

Chapter 1

Before You Move In

Legal Tactics: Tenants' Rights in Massachusetts
Ninth Edition, January 2025

Handout 1A	5
Handout 1B	7
Meeting the Landlord.....	9
1. Find Out About the Landlord	
2. Get Contact Information	
Tenant Screening.....	10
Checking Out a Place.....	10
1. What If There Are Bad Conditions	
Read the Lease Carefully	12
1. Is Your Lease Legal	
2. Should You Sign a Standard Form Lease	
3. Are There Illegal Clauses	
4. Advantages and Disadvantages of a Written Lease	
5. Common Lease Clauses	
Get All Promises in Writing.....	17
How Much Can a Landlord Charge.....	18
1. Illegal Fees	
2. Pet Deposits and Pet Rental Fees	
3. Utility Payments	
Keep Records Now, Avoid Problems Later	20
What If You Are Under the Age of 18.....	21
What If the Landlord Backs Out	21

Before You Move In

Tenants' Rights in Massachusetts

Check It Out

Before you rent a place, go look at it. Walk around the entire apartment and the building. An apartment must be in good condition before a landlord rents it.

- Use our **Moving In Checklist (Form 1)** for tips about what to check out and questions to ask as you walk around.
- Use the **Housing Code Checklist (Booklet 2)** to spot problems. Also ask current tenants about the landlord. Does the landlord make repairs? Have they had problems?

Protect Yourself

Only pay the landlord cash if they can give you a receipt right away.

Get a receipt for any money you pay the landlord. If the landlord does not give you one, use our **Rent Receipt (Form 2)**.

If you pay a security deposit, the landlord must give you a receipt within 30 days. If they do not, use **Security Deposit and Last Month's Receipt (Form 4)**.

Get all agreements in writing.

Read your lease carefully before signing it. See **Handout 1B: Leases**.

Rent

Landlords of private, unsubsidized housing can charge as much rent as they want.

Security Deposit and Other Charges

When you move in, landlords can **only** charge you for:

- First and last month's rent,
- A new lock and key, and
- A security deposit that is no more than 1 month's rent.

Landlords must **not** charge other fees, like pet, cleaning, or application fees.

Utilities

Your landlord can **only** charge you for gas, electricity, hot water, and heat if:

- Your apartment has **separate meters** for gas and electricity, and
- You agree **in writing** to pay for utilities.

Usually the landlord must pay for water. They can only bill you for water if:

- There is a separate meter and there are low-flow toilets and showers,
- You have agreed to pay for water **in writing**, and

- The landlord has filed the right papers with the city or town.

Keep Good Records

- Keep copies of all written communications (letters, texts, and emails) between you and your landlord.
- Keep receipts for rental payments, the security deposit, and other payments.
- Get all agreements in writing. If the agreement is not written and you disagree later, it will be your word against your landlord's.

Repairs

Before or just after you move in, make a list of anything broken or damaged. Use the **Housing Code Checklist (Booklet 2)**. Give your landlord the list. Keep a copy for yourself.

If the landlord agrees to make repairs, get it in writing. If they do not give you a written promise, write to them right away. Keep a copy of your communication. You could say:

Thank you for agreeing to fix problems
in apartment at address by date.

If a Landlord Refuses to Rent to You

Landlords use tenant screening agencies to find out about tenants. These agencies sell information about tenants including court cases, credit checks, employment verification, former rental addresses, and criminal record checks. Landlords also find information online. Some landlords refuse to rent to any tenant who has been to court. There is a new law that allows tenants in certain types of evictions with

certain outcomes to seal their eviction record. See **Chapter 2: Tenant Screening**.

If a landlord refuses to rent to you, ask why. You may be able to address their concern. See **Chapter 2: Tenant Screening**.

If a landlord refuses to rent to you, and you think it is because of your race, religion, or gender, or they are discriminating against you for another reason, see **Chapter 7: Discrimination**.



For more, scan the QR code for **Legal Tactics, Chapter 1: Before You Move In.**
MassLegalHelp.org/LT-move-in

Leases

Tenants' Rights in Massachusetts

When you are renting a home, you may have a lease or contract. Leases are legal agreements that explain your rights and responsibilities as a tenant, and your landlord's responsibilities.

If you plan to sign a written lease, read it carefully. If you do not understand something, ask questions or get advice. Your lease may have clauses that are not legal.

Both you and your landlord must sign your lease. Within 30 days of signing it, the landlord **must give you a copy**. Keep your lease in a safe place so you can go back to it and read it if you need to.

What should be in my lease?

Leases usually include:

- A description of the space you will be renting (number of rooms, size, etc.).
- How much rent you pay and how often.
- How long your tenancy lasts.
- Information about your security deposit if you paid one.
- Whether you are responsible for paying any utilities like electricity, gas, or water.
- Rules and responsibilities that you have as a tenant. For example, rules about pets, subletting, or property damage.

- Information about requesting repairs.
- Whether your lease has a renewal option.
- Name, address, and phone number of:
 - your landlord,
 - any other person who maintains the property, and
 - the person authorized to receive notices and court papers. (For example, it should include whether you send a court paper to your landlord, the owner, or anyone else.)

Protect Yourself

Spot Illegal Clauses

Common **illegal clauses** in leases include:

A clause that says you, as the tenant, are responsible for all repairs.

A clause that says your landlord can use your security deposit to pay for utilities if you do not pay for them.

A clause that says you must pay for pay for electricity or gas where the service or bill is in your landlord's name.

A clause that says you must immediately pay all rent due for the rest of your lease term.

If I live in privately-owned subsidized housing, is my lease with a landlord or housing authority?

If you have a voucher or get a housing subsidy, you must sign a lease with your landlord. When a tenancy has a subsidy, the lease must have certain clauses. If you and your landlord want to add anything to this lease, the organization running the subsidy program may have to approve the changes.

If I live in public housing, do I have a lease?

