

THE ROOMMATE WORKSHOP

Military & Post-Traditional Student Services

BRIGHT FUTURES: DECIDING TO GET A ROOMMATE

Financial benefits of roommates: The big financial benefit of getting a roommate(s) is that you get to split the cost of your rent and utilities. Why pay \$600/month for a 1 bedroom apartment when you could pay \$300/month for a 3 bedroom apartment? Factor in what you save on two-thirds of the total utility costs, and that could be a lot of money in savings each month!

Social benefits of roommates: When you live with roommates, it's much less likely you'll be lonely—something we should all take measures to guard against throughout our lives. Whether you're best friends with your roommates or just friendly acquaintances, you'll at least have someone to chat with from time to time. And who knows? Maybe you'll end up being lifelong friends (like me and my old college roommates!).

Having roommates and sharing responsibilities: Having roommates can cut down on your household chores and weekly responsibilities. Roommates often split duties ("I'll take out the trash when it gets full if you bring in the mail; if you clean the kitchen this week, I'll clean the bathroom—and next week, we'll switch!"). Having roommates means you don't have to do everything yourself (see the "Smart Living" section below for more information on making these arrangements go smoothly).

FINDING YOUR PERFECT MATCH: ROOMMATE SEARCHING AT NIU

Defining your roommate preferences: The first step in your roommate search is to decide who you want to live with. Are they already friends of yours? If not, who is your preferred living partner? Are they undergraduate students? Graduate? Law? What about sex? Men or women? Do you prefer to live with people who live a generally quieter lifestyle, or who are more outgoing and social? Would you prefer someone in your own major, or does it not really matter? Ask yourself all of these questions and more to be sure you and your future roommate(s) are a match!

Conducting your search: The single best way to look for roommates at NIU is to use The Roommate List for post-traditional students located in the office of Military & Post-Traditional Student Services. The Roommate List has helped countless students successfully find great roommates at NIU. In order to start receiving the weekly roommate listing, please visit our office in the basement level of the Holmes Student Center (down the stairs from the bookstore and TCF Bank), or feel free to fill out and submit the online roommate form here: <http://www.niu.edu/mptss/forms/roommate-form.shtml>

Staying flexible: Part of finding “the perfect roommate” is to realize ahead of time that there is no truly perfect roommate. Keep your expectations realistic, and understand that you are entering into a living arrangement with another person with their own background, preferences, personality, lifestyle, and idiosyncrasies. The ability to remain somewhat flexible with your roommates is an important part of living together.

SIGNING A LEASE: ENTERING INTO A LEGAL CONTRACT WITH YOUR RENTAL COMPANY

Lease review: Reading your lease and getting help with your lease: A lease is a legal contract between you and the property rental company. Therefore, you must be sure to read and understand ALL of the terms and conditions of the leasing contract. If there is anything in the lease you are unsure of, ask your property rental company what it means. NIU students should consider bringing a copy of their lease to Students’ Legal Assistance for a free lease review before you sign it. Chances are the terms and conditions will all be pretty standard—but it’s never a bad idea to have a legal professional make sure.

Knowing your obligations and those of your leasing company: The legal contract formed between you and your property company upon signing the leasing agreement puts into effect legal obligations on your part and on the part of your leasing company. For example, rent must be paid on time, maintenance must be made available, and so forth depending on the specific terms of your lease. Read these very carefully, and know who owes what duties to whom.

SMART LIVING: CREATING A ROOMMATE AGREEMENT

Roommate agreements are non-formal written agreements between roommates which clearly define and allocate responsibilities, duties, and understandings pertaining to the rental property, payment of rent and utilities, and rules and preferences for living together. Creating a written roommate agreement can be a useful tool for you and your roommate(s). Please feel free to contact Military & Post-Traditional Student Services if you would like help outlining a written or verbal roommate agreement.

Defining roommate obligations and responsibilities: It’s important to define who is responsible for what tasks and responsibilities within the household, and when. For example, when you first move in together, identify exactly what way you will share responsibility for: cleaning common living areas, paying rent and utilities, removing rubbish, doing dishes, bringing in the mail, mowing the lawn*, shoveling snow*, raking leaves*, etc.¹ The clearer you are at the very beginning of your living arrangement, the

¹*Grounds maintenance like mowing and shoveling snow is not normally the tenant’s responsibility, but will be taken care of by the rental company. If, however, you happen to rent a house as a “single family home,” then you may be required to take care of these tasks yourselves.

smoother things will go across the term of your lease, and the lower the chance of conflict arising.

