

Financial Ratings Series

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& Grey House Publishing

Financial Literacy Basics: How to Manage Debt

2022



GREY HOUSE PUBLISHING

Financial Literacy Basics: How to Manage Debt



Financial Literacy Basics: How to Manage Debt 2022 Edition



GREY HOUSE PUBLISHING



<https://greyhouse.weissratings.com>

Grey House Publishing
4919 Route 22, PO Box 56
Amenia, NY 12501-0056
(800) 562-2139

Weiss Ratings
4400 Northcorp Parkway
Palm Beach Gardens, FL 33410
(561) 627-3300

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Welcome!

Grey House Publishing and Weiss Ratings are proud to announce the fifth edition of ***Financial Literacy Basics***. Each volume in this series provides readers with easy-to-understand guidance on how to manage their finances. Designed for those who are just starting out, as well as those who may need help handling their finances, the volumes in this series outline, step-by-step, how to make the most of your money, which pitfalls to avoid, what to watch out for, and the necessary tools to make sure you are fully equipped to manage your finances.

Each of these eight volumes focus on specific ways to take the guesswork out of financial planning—how to stick to a budget, how to manage debt, how to buy a car or rent an apartment, how to calculate the cost of college, and how to start saving for retirement—all information necessary to get started on your financial future. Each volume is devoted to a specific topic. Combined, they provide you with a full range of helpful information on how to best manage your money. Individual volumes are:

- How to **Make and Stick to a Budget**
- How to **Manage Debt**
- Starting a **401(k)**
- Understanding **Health Insurance Plans**
- **Renting an Apartment & Understanding Renters Insurance**
- Calculating the **Cost of College & Understanding Student Loans**
- **Buying a Car & Understanding Auto Insurance**
- What to Know About **Checking Accounts**

Filled with valuable information that includes helpful, hands-on worksheets and planners, these volumes are designed to point you toward a solid financial future with clear suggestions, supportive guidance and easy-to-follow dos and don'ts.

Financial Literacy Basics:

How to Manage Debt

Sometimes it seems as if everywhere you look, someone wants your money. Maybe you get past-due notices from a credit card company, or warnings about paying your student loan on time. You might be afraid to even look at your mail in case you missed a payment on something last month. If you have bills to pay, you might feel worried about what could happen if you fall behind.

Managing debt can be easier if you understand the meaning of debt and know how to keep it under control. If you have debt, you can make a plan to get rid of it and free yourself from that worry!



What Is Debt?

Debt is money that's owed, and **credit** is money

given for use. The person who owes a debt is known as the **debtor** or **borrower**. The person (or company or financial institution) that gives credit is the **creditor**. Examples of debts are money owed on credit cards, car loans, mortgages, and student loans. These are personal debts.

Loans are usually for a certain amount of time, such as several years. The loan agreement includes how many payments the debtor will make, how often, and how much interest will be charged. **Interest** is what the debtor pays to use someone else's money. The debtor pays the interest and the original loan, or **principal**, to the lender. Interest is usually a percentage of the principal. It might be high, especially if the debtor is considered a high risk. This could be because the lender suspects the debtor may have trouble repaying the loan or if the debtor has poor credit.

Credit card debt is a loan, but it has a rolling (open-ended) repayment date. The lender decides how much credit to provide, and the debtor can charge up to that limit. The lender may also increase the limit.



Interest

Each payment you make on a loan includes money toward repayment of the loan as well as interest. For example, if you borrow \$100 (the principal) at 10

percent interest and agree to make ten monthly payments, you will pay \$11 a month, and the lender will collect \$110 by the end of the loan term. You paid the lender \$10 in exchange for borrowing \$100. The lender charges this interest, known as **simple interest** based only on the principal amount, not only because you are borrowing the money, but also to cover the cost of collecting it, such as paying employees to process payments.

Interest on credit cards is called **compound interest**. Compound interest is interest calculated first against the principal amount—then again on the combined amount of principal and interest. In essence, it's interest on interest. For example, if your principal is \$100 and you are charged 20% interest semi-annually, at six months, you are charged 20% interest on your principal, which means your principal is now \$120. At the next six month interval, you are charged 20% interest on \$120, which will be \$24, so your principal is now \$144. With compound interest, you end up paying much more than the principal.