Yes. If you live in public housing, your lease must be in writing, and it must be signed by both you and the housing authority.

- **State public housing:** Housing authorities use the state’s Form Lease, unless they get permission from the state to change it.
- **Federal public housing:** The federal housing agency, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, has a sample public housing lease.

Your housing authority should always give you a free copy of your lease.

How long does my lease last?

All leases are for a specific period of time — for example, 1 year. This time period is written in your lease.

Some leases are “self-extending.” Others, you have the option to renew.

- **Self-extending lease:** You and your landlord must give each other written notice if you want to end the tenancy. If neither you nor your landlord gives the other notice, your lease continues automatically with the same terms for the same amount of time as the original lease.
- **Option to renew:** Your lease ends at the end of the time period specified. If you want to stay, you must give your landlord written notice. If you want to leave, you do not have to give your landlord notice.

Learn how to figure out what type of lease you have at **Types of Tenancies:**
www.masslegalhelp.org/LT-Tenancies.

What if I don’t have a written lease?

If you have no written lease, entered a “verbal” agreement, have a written contract or tenancy at will agreement (which is different from a lease because it has no end date) or have an expired written lease, then you are a “tenant at will.” To learn more, see **Types of Tenancies**.

Note: If you live in public housing, your lease must be in writing.



For more, scan the QR code for **Legal Tactics, Chapter 1: Before You Move In.**
MassLegalHelp.org/LT-move-in

Before You Move In

by Pattie Whiting

Italicized words are in the Glossary

Looking for a place to live with enough room that is in good condition and affordable is challenging. You may also need a place by a certain date or near your work or where your children go to school.

This chapter tells you how you can protect your rights as you look for and move into an apartment; and how to avoid problems or misunderstandings with your landlord.

Whatever your situation is, you will be better off if you know your rights before you agree to rent an apartment.



For more information about applying for public and subsidized housing, go to: www.MassLegalHelp.org/housing/finding-housing.

Meeting the Landlord

The basic rule to follow when you are looking for an apartment is: Be careful. Rental agents and property managers work for landlords, and most landlords are renting property to make money. As in any business, some landlords are responsible; some are not.

When you first meet a landlord, a rental agent, or a property manager, she may seem very helpful. But remember—she wants to rent out an apartment as quickly as possible. When you are checking out an apartment:

- Don't let a landlord or her agent rush you.
- Carefully inspect the apartment.
- Read any agreement before you sign it.
- Get all promises in writing.

1. Find Out About the Landlord

It is a good idea to learn about the landlord's or property manager's reputation. The more you know about how a person operates her business, the better off you will be. Try to find out more about the landlord online. You can also try to talk to current tenants. Ask them how well the landlord takes care of the building or if

they have had trouble getting repairs made. Also ask current tenants if they have heard anything about the building being *foreclosed* upon. For more information see **Chapter 18: Tenants & Foreclosure**.

2. Get Contact Information

If you decide to rent a place, be sure to get a landlord's or property manager's contact information. Get a day-time office phone number and an emergency phone number that you can use after business hours. If there is ever an emergency or serious problem with the apartment, you will need to know how to contact the person responsible for the premises at any hour.

Also, ask your landlord for an email address so that you can notify her of any problems in writing.

If the landlord does not live in the property, they must post a sign with their name, street address, and phone number in a visible location inside the building. The sign must also include the name, street address, and phone number of the property manager, if the property manager does not live in the property.¹

Tenant Screening

Before you look for a place to live it is important to understand how landlords do tenant screening and what your rights are. Every landlord screens tenants differently. Because so much information is available on the internet, some landlords may use that information to reject tenants just because they were at some point involved in a court case regardless of the result of the case.

There is a new law in Massachusetts that will go into effect in May 2025 which allows tenants in certain types of eviction cases with certain outcomes to seal their eviction record. Tenants must file a motion. It is not automatic. For more see **Chapter 2: Tenant Screening**.

Checking Out a Place

Before you agree to rent a place, go look at it. Walk through the entire apartment and around the building. Use the **Moving In Checklist (Form 1)** to help you ask good questions and check out important things as you walk around, such as is the water discolored, does the toilet flush, are there any exposed wires.

Sometimes, landlords think they can get away with renting an apartment that is in bad condition and needs repairs. And, sometimes, they do. But the law requires landlords to put apartments in good condition before renting them. This means that an apartment must meet certain minimum requirements.

The **Housing Code Checklist (Booklet 2)** summarizes these minimum requirements. Take it with you when you look at apartments.

You can also find out if any tenants or local housing inspectors have ever reported an apartment or building for housing code violations. Although this takes time, if you really want to know who you are renting from, this information may be worth finding out.

To do this, go to the local Board of Health in the town or city where the apartment is located. Ask them if there are any housing inspection reports listed for the address of that building. If there are, read the reports. If a report shows that there were serious problems, ask the Board of Health if the landlord corrected this problem.

1. What If There Are Bad Conditions

If you want an apartment, but there are problems with it, ask the landlord when she plans to make certain repairs. If this repair schedule is agreeable to you and you decide to rent the apartment, make a list of the repairs that are needed. Then get the landlord to promise in writing that she will make the repairs and by what date. Putting this in writing can prevent misunderstandings later on and may make it more likely that the landlord will actually keep her word. In addition, if the landlord later refuses to make the repairs and you have her promise in writing, she will not be able to turn around and blame you for causing these problems.

If the landlord agrees to make repairs, but will not put it in writing, you should write a letter or an email to your landlord after you've moved into the apartment thanking her for agreeing to make repairs and then listing what repairs she agreed to make. This will document both the need for repairs and the landlord's promise to make them.

If your landlord requires a security deposit, by law she must prepare a statement describing the condition of the apartment. This is called a "Statement of Condition." See a sample **Statement of Condition (Form 3)**. Make sure all problems with the apartment are listed on this statement. Keep a copy of this Statement for your own records.

