



STEP 1: WORK WITH A BROKER, OR DO IT YOURSELF?

Starting out: Is it worth paying a broker's fee?

If you've never looked for a rental in New York City, it will probably come as a shock to learn that many apartments are represented by real estate agents who charge you (not the landlord) a hefty fee if you wind up renting. Expect to pay a **broker's fee** of anywhere from one-month's rent for a less-than-prime apartment or location, or for an apartment that's lagging on the market for some reason, all the way up to 15% of a year's rent (that's \$5,400 on a \$3,000-per-month apartment).

A "**no-fee**" apartment, on the other hand, is one that you rent directly from the landlord or management company, or one for which the broker's fee is being paid by the landlord (usually because the apartment is undesirable for some reason, or because the building is new and the landlord wants to fill it in a hurry).

There are plenty situations where it makes sense to use a broker--such as when you've exhausted your options for finding a no-fee apartment. Read on for the lowdown on both avenues.

How to find a no-fee rental

There are a number of ways to find a no-fee rental in New York City. Usually it's a combination of legwork and luck. Sometimes it's a matter of budget: If you can afford to rent in one of the bigger, luxury-style apartment buildings, you'll find that many have their own leasing offices where you can rent directly without paying a broker.

Here's how to find a no fee rental:

Tap your personal networks

Use every resource at your disposal--Facebook, Twitter, alumni networks, company bulletin boards, etc.--to let the world at large know what type of apartment you're looking for, ideal neighborhoods, and your budget.

Do they know of any availabilities in their building? Do they have any friends or relatives who own apartments or work for management companies? Do they know anyone who will be moving soon, so that you can either approach the landlord directly for an assignment of the lease, or sublet to the end of the leaseterm and then negotiate a new lease with the landlord rather than going through a broker?

Ask your contacts to repost your request to their own networks too.

Search the right websites

There are a number of websites that publish no-fee listings received directly from landlords and management companies. For more info, see [The 8 Best Websites for Finding a No-Fee Apartment](#).

Dial for dollars

Get hold of a list of management firms that deal directly with renters ([like this one](#)) and call each one for upcoming availabilities.

Hit the streets

Put on your most comfortable walking shoes and hit the streets of your desired neighborhoods, looking for "for rent" signs and chatting up doormen at rental buildings, dog owners at the local dog run, and pretty much anyone else you run into who might have a lead on a suitable apartment or a building. For inspiration, "[How I Found My No-Fee Apartment](#)."

When to work with a rental agent

If you don't have time to do the legwork yourself and want access to a broader pool of listings, consider working with a real estate broker.

Other reasons to work with an agent: You're new to New York, you can't find what you want on your own, your employer is paying your broker's fee, you are interested in subletting a co-op or condo (typically nicer and sometimes cheaper than a normal rental unit, and frequently represented by a broker), and/or you plan to live in your place for more than a year (i.e, though you'll still have to pay the entire broker's fee up front, you can mentally and emotionally amortize it over a longer period of time).

Expect to pay your broker a fee that could range from one month's rent to 15% of the annual rent (a little less than two month's rent). You will need to discuss the exact amount with your agent and get it in writing before you start your search.

Bear in mind that **the quality of NYC rental agents is notoriously uneven**. The agents you want to avoid--and there are many--tend to attract clients through the "bait and switch" technique of listing a too-good-to-be-true apartment that isn't actually available for rent.

So instead of finding an agent through a listing, ask for a recommendation from a friend or your employer's relocation office, or dip into the pool of high-quality agents at Brick Underground partner [TripleMint.com](https://triplemint.com), a technology-enabled brokerage founded by a pair of young Yale grads in response to the dismal rental experiences of their classmates and colleagues. Fees typically range around 10% of a year's rent and you won't feel like you need to don a Hazmat suit before each appointment.

Another way to zero in on low-fee apartments: On some apartment search websites like [NakedApartments.com](https://nakedapartments.com), you can search through "low-fee" listings, where the broker's fee ranges from 0-9%.

