3. Apartment Searching 101

You’ve heard the success stories: The friend of a friend who landed a fabulous two-bedroom loft with river views in a rent-controlled building for under $900 per month . . . and it allows pets. You’ve heard the nightmares: The cousin of your roommate who realized after his first night in the new apartment that his upstairs neighbor is a professional clog dancer . . . who practices at home. Searching for an apartment can be frustrating, but if you know where and how to look, what to look for, and what to avoid, it can actually be a fun experience!

The apartment searching process will vary depending on your personal situation. In this section, you will find general information on the many factors and considerations you may need to take into account as you go from starting your search to signing your lease.

Where to Start

Before you view apartments, it’s important to know what you’re looking for – otherwise, you may end up wandering all over town looking at places that you can’t afford or that don’t fit your needs. Here are a few questions to think about before you start this process:

- How much can you reasonably afford to spend each month on housing?
- Are you planning to live alone or do you want/need to live with a roommate(s)?
- Are you looking for short-term or long-term housing?
- Do you have any must-haves or specific criteria? (Location, furnished/unfurnished, smoking/non-smoking building, pets allowed, apartment size/number of bedrooms, etc.)

Keep in mind that your first place may not be your dream apartment, but you need to make sure it’s a place that you can live in, for a little while at least.
How Much Can You Afford?

A good rule is to spend no more than one-third of your monthly income (after taxes) on rent, though in areas with a high cost of living you may need to spend more. Now depending on the cost of living, you may not get all you hope for. On the other hand, if you’re moving to an area with a lower cost of living, you may be pleasantly surprised at what you can get. Keep in mind that apartment searching takes a degree of flexibility; your criteria may change once you see what is actually available.

Roommates

If you are moving to a new city with classmates or friends, you may already have made arrangements to share a place. Many new grads will discover that they cannot afford to live alone but don’t know anyone in their new city. There are certainly benefits to living with a roommate or two. In addition to saving money on rent, utilities, and household expenses, you have a social connection, which can be invaluable if you are new to the area.

There are various ways to find a roommate. Common resources are www.craigslist.org and Oodle Marketplace. Bulletin boards at bookstores and coffee shops can be a great way to find a roommate and/or a place in a specific neighborhood. Don’t forget about Facebook as a way to connect with friends and classmates who are planning to move to a specific area. You may also want to check with any groups or clubs you plan to join, including local Yale clubs. They may have online forums or housing resources you can access. In medium to large cities, there are roommate matching services you can contact for assistance. Typically you fill out an application, pay a fee, and the service will match you up with prospective roommates based on your stated preferences. Check local websites for information.

Cristina Isabel Ceballos ’13 suggests that “if you are going to live with roommates, keep in mind that living in apartment is different from living in college. You will have dirty dishes to wash, garbage to take out, a bathroom to clean, and all sorts of tasks that can create friction that did not exist in college. I recommend drawing up a house ‘constitution’ with some ground rules for communal living. The constitution should include a mutually-agreed upon and enforceable cleaning schedule. Do it at the beginning, before any big fights happen.

“That said, I think it’s much more fun to live with roommates than alone. In college, it was easy to find parties and social events: they happened right in
your dorm or a few blocks away. There was zero effort required. In the real world, you have to put actual effort into organizing things and it’s easy to fall into the life of a hermit if you’re not careful. Live with roommates, and you’ll have more of a social network and more fun.”

When posting or responding to ads, keep safety in mind. It’s best if you don’t give out your last name or too much personal information unless you are sure the arrangement will go forward. Be sure to meet with potential roommates and discuss your needs, wants, and lifestyle preferences to determine if you are compatible. If you agree to move in, be sure to get something in writing that states your share of the rent, utilities, etc. If they already have an apartment rented, make sure you get your name put on the lease so you are protected along with everyone else living in the apartment.

**Short-Term or Long-Term Housing?**

Depending on your situation, locking yourself into a 1+ year lease may or may not be the best option. If you are still job hunting, only planning to live in a location for less than a year, or not ready to commit to a particular neighborhood, then short-term rentals or sublets may be an option for you.