If a landlord does not take a security deposit, it is still a good idea to prepare your own statement describing the condition of an apartment when you first move in. See **Chapter 3: Security Deposits and Last Month's Rent - Statement of Condition**. You may want to take pictures (or video) of certain conditions. For example, if the window is broken, take a picture of the broken window. If you take pictures using your phone, download them to a computer or flash drive or the cloud for safekeeping in case you lose your phone. **Spending 20 minutes documenting the condition of an apartment when you first move in may save you a lot of aggravation and money later on.**

Read the Lease Carefully

You are a legal tenant whether or not you have a written *lease*. Many tenants do not have written leases.

If you do plan to sign a written lease, read it carefully. A landlord may try to rush you into signing a lease. She may say that all leases are "standard" and that you should not bother reading it. There may be a lot of small print and words you do not understand. Don't let a landlord intimidate you or stop you from reading the lease. Even if you are nervous or feel shy, be firm and polite and tell her you want to read the lease. You may want to bring the lease home and go over it with a friend or lawyer.

1. Is Your Lease Legal

Both you and your landlord must sign your lease. Within 30 days of signing it, the landlord must give you a copy.² The lease must include the following information:

- The amount of rent,
- The date on which your tenancy ends,³
- The amount of your security deposit, if you paid one,
- All your rights concerning the security deposit,⁴ and
- The names, addresses, and phone numbers of your landlord, any other person responsible for maintaining the property, and the person authorized to receive notices and court papers.⁵

If a written agreement does not include an ending date or a rent amount, it will not be a valid lease, but it could be a valid tenancy at will agreement. The difference between a lease and a tenancy at will agreement is that a lease has an end date, whereas a tenancy at will agreement does not have an end date by which you must move out.

2. Should You Sign a Standard Form Lease

Many landlords use "standard form leases." While these standard leases are generally weighted in favor of landlords, you can request a landlord to either add or take away specific terms so that a lease is more tailored to your situation. For example, if there is a no pet clause in the lease and the landlord agreed you could have a pet, you should ask to add that to the lease. When you change a lease—either by adding or removing words—make sure that both you and your landlord write your initials next to each change.

A landlord may be more willing to make changes to a lease at the time you agree to rent or if it is off-season for renting apartments in the area, there are a lot of vacant units, or she wants to rent an apartment quickly.

But be careful. While a lease may look like a standard lease and a landlord may even say that it is a standard lease form, it still might have illegal clauses.

3. Are There Illegal Clauses

Some leases may contain illegal clauses. For example, the following clauses are illegal:

- **A clause that says the tenant is responsible for making all repairs.** The law requires the landlord to make repairs, except when a tenant breaks something.
- **A clause that says a landlord can use your security deposit to pay for utilities if you don't pay for them.** A security deposit can only be used to pay for damage caused by the tenant or for rent if the tenant moves out owing rent to the landlord.
- **A clause that says you must pay for electricity or gas where the service or bill is in your landlord's name.** A landlord must pay electricity or gas unless there is a meter which separately calculates the tenant's utility use.
- **A clause that says that immediately upon termination of your lease you must pay all rent due for the remainder of the term of the lease.**⁶ While you may have to pay some rent if you or your landlord end your lease before it is over, a landlord also has a duty to find a replacement tenant for the remainder of the lease.⁷

But don't worry—if there is an illegal clause, a landlord cannot force you to comply with it.⁸ If you feel you will lose an apartment unless you sign a lease with an illegal clause, sign the lease and move in. Your lease will still be valid except for the illegal parts.⁹

4. Advantages and Disadvantages of a Written Lease

There are two major advantages to having a written lease. The first advantage is that a lease offers you more security because a landlord cannot evict you until your lease ends, unless you violate (*breach*) your lease. The second advantage is that your landlord cannot raise your rent until the term of the lease is over.

For example, if you sign a one-year lease, your landlord cannot raise the rent for a year, except through a tax escalator clause. (For more about tax escalator clauses, see the **Common Lease Clauses** section in this chapter.) If you and your

landlord agree to a rent increase and put this agreement in writing, the landlord cannot legally raise your rent during the term of the lease.¹⁰

There are also several disadvantages to having a written lease. The first disadvantage is that if you move out before your lease ends, a landlord can try to force you to pay the rent until your lease ends. But, depending on the circumstances, you may not have to pay rent after you leave. Under the law, a landlord has an obligation to look for another tenant as soon as you give her notice that you are leaving. In some situations, the law also allows you to break your lease. For more information about ending your lease early, see **Chapter 11: Moving Out**.

The second disadvantage of having a written lease is that it may impose restrictions on you that a landlord might not impose without a written lease. For example, standard leases often prohibit tenants from having pets. Standard leases may also limit the number of roommates you can have or if you can sublet. You can try to renegotiate these and others terms of a written lease at any point during your *tenancy*.

5. Common Lease Clauses

Most leases are not written in plain English, and, in many cases, it is not clear what certain terms mean. For example, instead of using the words "landlord" and "tenant," leases usually refer to the landlord as the *lessor* and the tenant as the *lessee*. Below is a list of the most common lease terms and clauses and what you should watch out for.

Disturbance or Improper Use Clause

This is a clause that says a tenant or any person in her apartment is not allowed to disturb other tenants or use the apartment for illegal purposes. If you are involved in a dispute with your landlord, she may try to use this clause to threaten you with *eviction*. If she does, try to get signed and notarized statements from other tenants which say that you have not disturbed them.¹¹ Also, under state law, a landlord does not have to give a tenant a *notice to quit* before evicting her if the tenant uses the premises for prostitution, gambling, lewdness, illegal sale of alcohol, or illegal possession or sale of drugs.¹² If your landlord tries to evict you for improper use of your apartment, you should consult a lawyer as soon as possible.