One final note on brokers' fees: Landlords who are eager to rent may pay all or part of a broker's fee. In industry parlance, an "owner-paid fee" is known as an "OP." They're more common during the slower rental season of November through February; where the building is new and needs to be filled; the unit is particularly undesirable; or the rent is particularly ambitious. You have a right to know whether your broker stands to collect an OP on a particular apartment and to have it credited against the fee you have agreed to pay your broker.

STEP 2: THE HUNT

How far in advance to start your search for a rental in NYC

No question about it, you will be walking a tighter timeline than you may be comfortable with when searching for a rental apartment in the New York City.

Apartments are typically listed just 30-60 days in advance of the date they become available, so it's tough to begin your search farther out than that. There will be many more listings available 30 days in advance than 60. Expect to spend anywhere from three days to three weeks on your rental search.

Tips for viewing apartments

Because showings are typically limited and good apartments go fast, be sure to have everyone who will be part of the decision making process present at all of the showings. That includes roommates and significant others. If someone, such as a parent, will have “veto authority,” they need to see all of the apartments with you, not just the one you finally decide on.

Not all apartments will be available to view on your schedule. Some will have very specific time frames (e.g. weekdays between 1-2 pm) or restrictions on when it can be shown (e.g. during business hours). Definitely expect to make Sunday afternoons available for apartment showings. Your broker will be able to make the arrangements to get you in, but you will need to make yourself available to see the apartments when they're being shown.

Questions to ask before renting a New York City apartment

There's a lot more to a New York City apartment than floors, walls, and windows--and much of it is invisible to the eye of the beholder, particularly one who has never rented in the city before.

To avoid nasty surprises later, be ready to evaluate each potential apartment with the eye of an experienced renter.

How noisy is it?

Come back around midnight to see if any rooftop bars or nightclubs might pose a threat to your peace and quiet. (Street noise can be mitigated, however, by soundproofing your windows, so it's not necessarily a reason to disqualify an apartment you love.) Ask the neighbors about any noise problems outside and inside the building, as some buildings are more soundproof than others.

Are there enough elevators?

Four elevators for 49 stories adds up to a lot of cumulative gridlock. (Should you choose to move ahead, at least check that your smartphone gets reception inside the elevator.) If your building has but a single lift, make sure you can tolerate the occasional hike.

Will you have to pay extra for amenities?

If there's a roof deck, gym, bike spaces or other amenity in the building, confirm that access (and any fees) are included in the lease.

What is the policy on temporary walls?

If you're looking for an apartment to subdivide and share with roommates (or a child), find out whether the building will allow it. Do not take a broker's word for it. (For more on this topic, see [The Insider's Guide to Temporary Walls](#).)

If you're subletting a co-op or condo, are you entitled to everything that owners are?

Because of the cumbersome approval process, renting a co-op tends to be a bit cheaper than a true rental, and both co-ops and condos tend to be a bit nicer than a run-of-mill rental. However, be sure to find out whether renters are excluded from any building amenities like bike spaces, roof decks, gyms, etc., or

prohibited from having pets. Make sure your application has been approved by the board (not just the owner) or you can be kicked out after you've moved in. Also, be aware that most co-ops only allow sublets of one to two years; after that, you'll need to move again.

What is the apartment and building's bed bug history?

You are legally entitled to written disclosure of the building's bed bug history when you sign the lease. But to spare yourself some last minute drama and headache, ask about bed bug history up front. Also, put the building's address into the [Bed Bug Registry](#) as well as the [NYC Department of Housing Preservation & Development website](#), looking for signs of ongoing infestation and poor management. (For more info, see [Finding an apartment without bed bugs.](#))

Is the building kid-friendly?

You may or may not want to be in a building with lots of children. Because of laws against housing discrimination, real estate agents can't discuss whether a building is family friendly or not. Lots of family-sized apartments (two-bedrooms and up), lots of small bikes in the bike-room, and/or a well-tended playroom usually go along with kids. You should also ask the doorman, and park yourself outside the building in the morning when school starts or in the afternoon when school ends to watch for a kiddie parade.

How much control do you have over heating and cooling?

