Moving into a new apartment can be both exhilarating and terrifying at the same time. Between lease signing, van rental or moving company services, utility transfers, address changes and managing many small decisions at the same time, it can quickly become daunting to manage all these aspects effectively – but somewhere along the line it will all come together smoothly… And then suddenly one morning there's no shower curtain or toilet paper holder and no idea where you put the box with your plates!

An effective new apartment checklist provides the solution. Not the kind that lists 60 obscure items you won't ever use, but one tailored specifically around how you set up your space — from essential first night items through longer-term purchases that can wait until after you know exactly what you require.

This guide offers a checklist organized by room and priority, along with practical advice on what items to purchase first, what items may be borrowed or thrifted and how to furnish your first apartment on a realistic budget while maintaining daily comfort.

Before You Move In: The Pre-Move Checklist

Items listed here must be addressed prior to moving day or on day one in a new apartment, since any delays can lead to serious problems that quickly compound.

Documentation and admin:

- Signed lease with copies stored digitally and physically
- Renter's insurance policy active from move-in day
- Utilities transferred or set up: electricity, gas, water, internet
- Address change filed with the postal service, bank, employer, and government agencies
- Keys, fob, and parking permit received and counted
- Move-in inspection form completed and documented with photographs

Move-in inspection forms are one of the most frequently neglected tasks on this list and often cause financial harm later. Be sure to walk through every room, photograph every scratch, scuff, stain and damage prior to unpacking any items and email them along with written summaries directly to your landlord on move-in day – this documentation will serve as protection when discussing security deposits at the end of your tenancy.

First night survival kit — pack this separately and keep it accessible:

- Toilet paper
- Hand soap
- Towels and washcloths
- One set of bed linens and pillowcase
- Phone charger
- Basic toiletries: toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant
- A change of clothes
- Basic snacks and water
- Medications

Everything else can wait. These items cannot.

Kitchen Checklist: What You Actually Need

Kitchen is often where first-apartment shoppers overbuy and then immediately regret it. A full set of pots, knife block, stand mixer and spice rack may seem appealing; however, much of this equipment will go unused as you find out your foodie niche.

Start with the essentials, then gradually build out as per how your kitchen is actually utilized over the first month.

Cooking essentials — buy these first:

- One large pot (for pasta, soups, boiling)
- One medium saucepan (for sauces, grains, reheating)
- One 10-inch skillet or frying pan (non-stick for eggs; stainless for everything else)
- One baking sheet
- Chef’s knife (one good one beats a full cheap block)
- Cutting board (one large, plastic or wood)
- Can opener
- Wooden spoon and silicone spatula
- Colander or strainer
- Mixing bowl (one large)

Eating and serving:

- Plates: 4 dinner plates, 4 side plates
- Bowls: 4 cereal or soup bowls
- Mugs: 4
- Glasses: 4 to 6
- Cutlery set for 4

Storage and food prep:

- 3 to 4 food storage containers with lids
- Dish drying rack or dish towels
- Dish soap and sponge
- Basic cleaning spray

What can wait: Stand mixer, full knife set, cast iron pan, specialty appliances, full spice rack. Add these when you know you will use them, not on day one.

Bedroom Checklist: Sleep Is Non-Negotiable

Poor sleep in a new apartment is an unpleasant way to begin life there, and prioritizing getting your bedroom functional as quickly as possible should always be given top consideration even if other rooms seem more important.

Bed and sleep:

- Bed frame or platform (if not bringing one)
- Mattress (rent one temporarily if budget is tight on move-in)
- Mattress protector — non-negotiable for longevity and hygiene
- Pillow or pillows
- Fitted sheet, flat sheet or duvet cover, duvet or comforter
- Extra blanket

Storage and organization:

- Dresser or chest of drawers (or use the closet with hangers and shelf dividers)
- Hangers: minimum 30 to 40
- Laundry basket or hamper
- Full-length mirror (useful and inexpensive)

Lighting and comfort:

- Bedside lamp or clip light (overhead lighting alone is rarely comfortable for a bedroom)
- Blackout curtains if the room gets morning light or street light at night
- Alarm clock or use your phone

Bathroom Checklist: The Overlooked Room

Bathrooms in new apartments often arrive lacking some items left behind by previous tenants, or with at least some missing functions that were taken with them from previous units.