Basically, subletting is when a current tenant or lessee rents out all or part of their apartment to another person. This is typically done when the original tenant is relocating temporarily and intending to return to the apartment after a time away. A short-term rental is an agreement directly with the landlord to lease an apartment for a shorter than standard one-year time period (weekly, monthly, or for a few months).

Some people will choose to sublet an apartment for a few months while they get to know the area better and determine where they want to live. Subletting can also give you time to transition into a new job, apartment hunt, and/or find a roommate. In addition, sublets often come with basic furnishings, which can save you a lot of hassle if you’re only planning to be in an area for a little while. You can find short-term rentals or sublets on craigslist, as well as in local publications such as New York’s *Village Voice* or the *Boston Phoenix*. For more information on subletting, review the section on “Signing a Lease or Renters Agreement” and “Protecting Yourself When Subletting.”

**Specific Criteria**

Here are examples of additional criteria to consider when preparing to begin your apartment search.
Types of Buildings
Depending on where you are doing your apartment search, there may be several types of buildings from which you can choose. You may rent an entire house, an apartment within a house, or an apartment in a complex. Some of these dwellings may have an on-site landlord, and a management company may run others. For obvious reasons, elevator buildings are usually more expensive. While high-rises (usually more than six stories) are required to have an elevator, some will also have a full-time or part-time doorman or elevator operator, and some will not. Doorman buildings, sometimes called “luxury buildings,” are usually among the most expensive buildings but can provide added security that walk-ups do not offer.

Inclusions/Exclusions
Various utilities are sometimes included in the monthly rent. The most common utilities to be included are heat and hot water. If you don’t want the added stress of an additional monthly bill, or if you live in a cold climate, you may want to consider looking for apartments that include heat. For those of you who prefer to have your place toasty, keep in mind that if heat is included in the rent, the landlord or management company typically controls the thermostat and is only required to heat the apartment to a certain temperature, usually 68 degrees. Occasionally electricity is also included, and in rare cases some landlords will even include basic cable or wireless internet service. Many apartment complexes in small to medium-sized cities include parking for tenants and occasionally have covered parking or a garage for an additional fee, though in large cities such as New York where space is at a premium, you shouldn’t count on this. Be sure to investigate exactly what is included in your monthly rent before signing a lease.

Location, Location, Location
Apartments in popular, trendy, or extremely convenient locations are typically the most sought-after and can cost quite a bit more money. When considering neighborhoods, take into account the length and expense of your daily commute, the availability of parking, and the proximity to public transportation, shopping, or nightlife. Determine what is most important to you. Would you rather be able to walk to work or live near a park? Is it important for you to be near a subway or bus line, or would you rather live off the beaten path? In addition, prices vary greatly not only by city but by neighborhood within a city, so be sure you are familiar with various sections.
I wish I’d known how important location is to your housing — a daily commute of even just 5-10 minutes eventually builds up over time, not to mention how tough much longer commutes can be. But at the same time, I wish I’d realized how important it is to balance location with cost.

-Nick Defiesta ‘14

Pet-friendly
It is much easier to find an apartment or sublet if you don’t have any pets. It’s common for landlords to specify “no pets allowed” in the ad. If you absolutely must have a pet, think small. Cats and small dogs (under 20 pounds) are much more likely to be allowed than a Golden Retriever. If an ad doesn’t specify whether pets are allowed and you are going to have a pet living with you, make sure to let the landlord know. When negotiating the pet policy with a landlord, offer to provide pet references from former landlords and your veterinarian, as well as proof of training classes completed to demonstrate that you are a responsible pet owner. Don’t try to sneak a pet into an apartment or assume that it is okay to have a pet, just because the landlord did not explicitly say pets are not allowed. Your landlord will inevitably find out, and you could risk losing your security deposit—or even eviction—especially if your pet does any damage.