If the building relies on central heat and air conditioning, at what time of year does the system switch from heat to a/c and vice versa? In an apartment with huge south facing windows, for instance, you may be in for some nasty shoulder seasons as you wait out the switch. If you'll need to install a window unit and you're looking at an older building, confirm that the electrical capacity is sufficient to run the number window units you anticipate needing.

Are pets allowed?

Not all buildings permit dogs, and even if they do, it may be on a case-by-case basis and you may need to pay a fee. Big dogs (over 50 pounds) are frequently discriminated against, as well as breeds with aggressive or noisy reputations. Special rules may apply -- for example, you may be required to take the service elevator or carry your dog through the lobby.

What are the restaurant delivery rules?

How many restaurants deliver food to your potential apartment? Type the building's address into restaurant-delivery website [Seamless](#) to avoid being unpleasantly surprised by your lack of delivery options. Speaking of food delivery, will it be coming to you, or do you have to meet it downstairs?

Will you and your furniture fit in the elevator, hallways and doorway?

Is your future doorway wide enough to allow for easy furniture delivery? 36" is a luxury, 33" – 34" is nice, 32" is dicey, and 29"-30" means you should put Dr. Sofa's number on speed dial. as your furniture may need to be disassembled to fit through your door.

Is the apartment rent-stabilized?

If an apartment is rent stabilized, the landlord can only raise the rent by a reasonable percentage set by the city each year and lease renewals are automatic except in very rare circumstances. Rents on older rent-stabilized apartments tend to be much lower than market rate, so even though nearly half of rental apartments in NYC are rent-stabilized, tenants lucky enough to live in one tend to stay put. (The downsides can include shabbier apartments and less responsive and even antagonistic landlords.) Complicating the hunt is that landlords don't always advertise the fact that an apartment is rent-stabilized, and some even omit the legally required lease rider that says a unit is rent-stabilized. For more on the ins and outs of rent-stabilized apartments, read "[New Yorkers' Biggest Misconceptions about Rent-Stabilization](#)". For tips on finding a rent-stabilized apartment, [click here](#).

Who pays for the utilities?

Find out who pays for cable, internet, electric, and gas.

Does the apartment get cell phone reception?

If you're planning not to get a landline phone, check the apartment's cell reception, [particularly on high floors](#).

Minimum income to rent a NYC apartment

Just because you can *afford* to rent an apartment doesn't mean you're qualified to. Most landlords will require that your annual income (OR the combined annual income of you and your roommates) equals at least 40-45 times the monthly rent.

For example, to rent a \$3,000 per month apartment, your annual income will need to be around \$120,000. You should also expect to have your credit report reviewed. Most landlords will be concerned if you have a score under 700 (out of 850), and/or you have a history of late payments, judgments, or bankruptcies. In that case, you may not qualify for an apartment without an additional security deposit or a guarantor.

How to find a lease guarantor

If you don't meet a landlord's financial or employment requirements, you'll need to find a guarantor. A guarantor signs a contract that makes them liable if you default on your lease; for this reason, guarantors are usually close family members.

Most landlords will only accept guarantors that live in the Tri-state area (New York, New Jersey or Connecticut) and who have an annual income of 80 times or more than the monthly rent of the apartment you're applying for. Typically, your guarantor will need to submit the same documents requested of you by the landlord (e.g. bank statements, tax returns, etc.). And if you have roommates, most landlords will only accept one guarantor--so that person needs to be comfortable guaranteeing the entire lease.

If you don't qualify on your own and you don't have a guarantor, you may be able to negotiate with the landlord to pay additional rent up front or a larger security deposit. Expect that they will ask for many months (e.g. 6), so this will require a substantial amount of savings to cover.

Alternatively, you may be able to use a guarantor service like **Insurent** instead. Its income and employment requirements are significantly less strict than a landlord's, though you'll still need to have a clean credit record. Insurent will guarantee your lease at an average cost of about 80% percent of a month's rent if you have U.S. credit and 110% if you are foreign with no U.S. credit.

