



Rent Smart

Module E

Communications

Rent Smart 2017 focuses on the knowledge and skills essential for a successful renting experience. It challenges participants to know and understand their rights and responsibilities as a tenant as well as know and understand the rights and responsibilities of their landlord. Emphasis is on forming a strong partnership between the tenant and landlord. **Rent Smart** was originally based on information collected through focus groups held with property managers and tenant advocates. It was piloted under its original name, **Good Neighbor-Good Tenant**, for several years, then taught as **Rent Smart** in numerous Wisconsin counties for the past 15 years.

Rent Smart 2017 participant goals include:

- Learn new skills to build positive relationships with landlords and neighbors.
- Gain confidence in their ability to find and maintain affordable housing.
- Understand the application and screening processes used by landlords.
- Learn the responsibilities and rights of tenants and landlords.

The 2017 revised curriculum continues to emphasize an active learning approach designed to foster participant motivation and course effectiveness. Videos, case studies and internet links have been incorporated in the updated curriculum to provide additional interactive learning options. The 2017 revised curriculum consists of six modules, designed to be taught separately or in combination.

Rent Smart 2017 Modules:

- How Much Will It Cost? And Can I Afford It?
- Checking Out the Rental Property and the Landlord
- Application Process
- Who's Responsible for Maintenance, Repairs and Care?
- **Communications**
- Rental Agreements—Moving In, Moving On

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References to websites and resources used in this publication are not an endorsement of one product over other similar products.

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Overview

Communication can be at the core of many problems with landlords as well as with neighbors and roommates. The emphasis of this module is on developing effective communication skills to minimize such problems.

Typical studies suggest that seventy-five percent of our waking time is spent communicating with others through speech, writing, or gestures such as smiles or handshakes. In spite of all of this practice, we often have problems communicating with each other. Poor communication is the cause of many arguments, hurt feelings, and misunderstandings.

Some problems arise from different communication styles based on personality, gender, or cultural differences. For example, in some cultures it may be considered poor manners to look someone in the eyes when you talk with him or her. In another culture, not looking a person in the eye may be seen as a sign of dishonesty. Some people depend a great deal on facial expressions and gestures to communicate, while others may not use this type of communication.

Both tenant advocates and landlords agree that many problems between tenants and landlords result from poor communication. The purpose of this module is to provide participants with techniques for improving their communication skills with landlords, roommates, and neighbors. This includes providing tools which participants can use if conflicts arise so that such problems can be settled with minimum anger and frustration.



Objectives

Participants will:

1. Understand the difference between business and personal relationships.
2. Develop active listening skills.
3. Practice formulating clear I messages.

Activities

Activity 1: Business Relationship

Activity 2: Listening

Activity 3: Formulating and Using “I Statements”

Activity 4: When Repairs Are Needed

Activity 5: Living with a Roommate

Teaching Outline

Provide the *Overall Handout* before beginning the module.

Suggested Introduction

Poor communications can be the cause of misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and arguments. In this module we will explore ways to make certain that your communications with your landlord, roommates, and neighbors have the desired effect. We will also look at some ways to settle conflicts or misunderstandings when they arise. Strong emotions can get in the way of listening for meaning. Sometimes it may be appropriate to communicate via phone, email or text, but most of the time face-to-face communication will be the most effective when crucial conversations need to happen.

OPTIONAL: Show “Who’s on First?” videos to demonstrate what happens when communication isn’t clear.

- “Who’s on First?": Abbot and Costello:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kTcRRaXV-fg>
- “Who’s on First?": The Sequel (Jimmy Fallon):
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K0JqZpvVzKk>

Activity 1: Business Relationship

(Objective 1: Understand the difference between business and personal relationships.)

- No Handouts

Suggested Introduction: Think about people with whom you have a business relationship (phone company, school, bank, etc.). How do you talk with them? (Acknowledge answers) You probably talk more directly, courteously, and with specifics. You do this is by: 1) planning ahead, 2) determining the topic, 3) if necessary—making notes, 4) having direct conversation in a neutral location, and 5) being specific. Business relationships focus on the facts, not the strong emotions that are present in personal relationships.

Ask participants to briefly describe an issue that they have recently experienced with a landlord, neighbor or roommate. List these issues on a flipchart or board. When five or six issues have been listed, summarize them and point out how resolving each of the issues should involve communicating with facts and a business approach.



Activity 2: Listening

(Objective 2: Develop active listening skills.)