Furnished or Unfurnished?
Unfurnished apartments are typically cheaper and more abundant. If you are planning to stay put for more than six months in the apartment or area, an unfurnished apartment may be the better financial decision. You can pick up inexpensive furniture at discount retail stores or look into purchasing used furniture through websites such as Facebook and craigslist. By going this route you have more control over the type and quality of furniture in your apartment.

Furnished apartments are usually more expensive than unfurnished and are typically harder to come by. So why would you choose this option? Furnished apartments are good if your living situation is relatively temporary. Those of you who are only planning to stay in a city or region for a few months, usually less than six months or a year at most, may be better off subletting or renting a furnished apartment than trying to purchase furniture for a short period of time.

If you do choose to rent a furnished apartment, make sure you are clear about what is and is not included. The contents will vary; some furnished apartments
have only the bare minimum, while others are fully stocked with furniture and kitchen essentials. When considering the apartment, take a good look at the furniture and evaluate it for cleanliness. You don’t know who was living there before you. Make sure the furniture and the living environment are at a standard you are comfortable with, or at least can adjust to for a short period of time.

After signing a lease or sublet agreement, go through the apartment with the landlord and make a list of all the furniture in the apartment. Taking pictures of the apartment and furniture while you’re with the landlord is also a good idea. This kind of due diligence can help you avoid any future disputes over the ownership or condition of items.

**Apartment Hunting**

Since most tenants are required to give at least 30 days notice when they’re vacating an apartment, you’ll want to start looking at least a month ahead of time. In some cities it is not uncommon for apartments to be rented within days — and sometimes even hours — from the time they are listed, so be prepared to work quickly. Block out a few weekends for your search. Every city has a number of places that list apartments for rent. Craigslist is a common search tool and covers cities around the world. You can also consider looking at local publications or websites for additional housing leads. In major metropolitan areas, such as Washington DC, landlords may simply put a “For Rent” sign in front of the building and rely on foot traffic and word of mouth to advertise the apartment. It doesn’t hurt to spend time walking around neighborhoods that interest you, both to get a feel for the area and for leads on apartments.

Realtors and apartment brokers are also an option to consider if you’re apartment hunting in a large city. Realtors/brokers often have access to a wider range of listings, including apartments that may or may not have made it to craigslist yet. In areas where apartments go quickly, realtors/brokers may give you an advantage by showing apartments as soon as they become available or by sharing leads on upcoming vacancies. Find out about any fees charged by the realtor before you establish a relationship with him or her. In some areas, the realtor/broker fees are covered by the landlord; in others, realtors will charge renters who use their listings or services. Sometimes the fee represents a percentage of the monthly rent (e.g., one half of one month’s rent), and other times it can be a percentage of the annual rent. This can translate into quite a bit of money on an expensive apartment. Check Facebook to find
brokers who are Yale alumni, particularly by checking the Oodle Marketplace section. LinkedIn is another good source for finding Yale alums in real estate.

If you are heading straight to graduate school, keep in mind that most schools have some sort of graduate student housing, whether on-campus or university-owned apartment complexes off-campus. Check with the graduate housing office to see what resources are available. An alumnus recommends, “Once you make the decision to head straight to graduate school from Yale, see if your new school publishes a list of students seeking roommates and available apartments. Add your name to the list. The key to finding a low-rent apartment and agreeable roommates is to begin your search early!”

Cristina Isabel Ceballos ’13 states that “for apartment-hunting in a competitive city, PadMapper, Lovely, and craigslist are your best friends.”

Deciphering the Ads

Apartment ads use a language all their own. Below is a list of some common abbreviations you’ll see in rental ads.