Note: Your landlord also has a duty not to disturb you in the use and enjoyment of your home.¹³ If your landlord substantially interferes with your use of the apartment, a court may compensate you for the harm that you have suffered. For more information, see **Chapter 13: When to Take Your Landlord to Court**.

Self-Extending or Option-to-Renew Clauses

An extension clause (also called "self-extending") says that if you or your landlord want to end the tenancy at the end of the lease, you must give each other written notice by a certain date. If you do not, the lease will automatically extend for another term. If, on the other hand, your lease gives you an option to renew, you must give your landlord written notice that you want to stay. Self-extending leases are more common than option-to-renew leases. For important information about how to protect yourself if you have either a self-extending or an option-to-renew clause, see **Chapter 4: What Kind of Tenancy Do You Have - How Long Is My Lease Valid.**

Late Payment Penalty and Discount Clauses

The late payment penalty clause says that you must pay the landlord more money if you do not pay your rent on time. "Late" may be defined as any time after the sixth of the month. If you pay only several days late and your landlord demands a \$5 or \$10 penalty, for example, you do not have to pay this penalty. A landlord has no right to a late penalty until a tenant is 30 days late paying the rent.¹⁴

If you do not have a lease, or if your lease does not have a penalty clause, you cannot be charged a penalty—even after 30 days. A landlord may also disguise a late payment penalty clause by calling it a "discount clause." A discount clause is where a lease says that your rent is \$675, but that if you pay before the fifth of the month your rent will be "discounted" by \$50 and you will only have to pay \$625. This is illegal.¹⁵ If you have a discount clause and the landlord tries to collect what is really a \$50 late penalty, do not pay. If a landlord continues to ask you for the money, tell your landlord (in writing) that under Massachusetts law, this clause is illegal.¹⁶

Tenant's Covenants in Event of Termination Clause

This is a clause that may make you responsible for paying the landlord for losses she may suffer as a result of your leaving early or her having to evict you. This may include the cost of getting the apartment in shape for leasing it to someone else, loss of rent for the time of your lease period the apartment remained vacant, and loss of rent if the new tenant is paying less than you were.¹⁷ A landlord must, however, make reasonable efforts to find a new tenant and to keep her losses down.¹⁸

Loss or Damage Clause

This is a clause that says you agree to pay back, or "indemnify," the landlord if you are responsible for an accident in the building that causes you, a household member, or a guest to be hurt or your property to be damaged. This clause does not require you to pay the landlord if an injury or property damage occurs because of your landlord's negligence or misconduct.¹⁹ It also does not stop you from being able to sue your landlord for injuries or damage to your property

caused by an accident in your building. It is worth consulting a lawyer if anything of this nature happens.

Notice Clause

This is a clause that says when and how you and your landlord must send each other notices or information. For example, the landlord must give you notice in order to end or *terminate a tenancy*.²⁰ Sometimes, leases require that notices be sent in writing in one of two ways: (1) by *certified* or *registered mail*, or (2) by hand delivery. The landlord must print an address on the lease to which the tenant is to send notices.²¹ The landlord must also accept any notice delivered to that address.²²

Pet Clause

This is a clause that prohibits pets or requires the landlord's written permission before you can keep a pet. If a landlord tells you that you can keep your pet, make sure she crosses this clause out of the lease and that you both write your initials next to the clause. If you did not do this when you first moved in and you have a pet, you may be able to keep your pet if your landlord knows you have one and still accepts rent without stating that you must get rid of the pet or move.²³

If you have a pet and the landlord tries to evict you for violating the lease by having the pet, you may be able to defend against an eviction if you have a disability and your pet is helpful to you with that disability. If this is the case, your landlord may have a duty to provide you with a *reasonable accommodation* by letting you keep your pet. Write a letter to the landlord telling her that you need your pet because of your disability and ask for a *reasonable accommodation*. Attach to your letter a doctor's letter outlining the necessity of your having a particular kind of pet. For more about reasonable accommodation see **Chapter 7: Discrimination, Discrimination Based on Disability**.

Repair Clause

This is a clause that says you agree to keep the premises in good repair, "reasonable wear and tear accepted." Remember, however, that the law requires your landlord to maintain and repair your apartment in safe and sanitary condition.²⁴ You are required only to repair damages caused by you, a household member, or a guest. For more information about repairs, see **Chapter 8: Getting Repairs Made**.

Redelivery Clause

This is a clause that says that at the end of your lease term you must leave your apartment in good, clean, and rentable condition, reasonable wear and tear

excepted. If it is not, the landlord may deduct the cost of repairing the damage from your security deposit ²⁵ and may be entitled to sue you for any remaining amount of money that it cost her to put the apartment back into the required condition if the security deposit is not enough to cover the damage.²⁶

Right of Entry Clause

This is a clause that says your landlord can enter your apartment only under the following circumstances: (1) to inspect the apartment, (2) to make repairs, or (3) to show the apartment to a prospective purchaser, tenant, or *mortgagee*. Any part of your lease that states other reasons that your landlord can enter your apartment is illegal.²⁷

Subletting Clause

This is a clause that requires the landlord's written consent for subletting your apartment. To comply with this provision, if you sublet, make sure to get your landlord's permission in writing.²⁸ For more information about subletting, see **Chapter 11: Moving Out**.

Tax Escalator Clause

This is a clause that says that if local property taxes go up, your landlord can increase your rent. Back when taxes were going up rapidly, these clauses were one way for landlords to raise the rent. If a tax escalator clause is not written in a certain form, it may be illegal and your landlord may not be able to raise your rent. For more information about tax escalator clauses and how you might save yourself some money, see **Chapter 5: Rent**.

Termination Clause

This is a clause that says how much notice a landlord must give you if she wants to evict you. A termination clause does not mean that the landlord can come into your apartment and physically throw you out. A landlord can never evict a tenant without a court's permission.²⁹ Under the law, there are specific rules that landlords must follow in order to evict a tenant. For more information about how much notice your landlord must give you, see **Chapter 12: Evictions**.