- Handout 1: *Listening Activity*

OPTIONAL:

- There are several options for communication exercises.

Suggestions might be to "Draw what you hear" or "Make a Peanut Butter and Jelly Sandwich" (based on the directions that a partner writes down), or "Paper Folding" with simple directions. The options are endless, so look for activities that reflect what your audience would appreciate! More can be found at sites like: <http://blog.trainerswarehouse.com/communication-and-listening-exercises/>.

Suggested Introduction: In high stress situations, we are often so busy being angry or worried that we don't listen to what is being said to us. In many cases we assume we know what the person is going to say and are busy thinking about our response, rather than what is actually being said. Being a good listener is a key component to being a good communicator and requires you to have an active role.

Training our brains to respond, not react, is essential when it comes to communication.

Provide Handout 1: *Listening Activity* and tell participants to listen and follow the instructions. (Don't reveal answers until the end.)

1. Put a dot on the i
2. BB = Baby Bull, MB = Mama Bull, PB = Papa Bull. Baby bull gets hurt; who does he go to for help?
3. Write the word candy in the spaces
4. Your mother calls and asks you to bring home meat, cereal, cheese, milk, bread, apples, carrots, toilet paper, flour, and orange juice. You arrive home with meat, bread, milk, and flour. What did you forget?
5. You are the driver of a school bus. At the first stop, 13 kids get on, at the second stop 5 get on and 2 get off, at the third stop 2 get on and 1 gets off, at the fourth stop 1 kid gets on, and at the fifth stop 3 get on and 2 get off. How old is the bus driver?

When everyone is finished, briefly discuss the responses listed on the activity sheet. This activity can help participants to experience how hard it can be to really listen.

1. I didn't say exactly how to "put a dot on the i". While some people may have interpreted this to mean, dotting the "i," others may take it literally and place the dot right "on" the "i" (demonstrate on board). There are opportunities for misunderstanding even in very basic communication.

2. A bull is an intact male. So the answer is probably "Papa Bull," since there's no such thing as a Mama Bull.
3. Some people might take this literally and put the letters in the spaces, like this: C_A_N_D_Y (not on the lines). (Write on board.) We tend to filter everything we hear through our own personal biases. Is one more correct than the other?
4. Missing: cereal, cheese, apples, carrots, toilet paper, orange juice. Did anybody get this? Sometimes when we give too much information at once, critical pieces of information get lost.
5. Who is the bus driver? Since "you're the bus driver," the answer is your own age. What got in the way of you hearing this? When we speak off-topic (who got on and off wasn't important), critical pieces of information get lost.

Communicating with "I messages" helps train our brain to make

smarter choices which helps to deflate barriers to communication.

Ask participants for examples of how this miscommunication could happen with landlords, roommates or neighbors. Ask participants what would have helped with the communication process in the above statements. Offer Handout 4: *Active Listening and Positive Messages* as a tip sheet to help with communicating more effectively.

Activity 3: Formulating and Using "I Statements"

(Objective 3: Practice formulating clear I messages.)

- Handout 2: "I Messages"
- Handout 3: *Feelings Chart*
- Handout 4: *Active Listening & Positive Messages*
- Handout 5: "I Messages" Scenarios

Communicating with "I messages" helps train our brain to make smarter choices which helps to deflate barriers to communication. Positive messages go a long way toward solving communication problems. For both options of activity 3 it is important to note that this is the formula to help train our brains to *respond*, not *react*. Anger and stress are natural responses to fear and pain, and make it harder to communicate.

Suggested Introduction: Just as our emotions can get in the way of listening, they can also get in the way of clearly expressing ourselves. This activity provides some ideas how participants can more successfully communicate their needs and concerns when it is important to be heard. This technique is sometimes referred to as the "I Message" technique because it stresses speaking for yourself—saying what you feel and what you need.

Have you ever tried to confront someone and planned to be very clear with your communication? Maybe you started the conversation like "You said you would fix the lock on the door." When we have strong feelings in

conflict, especially anger, we often use “You” statements. These are statements that start with “you” and they tend to accuse, blame, or belittle someone. When this happens, typically the conversation turns into a heated argument and people get defensive. “You” messages generally irritate people and can derail the conversation very quickly. People focus on their emotions and feelings and not at all on what you intended to say. As Maya Angelou once said, “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

It IS possible to express strong feelings without increasing the conflict by using “I messages.” They help keep the conversation moving in the right direction. We can express our feelings (frustration, disappointment, anger, etc.) and needs without sounding accusatory.