ROOMMATE DISPUTES: HOW THEY ARISE, AND HOW TO PREVENT THEM

Almost all roommates encounter some form of dispute, no matter how little. Here are some common causes of roommate disputes for you to think about and avoid in your future living arrangements:

Shirking Responsibilities: When one roommate forgets to pay his bills, doesn't pick up after himself, invites too many friends over, or doesn't do his fair share of the chores, conflict can arise. If this happens, it's important for everyone to be reasonable with each other and just reiterate that everybody has to do their fair share.

Disrespecting Others: Keep your TV or music volume to a reasonable level, be sure not to use another roommate's stuff without asking, speak to each other with mutual respect, and respecting each other's personal space.

General cleanliness: Be sure to pick up after yourself, do your dishes, clean up after yourself in the bathroom, take your fair share of the garbage out, and minimize any odors coming from your part of the apartment.

TAKING CARE OF BUSINESS: PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR ROOMMATES

On the first day of your new life together (or even before), it may be a good idea to sit down for a few minutes and discuss who will handle the bills and how you will share spaces and responsibilities together. Unless you are able to pay all of your bills (including rent) online, then it is important for every roommate to have a checking account at a reputable bank and a checkbook (trust us, using cash can get messy!).

Coordinating rent payments: Rental companies often ask for only one monthly rent check per unit, which means that many roommates assign one person (across the lease, or on a rotating basis) to write the check each month. When that happens, the other roommates simply provide the paying roommate their portion of the total rent up front, before monthly payment comes due. If, for example, each roommate gets paid on the 1st of the month, and rent is due on the 1st of the month, ask your rental company if there is a "grace period" for this kind of situation—a few days leeway with the rent due date. If, however, the property rental company does not ask for one payment per unit, each roommate will likely pay their portion on their own. Also—keep in mind that unless your lease explicitly state's a one-check-per-unit requirement, then you are under no obligation to pay your rent that way, unless you want you. Finally, ask if your property rental company allows roommates to pay rent online, as that can potentially make this whole process much easier.

Splitting the utilities: Utilities payments work basically the same way as rent payments, except that there will almost certainly be a firm requirement that each unit pay their bill with only one check (or online payment). Typically, roommates will put each utility in one person's name (for example, one roommate might put the electric bill in his name, and another might put the cable and internet service in hers—or, every bill might be in just one person's name). No matter what, it is very important that each utility company receive full payment each month from *someone* in the household, and that someone should be identified and agreed upon amongst all roommates well in advance of your first monthly payment. A monthly payment for any given utility (electricity, internet, gas, etc.) need not necessarily be made by the person in whose name the utility was put (although roommates often find it makes a lot of sense to just do it that way); however, the person who opened, for example, the cable/internet account will be on the hook with the cable company for payment if another roommate fails to pay. So just do yourselves a favor and discuss very early on exactly who will take care of which bills, how payment will be made each month, and how/when you will reimburse each other for each bill paid.

MOVING ON: CLEANING UP, MOVING OUT, AND GETTING YOUR DEPOSIT BACK

One day, when it's finally time to move on, be sure to wrap up your living situation smartly, and get the most out of your experience.

Securing your next living situation: Finding your next place should be done well in advance of your lease ending. Have a place secured at least a few weeks before you need to move out—preferably earlier.

Notify your leasing company in advance: Some rental property companies will send you a letter in the mail or give you a phone call asking about your plans after the end of your lease—whether you want to sign a new lease for the next year, or if you are moving elsewhere. This will usually come weeks or even months before your term is up. In any case, be sure to give them as much notice as possible about your plans—weeks or months—so that they can find someone new to rent your space.

Cancelling your utilities: In the weeks before you move out, be certain to contact your utility companies. Tell the cable company when to cancel your service (or when to move it to your next address), and notify the electric company when they will need to put the apartment back in the landlord's name. Don't forget to do this, because you will keep getting charged.

Timing your move: Try to time a smooth transition from one place to another. If, for example, your current lease ends on July 31st, try to have your next lease start on July 31st so that you are able to move all of your stuff from one apartment directly to another, all in one day. If it isn't possible for your leases to overlap by that one day (for example, if one ends on July 31st and the other doesn't begin until August 1st), then you will need to get permission from one of the locations to do your move for a few hours outside of your lease.

Cleaning up and moving out: get that deposit back: It is very important that you clean up your apartment very thoroughly before moving out, and make any repairs to the property that you are responsible for. That means: dust and vacuum everywhere, clean the entire bathroom and kitchen, mop floors, clean carpets, clean the refrigerator, fill any holes in walls from hanging pictures, etc. The apartment should look exactly the way it did when you moved in. If everything is cleaned, repaired, and ready for the next person to move in, you will get your entire security deposit back, and that can be a huge help when your next rent payment and bills start coming due. If one roommate doesn't fully clean their share of the apartment, everyone will take a hit in the money that gets returned to them.