Get All Promises in Writing

If the landlord or rental agent³⁰ promises you anything that is not stated in the lease, or if you do not have a lease, make sure to get these promises in writing. If you don't and a dispute arises later, it will be the landlord's word against yours.³¹

For example, if the landlord promises to make certain repairs, **get this in writing**. If the landlord promises you the use of a parking space, **get this in writing**. If a landlord promises you the use of a basement space for storage, **get this in writing**.

If you make any changes or additions to the lease, make sure that you and the landlord put signatures or initials next to each of these changes. For example, if you have a dog and the lease says you are not allowed to have a pet, make sure your landlord crosses this clause out and that both of you then sign or write your initials next to this change.

Some landlords try to get out of putting their promises in writing by telling tenants that if anything extra is written on the lease or anything is crossed out, the whole lease will be no good. This is not true. As long as the change is readable and signed or initialed, the lease will be legal and all of the changes will be legal (unless the clause is illegal). In fact, when it is to their benefit, landlords do not hesitate to add their favorite clauses to the lease.

If you cannot get the landlord to put her promise in writing, the next best thing is to write your landlord (via email, letter or text) summarizing what the landlord promised and send it to her. Always keep a copy for your records. You could also have a person with you when you talk with the landlord to witness what the landlord says.³² If you don't have someone with you when the landlord makes certain promises, arrange another time to talk with the landlord when you can bring someone you know. Tell the landlord you didn't completely understand what she said. When you and your friend meet with the landlord, get the landlord to repeat all of her promises. This friend should then write down the promises she heard the landlord make on a sheet of paper and sign and date it. Keep this document in a safe place with other papers about your apartment. **Note:** If possible, your witness should not be a relative or roommate because their testimony might be considered biased because of their relationship to you.

If you receive a housing subsidy, the lease between you and your landlord will usually be prepared by a local housing authority or a state or federal government housing agency. Subsidy leases have certain clauses that are required under the rules of the program. If you and your landlord want to add anything to this lease, the agency administering the subsidy may have to approve the changes.

How Much Can a Landlord Charge

When you move in, the most your landlord can charge you is:

- The first month's rent,
- The last month's rent,
- A security deposit up to the amount of the first month's rent, and
- The cost of buying and installing a new lock.³³

Whenever you pay the landlord any money, get a signed and dated receipt that says how much money you gave the landlord and what it was for.³⁴

If the landlord requires that you pay the last month's rent in advance or a security deposit, the law requires that the landlord give you a receipt. **You have a right to a receipt.** If your landlord does not give you a receipt, ask for one. Or, you can use the sample receipt. See **Rent Receipt (Form 2)**. The receipt must have certain information in it. To find out exactly what information a landlord must include in this receipt, see **Chapter 3: Security Deposits and Last Month's Rent**.

Never give your landlord cash for rent or anything else without getting a written receipt. If a landlord won't give you a receipt for cash, don't give her the cash. Use a check or get a money order and write on it what the payment was for. Then put the cancelled check or stub for the money order in a safe place.

1. Illegal Fees

When landlords rent apartments to new tenants, sometimes they try to get more money than just the rent. They may try to tack on extra fees such as "holding deposits," "rental fees," "pet fees," or "application fees." These extra charges are illegal.³⁵ The problem is, if you refuse to pay these fees, a landlord may refuse to allow you to move in.

The only extra charge the law allows is for a rental agent or real estate broker to charge a "finder's fee." A rental agent can charge a finder's fee only if she is a licensed real estate broker or salesperson. The broker must provide a written notice to prospective tenants with information about the fee and whether or not it is paid if a tenancy is not created.³⁶ If the rental agent is also the landlord, the law may prohibit her from charging a finder's fee.³⁷ To find out if a rental agent is a licensed real estate broker, go to the internet at: www.mass.gov/how-to/check-an-occupational-board-license and click on "Check a License."

2. Pet Deposits and Pet Rental Fees

If you have a pet, a landlord may demand that you pay a "pet deposit" to protect the landlord in the event that your pet causes damage to the unit. While such a deposit is clearly illegal if the landlord is also collecting a security deposit equal to the first month's rent, a landlord may not let you move in unless you agree to pay the additional deposit.

A new trend is that some landlords are also trying to charge what they are calling "pet rental fees," which take the form of an increased monthly rent if you have a pet (for example, \$20 extra each month if you have a cat). There is a question as to whether pet rental fees are legal.³⁸

If a landlord demands that you pay a pet rental fee, ask the landlord what this money is for. If the landlord or a management company says that it is to protect the landlord against damage that a pet might cause, try to convince the landlord that this is what the security deposit is for and that your rent should be the same as what another prospective tenant without a pet would be charged. You also could try to get a letter from your old landlord stating that your pet did not cause damage to your previous apartment.

3. Utility Payments

A lease may require you to pay for certain utilities, such as heat, water, electricity, and gas. It is important to be clear about what your rights and responsibilities are. Below is a chart that tells you when you are responsible for paying certain utilities and when your landlord is responsible.

Utility	Who Pays
Water	Landlord is required to pay unless there is a meter that separately calculates the tenant's water use, the unit has low flow fixtures, and there is a written agreement that says the tenant must pay. ³⁹
Fuel for Hot Water	Landlord must pay unless written agreement says the tenant must pay. ⁴⁰
Fuel for Heat	Landlord must pay unless a written agreement says the tenant must pay. ⁴¹
Electricity	Landlord must pay unless there is a meter that separately calculates the tenant's electricity use and a written agreement says the tenant must pay. ⁴²
Gas	Landlord must pay unless there is a meter that separately calculates the tenant's gas use and a written agreement says the tenant must pay. ⁴³

For more information about what your rights to utility services are, see **Chapter 6: Utilities**.