- ALC = Alcove
- APP = Application
- BR = Bedroom
- CA = Central Air Conditioning
- CEIL = Ceiling
- CONV = Converted / Convertible
- D/M = Doorman
- D/W = Dishwasher
- EIK = Eat-In Kitchen
- LR = Living Room
- M/W = Microwave
- NEG = Negotiable
- OH = Open House
- RM = Room
- EXPSR = Exposure
- INCL HT/HW = Heat and hot water included in rent
- LNDRY = Laundry facilities in building
- SF = Square Feet
- W/D = Washer / Dryer
- W/W = Wall-to-Wall carpet

Most ads list apartments by the number of bedrooms and price. You’ll need to determine how many bedrooms you need for yourself and your roommate(s). In some cities, such as New York, it is common for recent college grads to rent smaller, less expensive apartments and put up a temporary “wall” in the living room to create an additional bedroom. There are companies that put up and take down walls for a fee. Not all landlords allow you to construct walls, but if you are permitted and want to save some money by adding another roommate, then this is an option to consider. If you don’t want to pay to put up a wall, but still want the benefits of another roommate, think about using
curtains or bookcases to block off an area and form a wall of sorts. Though this doesn’t lend quite the same amount of privacy, it is cheaper.

Checking the Place Out

On your first day of apartment searching, wake up early, get online, and identify the listings that fit your needs. Spend time making phone calls to set up as many showings as possible. Give prospective landlords your cell phone number, so they can reach you while you’re out looking at apartments. Before you leave a deposit or sign a lease, be sure to give the place a thorough check. You don’t want to find out after you move in that the toilet is broken and an army of roaches live in the kitchen cabinets.

Apartment-Hunting Checklist: What to Ask and What to Look For

Bathroom — What to Check

- Water pressure in the sink, toilet and shower. Do the faucets leak?
- Does the water heat up? Do the sink and shower drain?
- Look for mold throughout.

Kitchen — What to Check

- Which appliances are included in the rent? Do they work? Test them.
- Water pressure in the sink. Does the sink drain?
- Tap water — does it have an odd taste, smell, or color?
- Open the cupboards. Are they clean? Any evidence of pests or mold?

General — What to Check and What to Ask

- Outlets in each room? If possible, test them out. Bring something small, like a cell phone charger.
- Ethernet connections—Does the unit have them? Where?
- Carpeting rules—If the unit has hardwood floors, are there any carpeting rules? Does the landlord require that rugs cover a percentage of the floor to lessen noise? Buying rugs can add up.
- Are there cracks, water stains, or mold on the walls, floor, or ceiling?
- Working smoke detectors and fire exits — How many and where?
- Heating ducts — How many and where?
Utilities — Who pays and controls? If you control them in the unit, test them (both heat and air).

Windows — Do they seal and lock? Are they cracked? Do they stay open on their own? Are there screens? Are the screens in good condition?

Pictures and decorating — Can you hang pictures or paint walls?

Lights — Do they work?

Pests — Look under radiators, in corners, and behind the stove for evidence of pests and traps.

Exterminator — Who is responsible, the landlord or the tenant?

Repairs — What is the process and wait time? Which is the landlord responsible for?

Neighbors — Can you hear them?

Do doors have deadbolts, adequate locks, and peepholes?

Are there any strange smells?

Miscellaneous

Hallways and stairwells — Are they clean and well-lit?

Mailboxes — Are they locked and secure?

Building security — Are there buzzers? Is the building locked?

Doorman — Full- or part-time? When is he/she there?

Laundry facilities — Are they clean?

Snow removal and lawn care — Who is responsible?

Water and trash removal — Are there extra fees for these?

Parking — Is it included? Off-street or on-street? Visitor spaces?

If possible, visit the apartment both during the day and at night to get a sense of noise and atmosphere.

You’ve Found A Place. Now What?

Making the Commitment

Once you’ve found a place you like, you need to be prepared to move quickly. It’s a good idea to bring your checkbook and supporting documentation, such as proof of income, when apartment hunting. You should also be prepared to leave a deposit to hold the place while the landlord verifies your information
and conducts a screening. If you leave a deposit, get a receipt from the landlord that clearly states what the deposit is for, and preferably that it is refundable if, for any reason, you don’t end up signing a lease.