Negotiating the rent & getting rental concessions

With vacancy rates around 1% in many NYC neighborhoods, most landlords don't feel that they need to negotiate. Exceptions include an apartment that has been on the market for a long time, one that has a lot of similar competition in the same building, one that is particularly undesirable, or is in a building with a history of bed bug problems.

Seasonally speaking, you may encounter more flexibility in the slowest part of the rental cycle, from November to March. Offer to move in immediately and let the landlord know you are willing to sign a lease of 15 or 16 months instead of a year, enabling them to re-list the apartment during the busy summer months.

Another tactic to try is to negotiate on amenities. For example, see if the landlord will waive the gym fee or bike storage fee, or pay for a minor improvement to the apartment like replacing an appliance, refinishing the floor, or soundproofing the windows.

Rental concessions

In the slower winter months and when a brand new building is leasing many apartments at once, landlords may offer rental concessions--usually in the form of paying the broker's fee and/or kicking in one or two month's free rent. (If they're not offering them, be sure to ask.) The rental credit usually only applies to the last month of the lease, which will be free, while the apartment will be advertised with a "net effective rent." This is not the amount you'll actually pay per month -- that is the "gross" rent. So if your monthly rent is \$3,000, and you get free rent at the final month of the lease, your "net effective" rent is \$2,750. Moreover, if you renew your lease, bear in mind that the increase will be based on the gross rent, not the net effective rent.

If you break the lease, many landlords will revoke the free month.

How to fill out a rental application, and questions to ask about your lease before you sign it

You need to move quickly once you find what you like. That means you should be prepared to submit an application and your supporting documents on the day you see the apartment that you would like to move forward with.

Your supporting documents will include:

- Last two paystubs
- Photo ID
- Last three months of bank statements
- Last two years of tax returns
- Letter of employment on employer letterhead stating job title, length of employment, salary and expected bonus; or if self employed, a letter from your CPA
- Proof of any other funds (e.g. stocks, bonds, etc.)
- Landlord reference letter if possible saying you pay on time and that you're quiet and nice; and contact information for all prior landlords
- Personal or business reference letters (sometimes required by co-ops, and a bonus for rentals)
- Most of the above for your guarantor if you will be using one.
- Some landlords may ask for a letter of recommendation from your prior landlord. Most important: That you paid rent on time all the time. Second most important: You're quiet and clean.

You'll need to pay an application fee and credit check authorization fee, which typically total \$50-\$200 per person in a rental building, but could go as high as

8-10 times that in a co-op or condo building. The application fee is refundable but the credit check is not.

You may be asked for a deposit of anywhere from a few hundred dollars to a month's rent if the apartment is taken off the market while your application is reviewed. If you're approved, you'll need to hand over first month's rent, security deposit (typically one month, sometimes two, or more if you are addressing a bad credit issue), and broker's fee by certified check from a New York bank.

Ask whether the landlord will take the apartment off the market while reviewing your application or if they will continue to show it. You may be able to make a deposit to "hold" the apartment. The deposit amount often ranges from \$500 to \$1,000 and it's only refundable if the landlord rejects your application.

After your application is approved the landlord, will expect you to sign leases and deliver the certified checks within a short time (e.g. 48 hours).

Things to look for in your lease

- Does your lease have an option to renew? If so, how far in advance do you have to claim your option to renew? How will rent increases be figured--by a fixed dollar amount, a percentage of the first year's rent, or cost of living increases?
- Are any utilities included in the rent?
- Are pets allowed?
- Is there a restriction on the number of air conditioning units you may have?
- Is use of outdoor space specifically mentioned in the lease? If not, you won't be entitled to a rent abatement if the space becomes unusable for any reason
- What is the sublet policy?
- Does your landlord have to return your security deposit in a certain amount of time? If not, try to add language specifying a time limit.
- What does the lease say about the landlord's right to show the apartment to tenants--how many days before the end of the lease can the landlord start showing it, are there any restrictions on time or days of week, who will be allowed to access and show the apartment, and whether you'll have to make the apartment available for open houses.

- If you are getting a free month or two rent as a rental concession, is the free month at the beginning or end of your lease? What happens if you need to break your lease?