This type of interest may be compounded, or added, at different intervals. For example, it may be compounded annually, semi-annually, or monthly. The number of intervals depends on the loan agreement. The

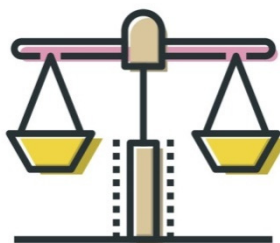
more often interest is compounded, the more money you will pay.



Collateral

Debt can be **secured**, or backed by something of value. This is called

collateral. Debt can also be **unsecured**. A mortgage is backed by the value of the property you are using it to buy, so it is secured debt. Credit card debt is unsecured, because nothing of value is backing it. Secured debt usually involves lower interest rates, because if you fail to make your payments, the creditor can take possession of the collateral.



Good Debt and Bad Debt

Good debt, such as a mortgage or loans for

education, can benefit the debtor. Good debt is an investment. It may increase in value or increase your value.

Bad debt is debt used to acquire things that do not create long-term income and lose their value quickly. Debt that carries a high interest rate is also bad debt. The value of debt can



GOOD DEBT

Good debt is an investment. It may increase in value or increase your value.

- Student Loans
- Mortgages
- Business Loans



vs.

BAD DEBT

Bad debt has higher interest rates or is used to purchase items that lose their value quickly.

- Credit Card Debt
- Cash Advances
- Payday Loans



be evaluated by looking at its potential to benefit you in the future.

People with college degrees often earn more, so your potential future income could be greater if you take a college loan. These loans also usually have lower interest rates. For these reasons, student loans are usually good debt.

Mortgages used to buy a home are also usually considered good debt.

They typically have lower interest rates than other kinds of debt and the monthly payments are usually low. Mortgage interest is tax deductible. And the value of a home usually increases over time.

A **home equity loan** is a loan based on the value of your house. For example, if your house is worth \$100,000 and you only owe \$50,000 on the mortgage, you have \$50,000 of equity in the house. A home equity loan uses



this equity as collateral. Home equity loans are often good debt, because the interest rates are lower than other kinds of debt. Before getting a home equity loan, however, consider the consequences of failing to make the payments. You could lose the house.

Auto loans may also qualify as good debt. If transportation allows you to earn more, you win. To make the most of the investment, however, the buyer should pay as much as possible at the start, and borrow as little as possible.

Examples of bad debt include credit card debt and cash advance or payday loans. Using a credit card to purchase things you want but can't afford increases your debt but does not provide long-term value. Credit cards usually have higher interest rates.

Payday or cash advance loans also increase your debt without benefiting you. A borrower writes a personal check to the lender and pays a fee for use of the money, but the borrower must pay it back with interest and the fee when he or she gets a paycheck. The interest rates on these loans may be 300 percent annually, and fees for missing payments can be crippling.



How Much Debt Is Too Much?

Even if you have a high income, you might have too much debt to keep up with your loan payments, or you might be paying a great deal in interest. To see if you have too much debt, you can calculate your **debt-to-income (DTI) ratio**. This is a comparison of your monthly debt and earnings. DTI is the percentage of your income before taxes, or gross monthly income, that you use to pay debt.

If your DTI is too high, you should examine your habits and experiences. Maybe you had to rely on credit cards for a while because you were unemployed. Or maybe you were sick and have large medical bills to pay.

You may have to examine your spending habits, such as restaurant dining, impulse buying, and shopping for unnecessary items. You can find free apps to help you keep track of every penny you spend. You can also create a budget to help you see how much you owe and find ways to save. A budget can help you pay down debt.



CALCULATE YOUR DTI

To calculate your DTI, add up your monthly payments. This includes mortgage payments or rent (and insurance and property taxes if you pay them), minimum monthly credit card payments, loans including student and auto, and other debts. Don't count other expenses including gas, groceries, utilities, and taxes.

Divide this debt total by your gross monthly income. This is the amount of money you are paid before taxes are taken out of it. The DTI is the percentage of your gross income needed to cover debt.

Lenders often look at DTI—a lower number means you are less risky. Many finance experts say that DTI should be no greater than 36 percent.