Check these exist before move-in:

- Shower curtain rod (frequently missing in budget apartments)
- Toilet paper holder
- Towel bar or hooks

Buy before first use:

- Shower curtain and liner
- Shower curtain rings
- Bath mat (non-slip)
- Toilet brush and holder
- Trash bin
- Soap dish or dispenser
- Toilet paper (enough for the first week)

Medicine cabinet basics:

- Pain reliever (ibuprofen or acetaminophen)
- Bandages and antiseptic
- Cold and allergy medication
- Thermometer
- Any prescription medications

Living Room Checklist: Function Before

Aesthetics

Living room mistakes are all too familiar among first-apartment occupants, such as purchasing an overly-large sofa that does not suit their space, a coffee table that blocks all movement or ordering an online rug that arrives the wrong color – these are all classic first apartment mistakes.

Before purchasing any significant furniture, carefully measure and sketch a floor plan to scale – even roughly. Only then should any large purchases be made.

Genuine priorities:

- Seating: sofa, loveseat, or armchairs that fit the room’s dimensions
- Coffee table or side table
- Floor lamp (rental apartments rarely have ceiling light fixtures in living areas)
- Wi-Fi router location and extension cable if needed
- TV and TV stand or wall mount if desired

What can wait: Area rug, decorative items, bookshelves, accent chairs. These improve the room but the room is functional without them.

Home Office or Study Area Checklist

If you work or study from home, having a functional workspace is paramount to productivity and back health. A dedicated, ergonomically suitable setup prevents backache, neck strain and productivity loss caused by working at the kitchen table or sofa – these benefits should make a serious statement about where work and study should occur in an apartment.

Workspace essentials:

- Desk sized appropriately for the space
- Chair with adjustable height and back support
- Monitor or laptop stand to bring the screen to eye level
- External keyboard and mouse if using a laptop
- Adequate task lighting (natural light plus a desk lamp)
- Power strip with surge protection
- Cable management solution (simple velcro ties and a cable box work fine)

Cleaning Supplies Checklist

Before moving in to a new apartment, no matter how thoroughly it was cleaned between tenants, it needs to be thoroughly sanitized before unpacking begins. These supplies offer both immediate and ongoing cleaning solutions.

First-day cleaning kit:

- All-purpose cleaning spray
- Bathroom cleaner
- Glass cleaner
- Mop or floor cleaner appropriate for your floor type
- Broom and dustpan
- Vacuum (essential if the apartment has any carpet)
- Microfiber cloths or paper towels
- Rubber gloves
- Trash bags in the right sizes for your bins

Tools and Hardware Checklist

An essential toolkit helps make life in any new apartment less of an inconvenience by providing the tools needed to tackle smaller jobs that arise quickly and reliably.

Minimum first-apartment toolkit:

- Hammer
- Screwdriver set (flathead and Phillips in multiple sizes)
- Tape measure
- Level (essential for hanging anything straight)
- Stud finder (for hanging items on walls)
- Drill or hand drill
- Pliers
- Command strips and picture hanging hardware
- Electrical tape and duct tape

First Apartment Checklist on a Budget: Priorities

by Spend

Not everything needs to be bought new or bought immediately. This framework organizes purchases by urgency and budget impact.

Buy new, buy first (non-negotiable for hygiene and safety): Mattress protector, bed linens, towels, bath mat, shower curtain and liner, toilet brush, cleaning supplies, toilet paper, food storage containers, and any safety items including a carbon monoxide detector and smoke alarm if not present.

Buy secondhand or thrift where possible: Furniture including sofas, dressers, bookshelves, coffee tables, dining tables, and chairs. Kitchenware including pots, pans, and dishes. Lamps, mirrors, and decorative items. Check Facebook Marketplace, Craigslist, local buy-nothing groups, and thrift stores before buying these new.

