



June 20, 2011
UVM: 124, 273



Rental Redesigns and Renovations

The 411 on what you can and can't change when you rent.

Looking to fix up your pad? Before you hire a contractor or roll up your sleeves for a little DIY paint job, keep in mind that home improvement projects may not be kosher with your landlord. Follow these five rules before making changes to your rental pad.

- 1. Review your rental agreement:** Your lease should spell out what types of changes are -- and aren't -- allowed. Usually things like painting, removing kitchen cabinets and altering flooring are covered in your agreement. If you break these rules, you could face fines, forfeit your security deposit or have to pay to repaint the walls or re-carpet the property after you move out. Asking your landlord ahead of time is far better in the long run than just altering the place and hoping he won't mind.
- 2. Talk to your landlord:** It's always best to talk to your landlord before making any major changes. Painting the walls or installing new light fixtures may not be explicitly prohibited in the lease, but talking to your landlord first can save you from having to deal with a major headache later on. Even if he's okay with the project, you may be required to obtain a permit or to limit construction to certain times. Plus, a little respect can go a long way. Think about it: If your friend borrowed your car, wouldn't you want her to ask you before she had rims put on the wheels? Treat your landlord with the same regard, and next time you have a leaky toilet, you won't have to wait a week before it's fixed. Even if your lease prohibits you from making the alterations you're thinking about, there are ways to work with your landlord to get the upgrades you want, especially if you've already established a good relationship. Often, rental agreements are written with the worst-case scenario in mind. Your landlord is simply trying to protect his investment from alterations that could make the apartment more difficult to rent after you leave. If you can convince him your proposed changes will make the place more attractive to potential renters (or at least not less attractive), he may give you his blessing.
- 3. Do your research:** Before you lay down any cash or spend your weekend priming, figure out what your landlord is responsible for in terms of upgrades, renovations and cleaning. Some states require landlords to make certain improvements for renters -- like repainting the property before a new tenant moves in -- under certain circumstances, such as the signing of a new lease. So check the laws in your state before you shell out for something you could've done for free. Also, ask for your building's maintenance schedule (it may be part of your lease) to find out if the improvements you want are generally made on a set schedule. For example, if the landlord paints walls and replaces carpets every two years, you may be due the improvements in six months and not need to waste your time and money doing it now. If such a schedule doesn't exist in your current lease, you can try requesting the alterations as a condition of your lease renewal.
- 4. Offer to take care of the improvements yourself:** If you're willing to make the alterations on your own or to pay someone else to make them, your landlord may be more willing to let you -- even if they're not technically permitted according to your lease. Handling renovations yourself gives you more leeway to choose the details you want, like paint color, carpet type or cabinet style. But before you talk to your landlord about any alterations you'd like to make, find out how

much money and effort is involved. Seemingly simple tasks like painting can be more expensive and time-consuming than you might think. So use that info as a bargaining chip to negotiate a discount on your rent.

5. Get your landlord's consent in writing: If you're making any changes not mentioned in your lease -- and especially if you're doing anything prohibited in your lease -- have your landlord sign a written document giving you permission to make the modifications. If you know what changes you want to make before you move in, have those modifications written into the lease. Written documentation is the best way to protect yourself and your wallet from any liabilities that come with home improvement projects.

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