

Research Before You Sign

A lease is a significant financial commitment. Do a little homework before you settle on a property!

Do not rely on any single tool to decide whether to rent or not rent from a landlord. Cast a wider net so that you can draw conclusions from a mosaic of information. Here are some of the tools available to help you check into a landlord or property manager before you rent a property:

- Would you be renting from a landlord who also owns the property or from a property manager who is managing the property for an owner? These are different relationships that may impact your experience. You can get this information directly from the property. It will also be disclosed on the lease document.
- Internet research. A wealth of information is available on review sites, apartment listing sites, and through agencies like the Better Business Bureau. Keep in mind the limits to the reliability of information you find online. For example, a bad review might be an isolated situation that does not reflect the general business practices of the individual or organization, or the methodology used to rank properties on a listing site might weight the building's age over factors like customer service.
- Court cases. Pennsylvania court cases are available in a searchable database at <https://ujportal.pacourts.us/>. Searching court cases can give you clues about whether a landlord evicts a lot of tenants or whether they are frequently involved in security deposit disputes.
- Word of mouth. This is not perfect information either; it is just one person's experience. But hearing the details of someone else's experience living at a property can be a valuable piece of information. If you know the person reporting their experience well, that is more reliable information than something you heard about through the grapevine.
- Inspect the property. If you can view the actual unit, do! That provides valuable information. If you are viewing a model unit, keep in mind that it may look very different than the actual unit you rent.
- Get to know your roommates. How well you know your roommates should be a factor in what kind of lease you are comfortable signing. Joint and several leases and leases with little flexibility require more trust with your roommates.
- Be alert to scams. Scammers are sophisticated!
 - Avoid cash or cash equivalent dealings. This includes payment forms like Western Union, Bitcoin, Venmo, or a pre-paid credit card. A common scheme is to send the tenant a check and ask them to send that money by check to someone else. The check will look real and seem to clear, only to get pulled back by the bank after you have already sent your money.
 - Get suspicious if the deal sounds too good to be true. A studio apartment walking distance to campus that allows pets and only costs \$500 a month should set off alarm bells.
 - Beware the absent or anonymous party. Scammers will often claim they cannot meet you because they are not in State College and will often ask for you to send payment to an account with a different name than they gave you. Other flags include no phone number, replies from auto-generated email accounts, and no address for the property.

- Get it in writing (then slow down). Once you have a copy of the written lease, you can research whether the owner has a rental permit for that property under that name.
- Tour the property. It takes a sophisticated scammer to get access to the property.
- High-pressure techniques are a warning sign to watch for. Scammers want to get money quickly before the victim has time to uncover the scam.