Verification and screening can consist of contacting current or future employers to verify income, running a credit check and background check, and contacting any previous landlords for a reference. In competitive markets, landlords often require proof that you can pay the rent. Some may simply ask where you work, others want formal documentation. A recent pay stub from your job will usually suffice. If you haven’t started working yet, the landlord may request a letter from your future employer stating that you will be a full-time employee as of a certain date, along with verification of your salary. You should have these materials on hand in case you need them so you can work quickly to get the apartment.

In some cases, landlords may require that you have a guarantor or co-signer, which is a person, usually a parent or relative, whose personal income is some multiple of the annual rent. This may come up if, after verifying your income and credit history, the landlord is not totally comfortable renting to you. By agreeing to be the guarantor, this person basically assumes responsibility for the rent if you, the tenant, can’t pay. This is not a common practice, but it is possible in larger cities where rents are high or in situations where the landlord is uncomfortable renting to recent college grads who have not established themselves at steady jobs. If a landlord denies your application to rent an apartment, you have the right to inquire as to why and to clear up any discrepancies.

Security Deposits

You may have heard the phrase “first month, last month, security deposit” and probably thought little of it. However, when you do the math, those innocuous words can mean a lot of money. As the phrase suggests, it is common for a landlord or management company to require that you pay the first month’s rent up front; they may also want you to pay the last month’s rent and a security deposit before moving in. Security deposits can be anywhere from a few hundred dollars to one month’s rent. (The standard deposit varies from city to city.) Therefore, you may need the equivalent of up to three months of rent saved up ahead of time. The security deposit is returned to you when you move out of the apartment, assuming you didn’t break your lease and the apartment is in the same condition as when you moved in. To ensure that you get your entire security deposit back, it is a good idea to inform the landlord of any problems you find in the apartment when you move in (chipped cabinets,
broken floorboards, etc.) so the landlord doesn’t charge you for those when you move out. Consider taking photos or a video of the apartment shortly after moving in, and again when you move out, to protect yourself against claims that you damaged the apartment beyond normal wear and tear.

Signing a Lease or Renter’s Agreement

Most landlords require you to sign some sort of lease or renter’s agreement before you move in. Keep in mind that this protects both you and the landlord. Most leases are for a 12-month period, although they can be longer. Less common is a “month to month” lease, which means you are not committed to the apartment for a full year and can leave at any time as long as you give 30 days notice. This type of lease is beneficial for someone who doesn’t intend to stay in the same apartment for a full year.

Read the lease carefully before you sign it. Make sure you understand all terms of the lease and that special agreements, such as being allowed to have a pet or holding the landlord responsible for certain utilities, are clearly spelled out. Get a signed copy of the lease for your records. It is unwise to live in an apartment without some sort of written rental agreement.

Protecting Yourself When Subletting

Although subletting is a shorter-term option, it may still require you to go through the same process of verification, agreements, and deposits as renting does. Before agreeing to sublet a place, make sure the current tenant has received the landlord’s permission to sublet. Depending on the terms of the lease, the landlord may require that you complete an application and go through a background check before she or he approves of you occupying the apartment. Before you move in, make sure you have a written contract outlining the terms of the sublet. Never move in without a written agreement signed by every party involved.

Maximum Capacity

In cities with a high cost of living, such as New York, it’s not uncommon for recent grads on a tight budget to cram as many roommates as possible into an already tight living space. While you may be fine with sharing a small living space with many friends, your landlord may not be so accepting. To avoid problems down the road, make sure the landlord knows how many people will be living in the apartment. In some cases, your lease may specifically state the maximum number of occupants in the unit. Overcrowding and housing
violations are major concerns for landlords, and you don’t want to get on your landlord’s bad side, or worse, get evicted for violating occupancy terms outlined in your lease. Don’t let the landlord find out later that you have six people living in a studio with a maximum capacity of two.

Additional Resources

Recent alumni are often great resources for city-specific information. Below are some tips and resources for apartment hunters, provided by alumni currently living in cities around the country.