For example:

Mortgage	\$1,000	+
Auto loan	\$280	+
Credit card payments	<u>\$220</u>	+
Monthly debt total:	=	\$1,500
Monthly gross income:		\$3,900

\$1,500 divided by \$3,900 = 38 percent DTI



HOW TO MAKE A BUDGET

The first step is to track all of your spending for a month. Write down everything you buy and all the bills you pay. Also keep track of all your monthly income. This may include wages, tips, and any money you regularly get, such as gifts from relatives. If your wages change from month to month, look at paychecks from several months and find the average.

You can find free tools and links to help you manage money at www.360financialliteracy.org/Calculators and www.mymoney.gov/tools. You can also simply write your budget in a notebook or use the budget worksheet on page 7. For more information about managing a budget, you can get further details in another volume in this series, *Financial Literacy Basics: How to Make and Stick to a Budget*.

Divide your expenses into needs and wants. Your needs will include **fixed expenses**, such as rent or a mortgage payment (including property tax), insurance, child care, and loan payments; and **variable expenses**, which change from month to month. Variable expenses include groceries, health expenses, transportation, and necessary clothing. Wants include entertainment, such as restaurant meals and movies, as well as unnecessary clothing.

Subtract your monthly expenses from your monthly earnings. If you have money left over, you can save it or use it to pay off debt. If your expenses are greater than your earnings, however, you need to find ways to cut expenses or earn more money to cover them.

Start by looking at your wants, and see if you can eliminate spending there. You may be able to reduce needs as well, such as saving on groceries, finding a better rate for utilities or cell phones, or getting rid of a vehicle if you can use public transportation instead.

Look at your spending habits. How and when did you spend your money all month? Are you spending too much going out to lunch every day? It takes work, but the savings you get from bringing your lunch from home can really add up.

Any way you can save money on expenses can help you pay off debt.



BUDGET WORKSHEET

Month/Year: _____

Monthly Income

Wages _____

Tips _____

Other Income _____

TOTAL MONTHLY INCOME _____**Monthly Expenses****HOUSING**

Mortgage/Rent _____

Utilities (Electricity/Water) _____

Credit Cards _____

Insurance (Homeowner's, Renters, etc.) _____

Loan Payments _____

Other Housing Expenses (Cable, Internet, etc.) _____

FOOD

Groceries/Household Supplies _____

Restaurant and Other Food _____

TRANSPORTATION

Public Transportation _____

Vehicle Loan _____

Gas for Personal Vehicle _____

Parking, Tolls, etc. _____

Maintenance & Supplies (oil, etc.) _____

Vehicle Insurance _____

HEALTH

Health Insurance _____

Medicine/Prescriptions _____

Other (Dental, Vision, Copays) _____

PERSONAL

Childcare or Support _____

Other Family Support _____

Laundry _____

Clothing, Shoes, etc. _____

Charitable Gifts, Donations, etc. _____

Entertainment (Movies, etc.) _____

Other (Haircuts, etc.) _____

DEBT & FINANCE

Debt (Credit Cards, etc.) _____

Student Loans or Other Debts _____

Fees (Bank, Credit Card, Debit) _____

Prepaid Cards, Phone Cards, etc. _____

MISCELLANEOUS EXPENSES

Supplies (School, etc) _____

Pet Care _____

Other _____

TOTAL MONTHLY EXPENSES _____**TOTAL MONTHLY INCOME** _____subtract your **TOTAL MONTHLY EXPENSES** _____**=** _____



Credit Cards, Charge Cards & Debit Cards

What's the difference? Here's information on how these types of cards differ, and what to look for when applying for a credit card.

- **Credit card:** You can use a credit card to buy things and pay for them over time. But remember, buying with credit is a loan; you have to pay the money back, with interest. And some issuers charge an annual fee for their cards. Some credit card issuers also provide "courtesy" checks to their customers. You can use these checks in place of your card, but they're not a gift, they're also a loan that you must pay back. If you don't pay your bill on time or in full when it is due, you will owe a finance charge, which is the dollar amount you pay to use credit. The finance charge depends in part on your outstanding balance and the annual percentage rate (APR).
- **Charge card:** If you use a charge card, you must pay the balance in full each time you get your statement.

- **Debit card:** This card allows you to make purchases in real-time by accessing the money in your checking or savings account electronically.