“I messages” usually begin with the words “I feel” so you don’t come across as being critical of the other person. They tell the other person your own feelings, what happened for you to feel this way and what can be done to help change the situation. “I messages” help you take responsibility for your own ideas and feelings instead of blaming the other person. We always have a choice in how we *respond* or *react*. And it does take a LOT of practice to use “I messages.” Handout 4: *Active Listening Tips and Positive Messages* suggests other things to keep in mind when formulating “I messages.”

Failing to talk things over with landlords, roommates and neighbors can result in misunderstanding, hurt feelings, and arguments. Learning to communicate clearly and honestly can keep things from getting out of control. Follow this template as you learn how to communicate in a positive way, asking for your needs to **be met**.

Provide handout 2, 3, and 4. Write on board:

When _____

I Feel _____

Because _____

Would you please _____

Provide Handout 5: “I Messages” *Scenarios*. Practice writing “I Messages” in a large group, small group, or individually. **Fill in** the blanks on Handout 2: creating the “I Messages.” Remind participants to not use any “hidden you” messages! Focus on not using “you” at all while learning how to communicate with “I messages.” Instead, focus on the importance of identifying your feelings (Handout 3) and the facts.



Potential responses to these scenarios:

Scenario 1: When I have water dripping through my bathroom ceiling I feel annoyed because it's creating a mess and I'm worried about falling on the slippery floor! I'm also concerned for the safety of my family. Would you please fix it today? The leak needs to be stopped.

Scenario 2: When I'm trying to sleep and there is so much noise in the hallway, I feel tired and annoyed because I work the night shift and am trying to sleep during the day. Could you please have your children play somewhere else or stop screaming?

Scenario 3: When I can't pay my bill on time, I feel ashamed. Because my hours have been cut at work I've not been able to keep up with my bills. Would you please allow me to pay \$50 a month until I can figure out a way to make some more money? What type of payment plan can I get on?

Scenario 4: When I moved in, I was promised new screens for my windows, especially since it's a housing code violation. I feel annoyed because I've not been able to open my windows all summer long while I've waited for them to be installed. Would you please replace them or update me on the status of them by Friday?

Scenario 5: When we moved in together, we were friends. I feel concerned and frustrated because the tension is so high between us. Would you please help me figure out what we can do to get through the next five months of our lease without hurting each other?

Activity 4: When Repairs Are Needed

(Objective 1: Understand the difference between business and personal relationships. Objective 2: Develop active listening skills, and Objective 3: Practice formulating clear I messages.)

- Handout 5: "I Messages" Scenarios
- Handout 6: *When Repairs Are Needed* Fact Sheet
- Handout 7: *Sample Letter Requesting a Repair* This sample letter requests that a landlord make a repair and can be helpful when thinking how to document your request in this "business relationship."

Use Scenarios 1 and 4 from Activity 3 on Handout 5: "I Messages" Scenarios to have participants think about how to handle the situation if the "I Message" doesn't work. Share Handout 6: *When Repairs Are Needed* and Handout 7: *Sample Letter Requesting a Repair* and discuss with participants.



Activity 5: Living with a Roommate

(Objective 1: Understand the difference between business and personal relationships.)

- Handout 8: *Life Skills*
- Handout 9: *Roommate Agreement*

OPTIONAL:

- Roommate Agreement from *Big Bang Theory*:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RVtiX1JCSq8>

If your participants plan to live with a roommate discuss Handout 8: *Life Skills* and provide Handout 9: *Roommate Agreement*.

**Learning Assessment**

Have participants learned the key concepts of this Rent Smart module? The following questions or activities are recommended to assess participant understanding of the information covered in this module:

- Identify the difference between an “I statement” and a “You statement”
- Share the formula for creating an “I statement”
- Identify ways to actively listen



Communications

Module Notes:

The difference between business and personal relationships.

Active listening skills.

"I messages".

Living with roommates.

Questions to Consider:

- What is the difference between an I statement and a You statement?
- What are some ways to actively listen?
- What information do you need to gather before you call the landlord about a problem?

