

10 Questions to Ask Before You Sign a Lease

Moving into your first apartment after graduation is thrilling — but signing your first lease can feel like a whole ordeal. To keep track of everything there is to consider when choosing where to live, use this apartment search checklist.

What does the rent cover?

Danielle Andrews, real estate broker at Realty ONE Group Next Generation, recommends asking up front, "What's included in the rent? Does it include utilities? Parking? Amenities?"

Are there restrictions on guests, pets, or other lifestyle factors (like quiet hours)?

Landlords can enforce any rules in the lease, like how often you host guests, Andrews explains.

What's the application process and fee structure?

There's often an application fee, but beyond that, Andrews suggests asking, "Are there any move-in or administrative fees? How are security deposits handled, and what's required for a full refund?"

What's the average cost of utilities here?

If utilities aren't included in rent, Andrews recommends asking about the average cost so you can get an idea of what to budget.

Is the lease negotiable?

Leases with private landlords often are. "You can request repairs, cleaning, or even painting as part of the agreement," says Jeremy Smith, real estate advisor at Engel & Völkers Atlanta.

Who handles maintenance requests (a super? An outside company?) and what's the typical response time?

No matter how nice your apartment is, maintenance issues will come up, Andrews says.

What are my options to get out of the lease?

"Before signing a lease agreement, you should always understand your termination options," Smith says.

Who owns the property?

You might not ask this right away, but Smith suggests verifying property ownership to avoid scams. "Check city and county tax records or request proof of ownership directly from the person offering the lease," he says.

What's the policy on renewing the lease?

Ask how you would renew your lease, whether it goes month-to-month, and how much notice you'd need to give, Andrews says.

What are the other terms of the lease?

Andrews recommends a close read of any lease to make sure it includes "an itemized list of all fees and deposits, a clear move-in and move-out inspection process, ... and access to common amenities or services promised during the tour," she says. Ask your broker about these, but check the lease yourself to confirm.

Take this with you while you search!