Keep Records Now, Avoid Problems Later

It is important from the moment that you begin your *tenancy* that you save and make copies of all communications you have with your landlord. When you send a letter to your landlord, make sure you sign and date it. You never know if or

when a problem may come up where you will need certain records. You should save:

- **Keep proof of all rent payments in a safe place.** Save all rent receipts, cancelled checks, and copies of money orders.
- **Keep proof of any deposits.** Save all receipts, cancelled checks or money orders that you used to pay a security deposit or last month's rent.
- **Keep all communications.** Keep all letters, emails, texts or other written communication to or from the landlord.

The best thing to do is to put all of these documents together in an envelope or folder and keep them in a safe place. Take a screenshot or download copies of texts with your landlord and put them in a safe place. If your phone is lost or damaged or you get a new phone, you will lose all texts with your landlord if you have not saved them somewhere else.

Because it is easy to forget the details of conversations or events, it is a good idea to keep a written diary or log of when important events happen. For example, when something breaks or if the heat goes off, record dates and times of when it went off, when you contacted the landlord, when the landlord said she would make the repair, and when the landlord fixed the problem.

What If You Are Under the Age of 18

If you are under the age of 18, you do not have the legal capacity to enter into a contract or a rental agreement unless you are an “emancipated minor.” To become an emancipated minor you must go through a court process where the court legally declares you an adult.

If you are under the age of 18, a landlord may not be able to enforce a rental agreement against you, even if you misrepresented your age.⁴⁴ However, you will probably be responsible for paying a reasonable amount of rent for your use of an apartment.⁴⁵ If you are under 18 you cannot legally enter into a contract unless you are an emancipated minor. For more about **Emancipation and the Legal Rights of Minors** at www.masslegalhelp.org/children-and-families/emancipation.

What If the Landlord Backs Out

Sometimes a landlord will promise an apartment to a tenant and then try to back out of the deal. If a landlord refuses to let you move in after she has taken money from you or has signed an agreement saying she will rent the apartment to you, the landlord may not be able to back out of the deal.

If you want the apartment and you and the landlord cannot negotiate your moving in, you can go to court and tell a judge what has happened. Before you do this, tell the landlord that you plan to go to court. The landlord may then decide to give you the apartment. If you go to court, there is a very good chance that the judge will order the landlord to let you move into that apartment.⁴⁶

If you feel that a landlord may be discriminating because of your race, national origin, sex, sexual orientation, age, religion, physical or mental disability, source of income, marital status, familial status, or status as a veteran, there are steps that you can take to protect your rights. For more information, see **Chapter 7: Discrimination**.

Endnotes

1. G.L. c. 143, §3S; 105 C.M.R. 410.400
2. G.L. c. 186, §15D. Violators can be fined up to \$300. See G.L. c. 93A, §1 et seq, 940 C.M.R. §3.17(3)(c). Failure to comply with this provision may make the lease voidable by the tenant. A party's secret signature to a lease, unrevealed to the other party, is not valid or binding. *Henchey v. Rathbun*, 224 Mass. 209, 211 (1916). As noted by E. Schwartz, *Lease Drafting in Massachusetts* §1.9 (1961), the tenant's signature on a lease is an offer that dies if the landlord doesn't sign within a reasonable period, but the tenant is bound as a tenant at will by signing.
3. *Marchesi v. Brabant*, 338 Mass. 790, 790 (1959) (rescript); *Berman v. Shaheen*, 273 Mass. 343, 344 (1930); *Murray v. Cherrington*, 99 Mass. 229, 230 (1868). Exceptions to the ending date rule are some subsidized housing leases, which are leases even though they continue indefinitely.
4. These rights are described in 940 C.M.R. §3.17(3)(b)(3); G.L. c. 186, §15B.
5. 940 C.M.R. §3.17(3)(b)(1). Failure to do so can result in a fine of up to \$50 per day.
6. 940 C.M.R. §3.17(3)(a)(3). This type of clause is known as a rent acceleration clause and is considered to be a penalty and therefore unenforceable. *Commissioner of Ins. v. Massachusetts Accident Co.*, 310 Mass. 769, 771 (1942).
7. For various statements of the landlord's duty to mitigate damages, see *Edmands v. Rust & Richardson Drug Co.*, 191 Mass. 123, 128 (1906); *Woodbury v. Sparrell Print*, 198 Mass. 1, 8 (1908) (landlord "owed to [the tenant] the duty to use reasonable diligence and to make the loss or damage to the [tenant] as light as [the landlord] reasonably could." *Loitherstein v. IBM*, 11 Mass. App. Ct. 91, 95 (1980). See also *Cantor v. Van Noorden Co.*, 4 Mass. App. Ct. 819, 819 (1976) (rescript); but see *Fifty Assocs. v. Berger Dry Goods Co.*, 275 Mass. 509, 514 (1931). Note that the Boston Housing Court has, at least twice, found a clear obligation to mitigate, in *Bridges v. Palmer*, Boston Housing Court 07326, p. 8 (Daher, C.J., May 24, 1979), and *Grumman v. Barres*, Boston Housing Court, 06334, p. 7 (Daher, C.J., March 1, 1979). See also *Gagne v. Kreinest*, Hampden Housing Court, 92-SC1569 (December 6, 1991) (a landlord who did not advertise a vacant unit in the newspaper had not mitigated her damages).
8. *Leardi v. Brown*, 394 Mass. 151, 160 (1985). See G.L. c. 93A, §9(3), and 940 C.M.R. §3.17(3)(a)(1).
9. G.L. c. 93A, §2(c).
10. *Torrey v. Adams*, 254 Mass. 22, 28 (1925).
11. Although these statements may not be admissible in court, judges will sometimes consider them, especially where the tenant is not represented by an attorney. Try to have the witnesses sign this statement as follows: "Signed under the penalties of perjury this ____ day of _____, 202 _."
12. G.L. c. 139, §19.
13. Landlord who owned a nearby cocktail lounge that disturbed tenants was found liable for breach of quiet enjoyment. *Blackett v. Olanoff*, 371 Mass. 714, 718 (1977).

