

you have attempted to rectify the problem. Make sure you include the following information on every letter:

Your name

Your apartment number

Your phone numbers - work, home and cell.

The date you sent the letter - (this documents your attempts to correct the problems, and looked upon favorably by the courts should you have to pursue legal avenues.)

A description of the problems or repairs to be made.

A date for action - be reasonable here - unless it is a matter of health and safety, give your landlord at least five days to repair the problem. If the heat does not work, or the toilets don't flush, request immediate repairs or you will report the problem to the Health Department.

Sometimes being nice won't get the repairs made - in that case you can contact the proper agency. Make sure that you have been firm with your landlord and asked for the repairs more than once before contacting an attorney or agency. Make sure the landlord knows you will be

Do the drains, toilets, sinks and other plumbing fixtures work well? Turn on the water to check pressure and whether or not it gets hot; and flush the toilets.

Turn on the bathroom fan it on to check if it is working.

Is the floor easy to clean and in good condition?

Is the stove safe and in good repair? Do you smell gas?

How does the manager let you know when the water may be off?

Bedrooms

Are the windows and closets in good shape? Is there a telephone or cable jack in the room?

Flooring

What condition is the carpet or linoleum in? Is it dirty? Is it curling up? Are there fleas? (A good test for fleas is to wear white socks and take off your shoes, scuff your feet along the carpet - then look for the little critters on your socks.)

Electric and Water

If you have a water heater in your unit is it vented to the outside? (It should not be in your bathroom or bedroom.)

Are there any electrical outlets, switches or fixtures that do not operate properly?

Do any pipes leak? Open the cabinets under the kitchen and bathroom sinks - these are notorious leaks that renters don't discover at walk-through.

General

- Does your heating system work?
- Are there insects or rodents in the dwelling? Obvious at it sounds, look for droppings inside drawers and cabinets.
- Does the basement flood?
- Do the walls or ceiling leak?

Warranty of Habitability

By law, apartment tenants are entitled to livable, safe and sanitary conditions. Any condition caused by the tenant would not be a breach of the warranty and must be fixed by the tenant. Landlords cannot enforce lease provisions or other agreements that breach the tenant's warranty of habitability. Unsanitary conditions should be reported to the County Health Department's Sanitation Office. Questions of building or fire hazards should be reported to your municipal Building Inspector or Fire Department.

After making your notes on your checklist, have the landlord or manager sign and date it, and mail him or her a copy. In the case that repairs are not made, you have proof the manager knew about the problem. In addition, this copy ensures the court or Health Department inspector that

used for payments of rent or late payments of your utility bills. Make sure you know which applies to which situation, and ask if a receipt will be attached for proof.

If you do not have a written lease and there is no detailed agreement regarding the damage deposit, it is likely that the deposit will be used for cleaning and repairs that exceed normal wear and tear. This can be based on length of occupancy - make sure you know the time limits that these charges apply. Always ask for a receipt for the repairs or cleaning done.

The Checklist - Or, How to Cover Your Fanny in Case of Damage

Think about the items below when you view the property. In addition, your manager should have a checklist with some of these items listed. If something you notice is not listed - LIST IT! Once you have filled it out, have the manager sign and date it. KEEP A COPY for your records - I cannot emphasize the importance of this enough. If repairs are required, get a date of repair as well - IN WRITING! Because once you move in, you can be at the landlord's mercy. Some things to check and make notations on are follows and are usually found on the checklist the manager provides. If the manager does not provide a checklist, print this one and use it.

Outside the Apartment

Are there lights in the common areas? Are they lit at all times?

Does the roof leak? (Look for staining or mold.)

Are the outside areas maintained nicely?

Are there hand railings where there are three steps or more?

Are the porches safe?

Are there any holes, breaks, and loose or rotting boards in the exterior walls or foundation?

Where are the garbage cans located? Are they full?

Windows and Doors

Does every room have at least one window or skylight, which can be opened, except bathroom, laundry, furnace, pantry, kitchenette, or utility room?

Do the locks on all exterior doors work properly?

Does wind or rain enter the place through the doors or windows?

Are there any broken windows?

Do all the windows operate properly?

Are there screens on all the windows?

Bathroom and Kitchen

Does your kitchen have cabinets and shelves? What is their condition?

Renter's Rights

Yes, you do have rights and they include the following:

Your apartment must meet be safe and clean to live in. It must meet state and local building codes, housing codes, health requirements, zoning ordinances, etc.

The appliances must work. Check the refrigerator, stove and garbage disposal if so equipped.

The heat and air conditioning must work.

The toilets and hot water heater must work. Run water to see if it gets hot. Flush the toilets for pressure.

The door locks must work.

The roof cannot leak. Look for stains on ceilings, inside closets and around the floors.

The windows must work - they cannot be sealed shut, or inoperable.

Outside pathways and porches must have working lights.

The Importance of a Walk-Through

Do a walk-through BEFORE YOU SIGN A LEASE. Most reputable managers will allow this. Sometimes, however, the apartment for rent is still occupied. If this is the case, ask the manager if you can wait until the walk-through to sign the lease or rental agreement. A good manager will agree to this. You may have to leave a deposit to hold the apartment, but make sure it is refundable - again, get it in writing. If this is not possible, or if the manager doesn't agree, you have 72 hours after move-in to do a walk-through - DON'T LOSE THIS OPPORTUNITY.

Moving In - Understand The Terms Of The Lease

When you are renting an apartment, both you and your landlord have created a relationship in good faith. You must get the name, address and phone number of your landlord. If the person you are dealing with is a manager, make sure you know her/his name, address and phone number and find out who owns the property. Get their name and phone number as well.

Make sure you know what your rent is, where to pay it, and where to contact your landlord for repairs or problems.

You will probably be required to pay a security or damage deposit with the first month's rent. **THE DEPOSIT IS NOT RENT.** If you have a written lease, it will generally state what your deposit will cover. If you don't understand the terms, ask the manager to explain them clearly.

Ask the manager outright - "How much is usually deducted from the deposit upon move-out?" Surprisingly, they will usually tell you - if they do, have them write the amount on the lease and initial it.

Some leases say the deposit is only for damages done to the unit or if the unit is "not left in a clean condition." That is pretty subjective. Your idea of clean and your manager's will most likely be different. Ask what it means - also, ask if you have it professionally cleaned and give a copy of the receipt, will you get all of your deposit back? Some leases may say the deposit can be