

Backstage Pass: Finding Your First NYC Apartment

March 4, 2026

With this session of Backstage Pass, we strive to answer all your questions about renting an apartment in New York City, and ensure you are as well prepared as possible once you start looking.

Anything you've ever wanted to know about renting an apartment in New York City should be in the [Rental Guide](#) on Columbia University's Office of Work/Life's website.

First thing is to be is to be prepared.

- Know where you want to live
- What you can afford
- Have all your documents ready.

Overview

Key Highlights

- Fast process – most apartments are available for move-in within 30 days.
- Determine the attributes most important to you – location, monthly rent, size of apartment, available light, and type of amenities.
- Usually it is faster and easier to use a real estate broker, but there are websites that have “no fee” listings, such as [StreetEasy](#).
- When viewing an apartment, be prepared to fill out an application. Have your documentation readily available in both electronic and hard copy form.
- Signing the lease can take as little as a day or two once your application has been approved. At lease signing, the first month's rent, security deposit of one month's rent, and broker's fees (if applicable) are paid by certified check or wire transfer.
- The lease term is usually 12 months, with a start date and termination date. You are obliged to pay rent during this period. Your landlord may not let you out of the lease early or may do so with penalties.
- Read the lease carefully. Understand your obligations to the landlord. Alterations are not usually accepted to the apartment. The apartment needs to be left vacant and in good condition if you would like the security deposit back. Take photos of the apartment when you move in, and when you move out.

Required Documentation

- Employment or offer letter (40-50x the monthly rent)
- Last year's tax return, if applicable
- Verification of other income, if needed
- Bank statements verifying funds
- Names and contact information of previous landlords*
- Personal and business reference letters
- Photo identification (driver's license, passport, etc.)

Required Funds and Credit Verification

- A full credit check will be conducted
- An application fee of \$20-\$100 is required
- First month's rent
- Security deposit of one month's rent
- Broker's fees (if applicable)

* Per Paul Ajayi: **Apply here for [Proof of Residency | Columbia Housing](#)**. It takes at least a couple of days to process, so please apply well in advance of starting your search.

Important Terminology

- **Condos and Co-op Buildings:** Apartments are individually owned. The buildings will have rules about how the apartments can be rented. (See page 8 for more definitions)
- **Guarantors:** If you do not meet the landlord's requirements, either a company or a personal guarantor can guarantee the lease on your behalf. A personal guarantor needs to have an annual income of 80-100x the monthly rent.
- **Broker's Fees:** A licensed realtor will charge a fee to help find an apartment. It should be equal to one month's rent. The landlord will pay their broker's fee.

Neighborhoods

There are several good neighborhood guides to help you determine if a certain neighborhood is where you would like to live.

[Compass](#)

[Niche](#)

[Time Out](#)

[StreetEasy](#)

Some of the more affordable areas in Manhattan are close to Columbia campuses:

Upper East Side (East of Third Avenue), Morningside Heights, South Harlem, Central Harlem, East Harlem, Hamilton Heights, Washington Heights, Hudson Heights, and Inwood.

Other areas to consider:

Queens – **Astoria, Jackson Heights, Sunnyside, Woodside, Long Island City**

Brooklyn – **Greenpoint, Williamsburg, East Williamsburg, Bushwick, Bedford-Stuyvesant, South Stuyvesant, Brooklyn Heights, Red Hook, Greenwood, Park Slope, Sunset Park, Prospect Heights, South Slope**

There are a few neighborhood guides on the [Office of Work/Life's website](#) as well.

Interactive Map of NYC with Neighborhood Borders

[Locality NYC](#)

Referrals for Real Estate Brokers

Manhattan, Brooklyn and Queens

Jeremy Cooper

Cooper & Cooper Real Estate

Cell: 917-821-2396

Telephone: 212-864-4555

jeremy.cooper@coopercooper.com

<http://www.coopercooper.com>

Manhattan

Kathleen Doran

Compass

Cell: 646-737-3872

Office: 212-913-9058

kathleen.doran@compass.com

Brooklyn

Anthony Morris

(nickname is Tmor)

Corcoran

Mobile: 646-523-5711

alm@corcoran.com

<https://www.corcoran.com/nyc-real-estate/agents/brooklyn-heights/the-morris-team>

Queens

Brigitte Myhre

Elliman

Office: 917-386-6164

Cell: 347-393-1459

Brigitte.Myhre@elliman.com

<https://www.elliman.com/agent/brigitte-myhre/1025123>

Subletting for the Summer / Renting a Room

- If you are looking to find a sublet, there are many ways to find an apartment to sublet in New York, but certainly the best way is to **ask all your friends, post on social media, or get the message out** in any way possible that you are looking to sublet an apartment. You never know who might know someone in New York that is leaving town for a few days, a few months, or longer.
- Sublets can last anywhere from one month (NYC does not allow sublets for less than 30 days) to several months. There is information in regard to finding a short-term accommodation can be found in the [Temporary Housing and Hotels](#) section on our website. Check out the **Rooms-to-Rent**, and **Furnished Apartments/Sublets** sections.
- If you are looking for a **sublet close to the Morningside, Manhattanville or CUIMC** campuses, [Off-Campus Housing Assistance \(OCHA\)](#) manages an online database of sublets, rooms to rent, and long-term apartment rentals (UNI required to log-in).