Remember:

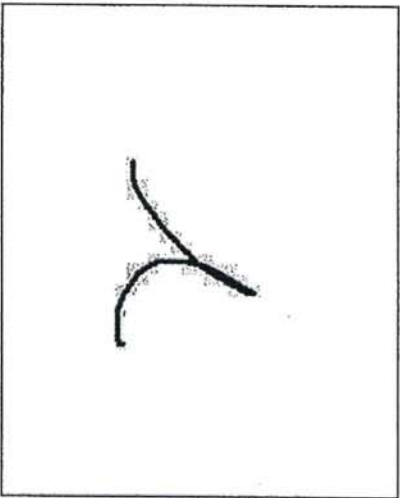
The Practicing "I messages"

- **When** (state the facts—what needs repaired or changed? Avoid using the word YOU here)
- **I feel** (must state a feeling here—angry, disappointed, frustrated, confused, happy, sad...)
- **Because** (how is it affecting you/your family/ what have you already done to fix it?)
- **Would you please** (what do you want/hope will happen?) or **Can we please** (I'd like it if...)

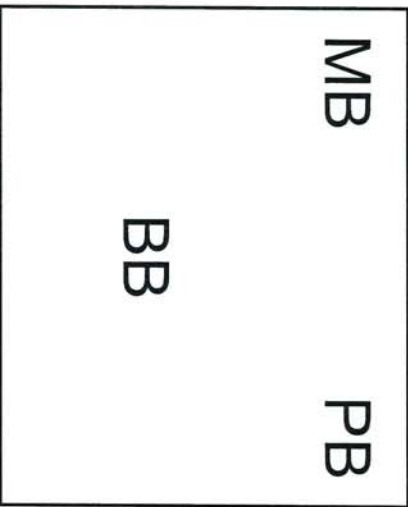


Listening Activity

1



2



3

4

5

Reproduced from *Warmups for Meeting Leaders*, Sue Bianchi, Jan Butler, and David Richey. San Diego, California: University Associates, 1990.



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“I Messages”

When (Just state the facts: What needs repaired or changed? Avoid using the word **YOU** here.)

I feel (One must state a feeling here: Angry, disappointed, frustrated, confused, happy, sad...)

Because (State the consequences of the behavior and/or facts: How is it affecting you/your family?
What have you already done to fix it?)

Would you please: (What do you want to happen? What do you wish or hope will happen? Can we please... I'd like it if...)



Feelings Chart

List of Feelings						
Happy	Sad	Angry	Other feelings			
Calm	Ashamed	Annoyed	Afraid			
Cheerful	Awful	Bugged	Anxious			
Confident	Disappointed	Destructive	Ashamed			
Content	Discouraged	Disgusted	Bored			
Delighted	Gloomy	Frustrated	Confused			
Excited	Hurt	Fuming	Curious			
Glad	Lonely	Furious	Embarrassed			
Loved	Miserable	Grumpy	Jealous			
Proud	Sorry	Irritated	Moody			
Relaxed	Unhappy	Mad	Responsible			
Satisfied	Unloved	Mean	Scared			
Silly	Withdrawn	Violent	Shy			
Terrific			Uncomfortable			
Thankful			Worried			

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Active Listening

- Face the person who is speaking.
- Focus your attention on what she/he is saying.
- Let the person finish speaking before asking questions or responding.
- When the person finishes, restate in your own words what you heard him or her say.
- Ask the person if she or he thinks you heard what he or she said correctly.
- Respond to what the person said.

Positive Messages

- Own the message. Use the word "I," not "you," "they," or "we."
- Discuss one issue at a time. Don't use the "laundry list" approach.
- Describe the facts:
 1. What needs to be repaired or changed?
 2. What you have already done to fix it?
 3. How it is affecting you and your family/household?
 4. What you want/hope will happen?
- Don't call the other person names or tell him what he/she has done. This will put the other person on the defense and meet your negative expectation.
- Start a conversation in a conflict situation only when you are, and can remain, calm.



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“I Messages” Scenarios

Scenario 1

When you got up this morning, you found water dripping into your bathroom from the rental unit above. In addition to the mess and the fact that the water has made the floor slippery, it is causing damage to the ceiling tiles.

You haven't spoken with the landlord for several months, but you have heard other tenants complain that he doesn't fix things. You call him and say...

Scenario 2

Chris is a single parent of three children, ages 5, 8, and 10. Chris has just returned from work and picking up the children from school. Chris works from 6:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. It is a rainy day. The three children are playing games in the hallway, chasing each other, and screaming.

To you, the next-door neighbor, the children seem to be getting louder and louder. You work from 11:00 p.m. to 7:00 a.m. and you just want to sleep. You knock on Chris's door and say...

Scenario 3

You are responsible for paying the electric company for heat and electricity. When you moved in three months ago, you were working 40 to 50 hours per week. You were just keeping up with the rent and other bills. The electric bill is usually \$60-\$70 each month.