When applying for credit cards, it's important to shop around. Fees, interest rates, finance charges, and benefits can vary greatly. In some cases, credit cards might seem like great deals until you read the fine print and disclosures. When you're trying to find the credit card that's right for you, look at the following:

- **Annual percentage rate (APR):** The APR is a measure of the cost of credit, expressed as a yearly interest rate. It must be disclosed before your account can be activated, and it must appear on your account statements. The card issuer also must disclose the "periodic rate," which is the rate applied to your outstanding balance to figure the finance charge for each billing period.

Some credit card plans allow the issuer to change your APR when interest rates or other economic indicators, called indexes, change. Because the rate change is linked to the index's performance, these plans are called "variable rate" programs. Rate changes raise or lower the finance charge on



your account. If you're considering a variable rate card, the issuer also must tell you that the rate may change and how the rate is determined.

Before you become obligated on the account, you also must receive information about any limits on how much and how often your rate may change.

- **Grace period:** The grace period is the number of days you have to pay your bill in full without triggering a finance charge. For example, the credit card company may say that you have 25 days from the statement date, provided you paid your previous balance in full by the due date. The statement date is on the bill.

The grace period usually applies only to new purchases. Most credit cards do not give a grace period for cash advances and balance transfers. Instead, interest charges start right away. If your card includes a grace period, the issuer must mail your bill at least 14 days before the due date so you'll have enough time to pay.

- **Annual fees:** Many issuers charge annual membership or participation fees. Some card

issuers assess the fee in monthly installments.

- **Transaction fees and other charges:** Some issuers charge a fee if you use the card to get a cash advance, make a late payment, or exceed your credit limit. Some charge a monthly fee regardless if you use the card or not.
- **Customer service:** Customer service is something most people don't consider, or appreciate, until there's a problem. Look for a 24-hour toll-free telephone number.
- **Unauthorized charges:** If your credit card is used without your permission, you can be held responsible for up to \$50 per account. If you report a lost card before it is used, you can't be held responsible for any unauthorized charges. To minimize your liability, report the loss as soon as possible. Some issuers have 24-hour toll-free telephone numbers to accept emergency information. It's a good idea to follow-up with a letter to the issuer. Include your account number, the date you noticed your card missing, and the date you reported the loss. Keep a record, in a safe place separate from your cards, of your



account numbers, expiration dates, and the telephone numbers of each card issuer so you can report a loss quickly.

- **Rewards:** Some credit cards offer rewards like cash back, points, and travel miles. As long as you use your credit card responsibly, this can be a way to save on travel or earn points that you can use for other purchases. But, these cards don't make sense if you carry a balance on the card, or pay more in interest or an annual fee compared to the value of the rewards.

If you are considering getting a credit card, use the comparison chart on the next page to weigh your options.



Pay Credit Card Bills on Time

It's important to pay your credit card bill on time. If you don't, you'll pay late fees and additional finance charges. Late payments to your credit card issuer will also lower your credit score.

When you make a payment, your card issuer generally must credit your

account the day they receive it, but there are exceptions.

To help avoid additional charges, follow your issuer's payment instructions. Sending your payment to the wrong address, even if the payment is received and accepted at some other office of the issuer, could delay crediting your account for up to five days. If you pay by mail and misplace your payment envelope, look for the payment address on your billing statement or call the issuer for the correct address for payments.

If you pay your bill online, set up a reminder a week or so before the bill is due to be sure you pay on time and to the proper electronic address. Set up a return electronic notice showing the company received your online payment. No matter what method you use, check your billing statement to be sure you have the right due date and location for each account.

Automatic debiting to your bank account can be a convenient way to pay bills, but there are factors to consider. For example, the amount due each month could vary, and you would need sufficient funds in your bank account to pay it. Otherwise, you could overdraw your account, be charged for insufficient funds, and damage your credit rating. Under federal law, you can't be required to use automatic debits from your bank



CREDIT CARD COMPARISON CHART

	Card #1	Card #2	Card #3
Introductory Annual Percentage Rate (APR)	% Length:	% Length:	% Length:
Regular APR for New Charges	%	%	%
Regular APR for Cash Advances	%	%	%
Regular APR for Balance Transfers	%	%	%
Annual Fee			
Grace Period			
Rewards			
Cash Back			
0% Interest			
Bonus Offers			
Travel Miles			

Remember that credit cards might seem like great deals until you read the fine print and disclosures. Review any offers carefully to make sure you understand the terms of your card. Weigh the costs of the card against possible rewards carefully to make sure they make sense for you. Factor in how this new credit card will affect your budget.



account to repay an extension of credit.