See also *Humphries v. Brown, Hampden Housing Court*, 90-SP1426 (July 17, 1992) (landlord violated the tenant's right to quiet enjoyment under G.L. c. 186, §14, by failing to take steps to prevent tenant's upstairs neighbor from disturbing him).

14. G.L. c. 186, §15B(1)(c). If a lease clause requires a penalty before you are more than 30 days late, it is void and your landlord cannot collect under it even if you are more than 30 days late in paying your rent. You may not be charged for service of a notice to quit based on non-payment of rent *Commonwealth v. Chatham Development Co.*, 49 Mass. App. Ct. 525 (2000) (landlord's act of charging tenants a \$25 dollar constable fee upon service of a 14-day notice to quit for nonpayment of rent, prior to the entry of a judgment in any eviction action, was a violation of G. L. c. 186, s. 15B(1)(c)).
15. The Boston Housing Court has noted that such a discount clause "appears to be, in substance, a late fee charge which is prohibited by G.L. c. 186, §15B(1)(c)." *Patriquin v. Atamian*, Boston Housing Court, SP-19648-K, p.4 (King, J., August 27, 1981).
16. G.L. c. 186, §15B(1)(c), which says that "no lease . . . shall impose any interest or penalty for failure to pay rent until thirty days after such rent shall have been due."
17. This clause describes two types of obligations you may have to a landlord after you leave an apartment. One is called "damages." This means that as soon as you leave, the landlord may sue you for the difference between the rent you agreed to pay for the remainder of the lease and the "fair rental value" of the apartment. The other type of obligation is called "indemnification." This means that at the end of a lease, a landlord may be able to sue a tenant for the amount of money the landlord has lost because the tenant has left. Generally, the landlord cannot sue on both grounds—damages and indemnification. *Gardiner v. Parsons*, 224 Mass. 347, 350 (1916); *Cotting v. Hooper, Lewis and Co.*, 220 Mass. 273, 274 (1915). The landlord's choice in this matter is critical, for it determines when one can bring suit. *Commissioner of Ins. v. Massachusetts Accident Co.*, 310 Mass. 769, 772 (1942); *Hermitage Co. v. Levine*, 248 N.Y. 333, 337 (1928) (Cardozo, C. J.). A landlord must also use "reasonable efforts" to find a new tenant to keep down her losses due to having the apartment empty. Also, if a lease states that a landlord can recover attorney's fees if she sues a tenant for breaking a lease, state law says that a tenant can also recover attorney's fees if a tenant sues a landlord and wins the case, even if the lease does not provide for this. G.L. c. 186, §20. Public and subsidized housing tenants may not be charged court costs or attorney's fees unless there is an actual judgment from the court. *Springfield Housing Auth. v. Oldham-King*, 12 Mass. App. Ct. 935, 935 (1981) (rescript).
18. *Krasne v. Tedeschi and Grasso*, 436 Mass. 103, 109 (2002), *Baldacci v. Copley Management*, 32 Mass L. Rptr 391 (November 3, 2014).
19. G.L. c. 186, §15.
20. G.L. c. 186, §12. Waiver of notice to terminate tenancy in a lease is void. G.L. c. 186, §15A. The landlord has the burden of showing that the tenant actually received the notice to quit, *Ryan v. Sylvester*, 358 Mass. 18, 19 (1970).
21. 940 C.M.R. §3.17(3)(b)(2).
22. 940 C.M.R. §3.17(2)(b).
23. You have a legal argument that your landlord has waived this clause of the lease. You should check your lease, however, to see if there is a clause preventing waivers.

You can also argue that having a pet is not a serious breach of the lease. See *Allen Park Assocs. v. Lewandowski*, Hampden Housing Court, 89-SP9400, p. 7 (Abrashkin, J., May 8, 1989), where the judge found that management's employees knew that the tenant had a dog, and therefore management had acquiesced in the dog's presence and had waived its right to evict under the no-pet clause of the lease.

24. [105 C.M.R. §410.500; 940 C.M.R. §3.17\(1\)](#).
25. [G.L. c. 186, §15B\(4\)\(iii\) and \(6\)\(e\)](#).
26. The measure of damages is stated as the reasonable cost to the landlord to put the premises in the required condition. *Corbett v. Derman Shoe Co.*, 338 Mass. 405, 414 (1958); *Ryan v. Boston Housing Auth.*, 322 Mass. 299, 302 (1948). See *Weeks v. Wilhelm-Dexter Co.*, 220 Mass. 589, 592 (1915). A landlord may be able to bring a separate court case for damages actually caused by the tenant, even if the landlord has violated the security deposit law. See also *Jinwala v. Bizzaro*, 24 Mass. App. Ct. 1, 7 (1987).
27. [G.L. c. 186, §15B\(1\)\(a\); 940 C.M.R. §3.17\(6\)\(e\)](#).
28. A landlord need not act reasonably in withholding assent where a tenant must obtain assent in writing to sublet under a lease. *Slavin v. Rent Control Board of Brookline*, 406 Mass. 458, 463 (1990). However, a landlord cannot unreasonably withhold consent if the lease says she can't. *Adams, Harkness, Hill, Inc. v. Northeast Realty Corp.*, 361 Mass. 552, 557 (1972).
29. The landlord must bring a summary process action to evict you and is subject to civil and criminal penalties for failing to do so. [G.L. c. 186, §§14, 15F; 940 C.M.R. §3.17\(5\)](#). Summary process must be used to regain possession. [G.L. c. 184, §18 and G.L. c. 266, §120](#). The primary summary process statute is [G.L. c. 239, §1](#).
30. In Massachusetts, the apparent powers of any agent are her real powers, and her actions are binding on her boss (i.e., the landlord). *Danforth v. Chandler*, 237 Mass. 518, 520 (1921); *Binkley Co. v. Eastern Tank, Inc.*, 831 F. 2d 333, 337 (1st Cir. 1987).
31. Verbal, or oral, evidence (as opposed to written) is admissible to establish the terms of a tenancy at will agreement. *Walker Ice Co. v. American Steel & Wire Co.*, 185 Mass. 463, 473 (1904). This is an exception to what is called the parol evidence rule. Subsequent oral modification of a lease is admissible, but it must be supported by legal "consideration" (which means that each party must give up something in order for the agreement to be binding). *Cohen v. Homonoff*, 311 Mass. 374, 376 (1942). A promise not to vacate premises is good consideration for an additional performance by the other party. Thus, if the tenant under a written lease threatens to move out, and the landlord, to please the tenant, agrees to reduce the rent or to provide additional services, such as heat, the landlord is bound by her agreement if the tenant agrees not to move out. *Commonwealth Investment Co. v. Fellsway Motor Mart*, 294 Mass. 306, 313-14 (1936). See also *Tashjian v. Karp*, 277 Mass. 42, 46 (1931). Even without "consideration," the refusal of the landlord to honor her promise is a violation of the Consumer Protection Act, [G.L. c. 93A, §2](#). See [940 C.M.R. §§3.01, 3.05\(1\), 3.16](#).
32. If a landlord promises a tenant something and then denies that she made this promise, this may be a violation of the Consumer Protection Act, [G.L. c. 93A](#). Under [G.L. c. 93A](#), it is against the law for a landlord or rental agent to engage in deceptive acts or practices. To enforce the law, tenants should try to find witnesses other than themselves to testify that the landlord made certain promises.