Borrow for the first month: Kitchen appliances you are not sure you will use. Extra furniture while you figure out the room layout. Tools you need for a one-time job.

Wait and buy as needed: Decorative items, specialty kitchen equipment, extra bedding, artwork, plants, and anything that sounds like a good idea in a store but has no specific purpose in your actual space.

New Apartment Safety Checklist

Safety items are easy to overlook in the excitement of moving and easy to regret skipping.

Verify these exist and work on move-in day:

- Smoke detectors on every floor and outside every sleeping area — test each one
- Carbon monoxide detector if the apartment has gas appliances or an attached garage
- Working locks on every exterior door and window
- Fire extinguisher in or near the kitchen

Add these yourself:

- Door stopper or door alarm if security is a concern
- Window locks or window security bars if ground floor
- First aid kit
- Flashlight with fresh batteries
- Emergency contact list posted somewhere visible

New Apartment Checklist Google Sheets Template

The interactive checklist above this article allows you to check off items as you complete them and track your progress by category. You can also copy the list below into your own Google Sheets or Excel document for a shareable, editable version.

To use as a Google Sheets template:

1. Open a new Google Sheet
2. Create columns: Item | Category | Priority | Estimated Cost | Purchased | Notes
3. Copy each item from the checklist sections above into the Item column
4. Assign Priority as: Day 1, Week 1, Month 1, or Later
5. Fill in estimated costs as you research to track your total budget

This format gives you a living document you can share with a roommate, update as you shop, and reference throughout the first months in a new apartment.

Frequently Asked Questions

What should I buy first for a new apartment?

Before purchasing any other items, prioritize those which impact sleep, hygiene and basic daily function first. From day one you should have bed linens and pillows as well as towels, toilet paper, shower curtain/liner combo and basic cleaning supplies on hand for at least one or two meals each week and month – everything else will become apparent over time as you learn about your space and its requirements.

How much does it cost to furnish a first apartment on a budget?

Setting up a functional first apartment on a budget of between $1,500 and $3,000

can be accomplished if you shop strategically, prioritize secondhand furniture purchases, and resist impulse buys of everything at once. The main expenses to keep in mind include mattresses, sofas and any large appliances not provided with the apartment; buying secondhand for furniture while new for bedding towels and kitchen basics keeps total costs manageable without compromising hygiene or comfort.

What is the most commonly forgotten item on a new apartment checklist?

Move-in inspection documentation is often overlooked when packing their first night essentials; among physical items, common first-night necessities include toilet paper, shower curtains, can openers or basic cooking tools – leaving people unable to cook or use the bathroom comfortably on moving day. An essential first night bag packed before moving day can prevent this entirely.

Do I need renter’s insurance for a new apartment?

Renter’s insurance may not always be legally mandated, but is strongly recommended and frequently required as part of lease conditions by landlords. Renter’s coverage protects personal belongings in case of theft, fire or water damage as well as providing liability protection should anyone become injured within your apartment complex. Cost-wise it often offers great coverage with relatively minimal upfront expenses to set it up before move-in day rather than later on when all is settled in.

What should I check before signing a new apartment lease?

Before signing, conduct an in-person inspection of the apartment and document its condition thoroughly with photos. Make sure all appliances work, hot water is functional, all windows and doors open, close, and lock properly, no signs of water damage, mold growth or pest activity are visible; read through your full lease contract including clauses regarding subletting, rent increases, maintenance responsibilities and early termination before making your final decision.

Moving into a new apartment can be one of the most logistically complex experiences most people face, yet using a checklist approach works effectively to break this complexity down into discrete tasks that can be completed step-by-step. Make a priority list, use an interactive checklist to track your progress, and don’t

feel pressured to complete everything immediately; an apartment will become its true form over time as you learn how to utilize its space; purchases made later will more closely reflect how you live than anything bought initially.

Where do you feel most overwhelmed while planning for your move? Often that is a good place to begin.

Article written for Home Narratives — practical guidance for better living spaces.