Prepaid Cards

If you're just starting out and want to build your credit history, or maybe you don't want to have any debt to start with, you might consider using prepaid credit cards.

Unlike a debit card that withdraws money from your bank account, a prepaid card requires you to load money onto the card before you can use it for purchases.

Some benefits of a prepaid credit card:

- You can get a prepaid credit card without any credit history requirements.
- Possible cash-back incentives.
- No late fees or worries about exceeding your credit limit. But, keep in mind that your purchases are limited to the amount you have loaded onto the card.

If you are getting a prepaid credit card to build your credit history, make sure that the card you select builds credit by reporting to the credit

bureaus. If your card does not report to the credit bureaus it will do nothing to help you build your credit.

A prepaid credit card might sound like a good solution, but there can be drawbacks. Consider these points before using a prepaid card:

- Beware of hidden fees. Some cards charge activation fees, fees to load funds, more fees to call customer service and other fees for balance inquiries. Your money might be spent on fees rather than purchases.
- Prepaid cards don't have the same consumer protections that credit cards offer. If you purchase something online and it arrives damaged, you would have better protections if you purchased with a credit card.



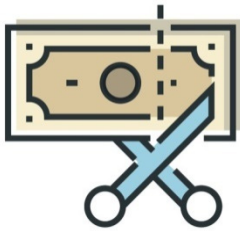
Rewards Cards

You might be tempted to take advantage of credit cards that offer rewards like airline miles or cash back.

Before you apply, be sure to read the fine print. Some reward cards charge higher interest rates than other cards to offset the rewards that they pay out. Some may charge an annual fee as well.



If you pay your balance in full every month, rewards cards can be a good way to earn airline miles or get cash back. If you cannot pay your balance in full every month, a credit card with a lower interest rate would save you money in the long run.



Take Steps to Reduce Debt

Once you have made your budget and know how much you earn and spend, here are some ways to pay down or reduce your debt.

- Make a list of monthly debts, including student and car loans, credit cards, and mortgage.
- Make a monthly budget to determine how much you can afford to pay towards your debt. You'll want to pay as much as you can to bring down your debt.
- Continue to pay all your debts, because if you miss payments, you may be charged fees and even higher interest rates.
- Pay as much as you can on the debt with the highest interest rate. To help you do this, pay the minimum amounts due on other debts.
- After you pay your highest interest debt off, move on to the debt with the next-highest interest rate and pay that down. Keep paying as much as you can each month towards bringing your debt down.
- Move down the line until you have paid off your debts.
- Use the debt snowball method. Order your debts by size, regardless of interest rate. Pay off the smallest debt while making minimum payments on the rest of your debts. That way, you have a smaller, more achievable goal that you can celebrate sooner. That might give you the incentive to keep paying off your debt. As you pay off each card, close it or stop using it, so you're not incurring new debt.
- Avoid using credit cards for new purchases. Put your credit cards away until you have paid off your debt. If you continue to add new charges to your credit card debt, it is unlikely that you will pay it off.
- If you get a raise, increase your savings instead of increasing your spending.
- Don't use all of your savings to pay off debt. You'll want to



keep a small amount of savings on hand in the event of an unforeseen emergency. Savings will prevent you from having to charge these emergencies to your credit card.

- Call the bank that issues your credit card and ask them to lower your interest rate. There is a good chance that they will agree, especially if you are aggressively paying off the balance.
- You may also want to consider balance transfer offers to credit cards with lower interest rates or debt consolidation.
- When you receive extra money, like a bonus or income-tax refund, use it to pay off debt or add to your savings, rather than paying for a vacation or other splurge.



Ways to Earn More Money

If you're interested in paying down your debt, adding some extra income can go a long way towards getting closer to your goal.