Questions from the survey

Is it better to prioritize location, space, or price for your first apartment?

- It might be a good idea to first understand what your budget will allow. If you can only get a larger apartment by living two hours away from your job, then finding a compromise might be best. A landlord will tell you what they think is the maximum amount of rent you can pay, but are you comfortable with that number?

What are some NYC red flags? What are some questions you might ask before securing an apartment?

- Unfortunately, there are apartments that might have rodent or insect issues. Check for any evidence that there is a problem. Responsible landlords will exterminate regularly.
- Another unfortunate occurrence with people living in proximity of each other is noise. Who are your neighbors, and will there be an exorbitant amount of street noise filtering into your apartment?

How does one go about finding their price range when looking at apartments? What to look out for with landlords?

- Landlords usually expect the tenant's gross annual income to be 40-50 times the monthly rent. Are you comfortable with paying this amount of rent every month?
- Always Google your landlord. Also, you can look on [OpenGloo](#) for tenant reviews on building.

What to look out for in lease agreements?

- Make sure the rent and lease start and end date is what you expect. Most leases are standard, boilerplate leases, but read through the entire lease. Pay close attention to any riders that might have been added. These clauses typically reflect issues landlords have had with previous tenants.

What should be taken note of when viewing apartments? What are some things to look out for and questions to ask when touring?

- What is the orientation of the apartment? If it faces south, does it get a lot of light? Do the windows face the back of the building? If so, then it might be quieter. If the windows face the street, is it a quiet or a very busy, active one with a lot of traffic.

What is the best way to find a place when you can't physically tour it?

- Not all landlords allow you to sign a lease if you have not seen the apartment. However, exceptions can be made if you authorize someone to do it on your behalf, or if you take a video tour with a real estate broker of the apartment.

What are some of the expected and unexpected costs?

- The expected costs are listed above – first month's rent, security deposit of one month, application fee (\$20-\$100), possibly a moving-in deposit for the building, and if you use a real estate broker, then the broker's fee of one month's rent.
- The unexpected costs are any new furniture or furnishings that might be needed (i.e., air conditioner, new curtains, etc.) and any moving costs such as renting a van or hiring movers.

How does relocation work? How do we prove income from a job we haven't started but was offered?

- Each company will have their own relocation policy. If a company is offering to relocate you, you might be offered a lump sum payment either as straight income or as an amount that will need to have receipts submitted for reimbursement. Some companies offer temporary housing or moving costs separately.
- If you have an offer letter, then landlords will accept this as proof of income that is forthcoming.

What are the most affordable ways to get an apartment in the city? What's a reasonable price right now?

- Most apartments are market-rate and can vary tremendously depending on size, location, views, building amenities, etc. Please refer to [StreetEasy](#) for desired location and size to start to get an idea of current rents.

How do I go about securing an apartment before I start working? I won't have any paystubs to prove my income.

- You received an offer letter from our new employer. Landlords will accept this as proof of income.

When should I start looking for an apartment if I want an early July move-in? For a September move-in?

- In some instances apartments are listed more than 30 days before the lease start date, but usually the earliest to start looking is 30 days before the lease would start. In many listings apartments are listed for immediate occupancy, which would mean the lease would start within a week. So an early July move-in would mean looking in early June, and a September move-in would mean starting in August.

What is the subletting process and tips? What about summer internship housing?

- See the information about subletting an apartment or room. Also, NYU offers [summer intern housing](#) in their residence halls.

What is the best time to get an apartment?

- The worst time to search for an apartment is the summer as there are too many other people looking. Any other time of the year is better.

Washer/dryer and dishwasher availability? What about living in Jersey City and commuting?

- The buildings that have been built more recently, or older apartments that have been renovated can have an in-unit washer/dryer and will usually have a dishwasher. Otherwise, most buildings have large laundry rooms in the basement of the building. Small townhouses might have a washer and dryer in the basement but will rarely have a dishwasher.

Are there certain databases or forums that can be beneficial in finding available apartments?

- [Leaseswap](#) – Discover NYC apartments before they hit the market
[Leasebreak](#)
[Listings Project](#) – no fee rentals
[NYBits](#) – no fee rentals
[Transparentcity](#) – no fee rentals

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