standard rental lease terms are a good fit for you.

## THE TOUR

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- **ASK QUESTIONS:** Check the apartment carefully and ask questions!
  - **Repairs:** What repairs or changes to the rental will the landlord make before you move in (for example, will the unit be freshly painted or will the carpets be replaced or cleaned)?
  - **Smoke detectors:** Make sure all detectors work.
  - **Pests:** Look for signs of bugs, mice or other pests.

- **Electric:** Test all lights, fans or other electric equipment.
- **Appliances:** Make sure all appliances (stove, refrigerator, microwave) work.
- **Utilities:** Make sure the electricity, water, gas, etc., all work.
- **Toilets:** Make sure the toilets flush.
- **Sinks and tubs:** Make sure the sinks and tubs drain properly.
- **Heating and cooling:** Test the furnace and air conditioner.
- **Thermostat:** Where is the thermostat and who controls it?
- **Breaker box:** Where is the breaker box and who has access to it?
- **Water heater:** Where is the water heater and who has access to it?
- **Utility meters:** Does the rental have its own utility meters or are they shared with other rentals?
- **Windows and doors:** Make sure all windows and doors open, work and lock properly. Make sure they keep out the elements when shut.
- **Window screens:** Make sure all windows have screens with no holes.
- **Window coverings:** Will the landlord give new window coverings?
- **Water leaks:** Check all rooms, walls and ceilings for signs of leaks.
- **Mold:** Look for mold growth.
- **Parking:** What parking options are there?
- **Mailbox:** Check the mailbox and make sure it is secure and in good condition.
- **Security:** Are there any security services offered at the property?
- **Lead:** Are there lead hazards? The landlord must warn you of all know lead hazards in the property.

## THE LEASE

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- Read the lease carefully before you sign it or pay a security deposit.
- Ask questions if you don't understand a section of the lease.
- How long will the lease last?
- How much is the security deposit?
- How much is the rent and when is it due?
- If the rent is late, what happens?
- Who pays for each utility (electric, gas, water, sewer, trash)?
- If you are responsible for a utility: who, how, and when do you have to pay?
- Is garage space or assigned parking included in the rent?
- Review lease sections that allow the landlord to enter the property to make repairs or inspect the unit. How much notice does the landlord have to give?
- If you have to move before the end of the lease, what happens?

- What changes can you make to the apartment and when do you need permission? Always get the permission in writing as proof.
- What is the procedure for requesting repairs? Ask if there are certain hours to call. What sort of maintenance staff does the landlord have on hand?
- When you move out, what charges can be taken from your deposit? Find out so there are no surprises at the end. Ask the landlord if it keeps a list of these charges and request a copy.
- If you agree to changes or make additional agreements, get those changes or agreements in writing to avoid future problems or disagreements. Don't rely on oral promises by the landlord.

### MOVING IN

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- Do a walk-thru inspection with the landlord right before you move in.
- Make a list of any problems you find with the rental (including problems with the floors, windows, doors, walls, or appliances). Ask the landlord to sign your list.
- If the landlord needs to make repairs, get them to agree in writing. Don't count on your landlord just saying that he/she will make repairs. If the rental needs repairs, ask the landlord to sign an agreement that he/she will make the repairs without charge. If the landlord agrees orally, confirm the agreement in writing.
- Take photos of the property before you move in and keep the photos in a safe place.
- Your landlord's insurance probably won't protect you from damage, theft or loss to your furniture or other property. Consider buying your own renter's insurance (some leases require it).
- Keep your rental records in a safe place:
  - landlord's address and phone number,
  - the lease,
  - security deposit receipt,
  - repair requests,
  - rent receipts (or cancelled checks), AND
  - all other papers about your tenancy.

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This fact sheet is for general education only it is not intended to be used to solve individual problems. If you have specific questions contact a lawyer. The laws described here may change without notice. You may find additional resources at: <https://www.jaxlegalaid.org/get-help/self-help/pamphlets-videos/>. Revised October 2023.

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