Housing resources can also be found at ocs.yale.edu/content/housing

New York

*Village Voice* — [www.villagevoice.com](http://www.villagevoice.com) — Apartment ads

Metro Transit Authority — [www.mta.info](http://www.mta.info) — Public transportation schedules and maps. (Also use [www.tripplanner.mta.info](http://www.tripplanner.mta.info) for help with routes.)

Yale Alumni Association of New York — [www.yaany.org](http://www.yaany.org) — Apartment hunting resources


City Realty — [www.cityrealty.com](http://www.cityrealty.com) — Rental information

San Francisco

SF Gate — [www.sfgate.com](http://www.sfgate.com) — Apartment ads and public transportation

Rent-in-San Francisco — [www.rentinsanfrancisco.com](http://www.rentinsanfrancisco.com) — Apartment ads

Chicago

Chicago Reader — [www.chireader.com](http://www.chireader.com) — Search for apartments by zip code, type of housing and price range

Chicago Transit — [www.transitchicago.com](http://www.transitchicago.com) — Public transportation

Boston

*Boston Apartments* — [www.bostonapartments.com](http://www.bostonapartments.com) — Rental magazine
Los Angeles

Los Angeles Times — www.latimes.com—One alumnus recommends checking the ads online: “By the time it’s in print, the apartments are gone.”

Westside Rentals — www.westsiderentals.com — Paid rental listing service for Los Angeles and Orange County

South Bay Rentals — www.southbayrentals.com — Apartment listings for the Los Angeles area

Washington, DC


Metro Homepage — www.wmata.com — Transportation information

Roll Call — www.rollcall.com — Capitol Hill newspaper

HillZoo — www.hillzoo.com — Online magazine geared toward congressional staffers. Features classified ads


GW Hatchet — www.gwhatchet.com — GW’s newspaper that emphasizes grad housing options

Southern Management Corporation — www.apt-locators.com — Search for apartments in DC and surrounding area

Philadelphia

4 Walls in Philly — www.4wallsinphilly.com — Apartment rental guide

SEPTA (Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority) — www.septa.org — Public transportation guide

Seattle

Seattle Weekly — www.seattleweekly.com — Comes out on Wednesdays
If you’re planning to move abroad, it can be especially difficult to find housing in advance. To ease your move, try to connect with local alums, Yale Clubs, or expat groups, or check with your employer for resources.

Alumni living in Asia recommend walking around neighborhoods looking for realtors and agencies or using www.thatsshanghai.com (for Shanghai, Beijing, or Guangzhou). Another web resource is www.asiaexpat.com, which covers classifieds, nightlife, dining, etc., in Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Hong Kong, Singapore, and more.

In London, alumni recommend using www.loot.com or checking classified ads in the Evening Standard at standard.co.uk.

General

Apartment Finder – www.apartmentfinder.com – Search for apartments by zip code

Craigslist – www.craigslist.org – Apartments, furniture, roommates, and more; covers cities around the world

Oodle – www.oodle.com – Join a regional network to see local listings; postings often include furniture, miscellaneous items, and apartments for rent

Additional Tips

Here are some additional tips for success from alumni.

Moving to a new city will be kinda like freshman year, where you have to find a niche in the world all over again. It can get hard to find a community and friends at first, so remember to put yourself out there and socialize, using websites like Meetup etc.

-Alumna

Med students make the best roommates because they’re not there half the time and their life is always more stressful than yours.

—Alumnus

Graduate schools must deal with an influx of hundreds of students every year, so they have experience in helping people in your income and age brackets find housing. Why reinvent the wheel? Schools can provide listings or show you where professional listings are kept.

—Alumnus

I ran into an interesting situation where an agency offered me the apartment I wound up taking for $150 more than the landlady charges directly. Be wary of paying rent to a middle man!

—Alumna

Try and avoid moving into a place on September 1. That’s the day when all the students are moving into their apartments so the streets are crowded with moving vans. If you do have to move in on September 1, reserve a U-Haul early!

—Alumna