Now you've lost work and work only 30 to 35 hours each week. You did not pay the electric bill last month. This month's bill just came. You owe \$160 and do not have the money to pay it. You call the electric company and say...

Scenario 4

When you moved in two months ago, you noted on the check-in form that two windows did not have screens on them. This is in violation of local housing code. When you submitted the check-in form to the landlord, you mentioned the need for these screens. She said, "I'll have to order them." Nothing has happened since then. The weather is warming up and you'd like to open your windows. You do/say this to address the issue...

Scenario 5

When you moved in with your friend, you both signed the lease. For the first seven months things went reasonably well. Now, the two of you rarely speak to each other and have started locking your food in separate rooms. Your roommate has recently threatened to move out. You do/say this to address the issue...



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When Repairs Are Needed Fact Sheet

If something goes wrong in your rental unit, first figure out if it is something you should fix yourself. Unplugging a toilet or sink, changing light bulbs, or replacing batteries in a smoke detector are things most landlords require residents to handle themselves. If you aren't sure, check your rental agreement or call the landlord.

If it is clearly something that the landlord should fix:

Call the landlord or his/her agent; the name and phone number should be on your rental agreement. Before you call the landlord, gather the information:

- What happened?
- When did you notice it?
- What have you already done about it?
- What do you want done?

Give the landlord the following information:

- What needs repair—be as specific as possible.
- What type of a problem it is causing for you.
- Your name and address.
- Times when it would be convenient for the repairs to be made.

Ask the person who answers your call for his or her name. Ask when you can expect the repair to be made. Make notes on your conversation and keep them until the repair is completed.

If the repair is not made when promised...

Wait two days, and then write a letter to the landlord, repeating the information in your phone message and stating what you were told in the phone conversation, along with the name of the person with whom you talked. Be polite but firm in your letter and other contacts. Keep a copy of the letter. Handout 5 is a sample letter you may work from.

If the landlord has not made the repair after several requests...

Contact one of the resources listed in Renter Resources for advice on what to do next. Depending on the situation, you may be advised to report the problem to the local building inspector, take specific actions with the landlord, find a mediator, or file a complaint with a consumer protection agency.



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Sample Letter Requesting a Repair

January 7, 2016 (today's date)

Jane Smith
Sunrise Rental Units
1111 Eastview Blvd.
Somewhere, WI 55555

(This should be the full name and address listed in your rental agreement of the person to whom you are supposed to report the need for repairs.)

Dear Miss Smith:

We first contacted your secretary, Jim Jones, on January 4, 2016, about the lack of hot water in our rental unit. We initially noticed the problem that morning when we were showering. Mr. Jones said he would have someone look into it on that day, January 4.

We called again on January 5, and Mr. Jones said that the maintenance person had been busy, but he was sure that he would be there that day.

It is now several days later and we still do not have any hot water. I am not able to clean the rental unit effectively without hot water and my kids are complaining about having to take showers with cold water. (Be specific about the repair, when you first noticed the problem, what you have done to fix it, and prior contacts requesting repairs.)

Please call me with a firm date when you expect to have the repair made. If I do not hear from you by January 12, I will contact the building inspections department. **(Do not make threats unless you know that you can legally carry them out and have specific actions in mind. For example, do not threaten to withhold rent unless you have checked with an attorney or an agency that counsels renters.)**

Sincerely,

Jill Nelson
Rental Unit 201, Sunrise Circle
Somewhere, WI 55555
Tel. 234-5678



Life Skills: Living with Roommates

SELECTING A ROOMMATE

- Friends do not always make good roommates.
- If you are going to share a room, you need to consider a person's sleeping habits and cleaning habits.
- Are your work schedules compatible? Will one of you be sleeping while the other is up and about making noise in the apartment?
- Strongly consider cleaning habits. Both people may consider themselves messy. However, there is a difference between doing dishes every other day and doing dishes every other month.
- Does the person smoke, drink, or use drugs? If so, is it more or less than you can tolerate?
- Does the person have any hobbies? There is big difference between stamp collecting and playing the drums, especially if the person likes to do a hobby at 3 a.m.
- Does the person have pets?
- Does the person have a "significant other" that may become a third roommate?
- Does the person have friends that will spend a lot of time at your place?
- Has the person had financial problems?
- Do you have similar religious and political beliefs? If not, are both of you willing to keep your beliefs to yourself or enjoy a good friendly debate?
- Finally, is the person nice and considerate? When differences arise, a courteous person is more likely to be willing to change.