-
33. [G.L. c. 186, §15B\(1\)\(b\)](#).
34. For certain items, such as security deposits and last month's rent, the landlord is required to give such a receipt. [G.L. c. 186, §15B\(2\)\(a\)](#) and [\(3\)\(a\)](#).
35. Under [G.L. 186, §15B\(1\)\(b\)](#), the law is clear that a landlord can charge only first month's rent, last month's rent, a security deposit, and the cost of a new lock. [Perry v. Equity Residential Management, LLC](#), U.S. District Court, District of Massachusetts, Civil Action No. 12-10779-RWZ (August 26, 2014) (G.L. 186, §15B(1)(b) does not authorize landlords to charge prospective tenants an application fee, amenity fee, a community fee or an upfront pet fee); [Broad Street Associates v. Levine](#), Northeast Housing Court, 12-SP-2041 (Kerman, J., July 30, 2012) (landlord's acts of charging an application fee and a recurring "pet fee" of \$50 per month were both violations of [G.L. 186, §15B\(1\)\(b\)](#)); [Vazquez v. Fletcher](#), Worcester Housing Court, 09-CV-1032 (Fields, J., July 2009) (application fee is illegal).
36. [G.L. c. 112, §87DDD½](#) and [254 C.M.R. §7.00\(1\)](#).
37. See [G.L. c. 186, §15B\(1\)\(b\)](#).
38. While there is very little case law directly addressing this issue, if there is no reason for the pet rental fee other than to protect the landlord against damage caused by the pet, a court may conclude that such a fee is illegal, at least to the extent that the landlord has collected a security deposit equal to the first months' rent. See also [Broad Street Associates v. Levine](#), Northeast Housing Court, 12-SP-2041 (Kerman, J., July 30, 2012) (landlord's act of charging a recurring "pet fee" of \$50 per month was a violation of [G.L. 186, §15B\(1\)\(b\)](#)); [Belchertown Real Estate Co. v. Farina](#), Western Housing Court, 09-SP-1546 (Fields, J. June 30, 2009) [Jenkins v. Warringer](#), Northeast Housing Court, 07-SP-2244 (Kerman, J, October 11, 2007) (pet fee constituted an additional security deposit which exceeded the first month rent limitation in [G.L. 186, §15B](#)); [Madan v. Berrath](#), Boston Housing Court, 97-03156, p. 3 (Winik, J, August 20, 1997) (holding that a pet deposit is a security deposit within the meaning of [G.L. 186, §15B](#)).
39. See [G.L. c. 186 §22](#) which lays out the requirements landlords must meet in order to be able to bill tenants for water usage and [150 C.M.R. §410.130](#). See also www.MassLegalHelp.org/housing/water-law for useful information about this law.
40. [105 C.M.R. §§410.200, 410.210](#). If no such written agreement exists, the landlord is legally responsible for the cost of heating the tenant's apartment even if the tenant has adopted the practice of paying for the heat herself. [Young v. Patukonis](#), 24 Mass. App. Ct. 907, 908-09 (1987) (rescript). See also [Lezberg v. Rogers](#), 27 Mass. App. Ct. 1158, 159 (1989).
41. See previous endnote.
42. [105 C.M.R. §410.200](#).
43. See previous endnote.
44. [G.L. c. 4, §7 \(para. 51\)](#); [Raymond v. General Motorcycle Co.](#), 230 Mass. 54, 55 (1918); [Slayton v. Barry](#), 175 Mass. 513, 515 (1908).
45. [G.L. c. 186, §10](#); [Gorin v. McGann](#), 26 Mass. App. Dec. 150 (1963).
46. The Hampden County Housing Court has ruled that a landlord is contractually bound to rent an apartment for which she has signed a subsidy "Request for Lease
-

Approval." *Blanks v. Gray*, Hampden Housing Court, LE-3001-S-87, p 5. (Abrashkin, J., April 4, 1988). That court has also ruled that someone who has been wrongfully denied an apartment after a contract to rent has been formed can sue the landlord under one of the "anti-lockout" statutes, [G.L. c. 186, §15F](#). *Delgado v. Stefanik*, 89-LE-3532-H, p. 11 (Abrashkin, J., November 1, 1989).