BEING A ROOMMATE

- Look at your own behavior. Are you infringing on the rights of others?
- Be honest. Being straightforward and direct can help resolve and prevent problems.
- Do not let things build up. Address problems as they happen. Use assertiveness training to help in making appropriate requests for behavior change from a roommate.
- If you have requested the roommate to change his/her behavior, give him/her a chance to change. Thank them for making attempts to change. This will be more effective than continually harping on them.
- Be flexible about your roommate's lifestyle. It may not be the same as yours, but as long as he is not hurting himself or others do not try to impose your will on the person. If it is something that is bothersome, talk about it and get the other person's point of view. If a person's lifestyle is still causing too much strife, it is probably time to go separate ways.
- Don't get taken advantage of. Be assertive when you think your roommate is making demands that are unreasonable. If you don't, you will build up resentment and the relationship will turn sour.
- Agree to disagree. Even the best relationships will hit bad times. When there are points of disagreement in the roommate relationship, sometimes you have to agree to disagree. If it is an item that is too personal or bothersome, you may need to look for a different place.

Source: Life Skills for vocational Success Chapter 1 Handouts 13, 14, 15—<http://www.workshopsinc.com/manual/>



Roommate Agreement

This agreement is made by and among the roommates named herein who have signed a lease for a shared dwelling unit that makes the roommates jointly and severally liable for all terms of the contract.

Execution of this roommate agreement does not alter the joint and several liability of the tenants under the rental contract with the landlord. However, it may be used if a dispute among the roommates arises.

Address of Rental Unit _____

Term of Lease _____ to _____

Name	Rent per Month	Security Deposit	Bedroom to be Occupied
	\$	\$	
	\$	\$	
	\$	\$	
	\$	\$	
	\$	\$	
	\$	\$	
	\$	\$	

If roommates will switch bedrooms or pay different amounts of rent at any point, those changes should be noted above. Any roommate who does not pay any or all of the amount of rent listed above shall be liable to the landlord or to any roommates who pay any amount due for the defaulting roommate.

Security Deposit

A security deposit has been paid by each roommate in the amount listed above. The roommates will divide the refund of the security deposit according to the amount each tenant originally paid as listed in this agreement. When a specific roommate is clearly responsible for fees and damages to the premises- including late fees, repairs and cleaning costs-that roommate will pay full fees and damages. The roommates agree to share equally in the cost of all other fees and damages charged.

Utility Bills

The utility bill will be in _____'s name.

The bill will be divided (strike one) evenly/as follows (for example, because one roommate has an air conditioner or a personal refrigerator): _____

Utility late charges will be paid by _____

Phone Bills

The phone bill will be in _____'s name.

The local phone bill will be divided (strike one) evenly/as follows: _____

The long distance bill will be divided (strike one) evenly/according to who made the calls.

Phone late charges will be paid by _____



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Cable

The apartment (*strike one*) will/will not have cable.

If there will be cable, the bill will be in _____'s name.

If there will be cable, the bill will be divided (*strike one*) evenly/as follows:

Cable late charges will be paid by _____

High Speed Internet Access

The apartment (*strike one*) will/will not have high speed internet.

If there will be high speed internet, the bill will be in _____'s name.

If there will be high speed internet, the bill will be divided (*strike one*) evenly/as follows:

Internet late charges will be paid by _____

Subletting

Subletting is (*strike two*) not allowed/allowed/allowed only with permission of all roommates.

(*Sublet agreements are available at the Tenant Resource Center.*)

Guests. (*Strike any part not applicable.*)

Each roommate is responsible for the behavior of his or her guests. Guests shall not unreasonably disturb other roommates. Guests must stay in the bedroom of the roommate who invited them, unless all other roommates agree that the guest may stay in a shared area. No guest may stay for more than seven consecutive days without the permission of all other roommates. New roommates may move in only with the written permission of all other roommates and the landlord.

Quiet Hours

All roommates agree to observe quiet hours for sleep, study and other purposes on the days and times listed here.

(*If none, write "None."*) _____

Pets

The following pets are permitted: _____

The person responsible for the pets will be _____

Smoking

Smoking in the apartment will be (*strike one*) allowed/not allowed.

Household Duties. Household duties (take out trash, clean bathroom, etc.) will be divided as follows:

Other Terms _____

Signatures	Date	Signatures	Date
_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____