- Develop a side business, like dog walking, house cleaning or babysitting. If you have a special talent, put it to work for you.
- Get a part-time job. Drive for Uber or Lyft. Pick up a weekend or a night shift to earn extra money.
- Sell unwanted items on Craigslist, eBay or Facebook Marketplace.
- If you have a closet full of clothes that you don't wear or they don't fit any more, sell them. Check out some online thrift stores like ThredUP, Poshmark, and TheRealReal.
- Have a crafting hobby? Sell crafts and other homemade items on Etsy.
- Rent your spare room on AirBnB.
- Have a garage sale.



- If you have graphic design or other technical skills, explore gig assignments on Upwork and Fiverr.



OTHER DEBT STRATEGIES

Balance Transfers

If you have a credit card that charges a very high interest rate, a **balance transfer** might be a good fit for you. You could apply for a new card that has a lower interest rate and transfer your debt from the old card to the new card. This can save you a lot of money in interest charges and help you pay down your debt faster.

Keep in mind that you will usually be charged a fee when you transfer a balance from one card to another. That fee is generally 3 percent to 5 percent of the total that you transfer.

Your new credit card will probably have a credit limit, so keep that in mind when you transfer a balance. Make sure to add in the balance transfer fee before you transfer.

If you owe \$7,000 on one card, for example, and your credit limit on the new card is \$6,000 (including fees),

you will still have to make payments on the remaining balance on your old card.

To maximize your savings, focus on transferring the balance from your highest-interest cards to your new credit card.

A balance transfer can do more than save you money on interest—it can simplify your life by eliminating the need to pay multiple bills.

The balance transfer card's low interest rate may have a time limit, like six months or one year. Be sure you know the terms of the balance transfer and consider how much debt you can pay off before the rate increases. Find out what the regular interest rate will be after the introductory rate expires. The low interest rate may not apply to new purchases you make on the card, although if your goal is to reduce debt you should avoid making new charges if at all possible.

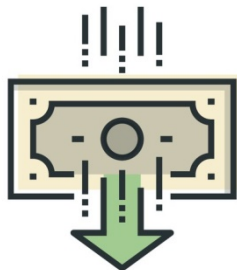
A balance transfer, once accepted, usually pays the other credit card companies in one to two weeks. Even if you pay off your entire credit card debt using a balance transfer, your account does not automatically close. You must contact the creditor to close the credit card account, and should do so quickly to avoid the temptation to use it again.



Things to consider before deciding to get a new credit card to transfer a balance:

- Review the promotional period. If the 0% interest rate only last for six months, make sure it makes sense for your situation, before proceeding.
- Check for balance transfer fees.
- Check if the credit card charges an annual fee.

Again, after you transfer your balance, close down your other account, so you are not tempted to continue using it.



Lower Interest Rates

You may be also able to get a lower rate without having to transfer the balance and pay fees. If you are a customer in good standing, call your credit card company. Tell them about any low-interest card offers you are receiving and ask them to match it to keep your business.

Credit card companies are more likely to lower your rate if you have had the card for a long time and pay on time. If the customer service representative does not offer you a lower rate, ask to speak to a supervisor. If you still can't

INTEREST RATES

Loan agreements explain how much interest the debtor pays for using the principal, or the amount of the loan. Sometimes a high interest rate is good—for example, if you have an interest-earning bank account, you want to earn as much interest as possible. If you are using a credit card, however, you should look for a low interest rate to pay as little as possible to the creditor.

Simple interest is charged at a rate that does not increase over the term of the loan. If you borrow \$100 at 10 percent interest for one year, you will pay the creditor \$110.

Many types of loans, such as credit card loans, charge compound interest. Compound interest is charged on the principal as well as on the accumulated interest. The interest compounds at set times, for example annually or quarterly (four times a year). With compound interest, the debtor is paying interest on interest.

If you are paying high interest rates, you can find ways to reduce them. If you are a good customer and pay credit card bills on time, you can ask for a reduced rate. You may also consider debt consolidation loans, balance transfers, personal loans (at a lower interest rate) to pay off debt, and debt-relief programs.

get a lower rate, call back later. Another customer service representative may agree to your terms. If you still don't get a rate reduction, keep making payments on time and wait a few months before asking again. Even if you transfer a balance to another card, you can try negotiating a lower interest rate on any other credit cards you have.



Debt Consolidation

Debt consolidation is another way to reduce interest

rates. Debt consolidation is taking out a new loan, at a lower interest rate, to pay off other debts. In addition to a lower rate, consolidation can help the debtor by allowing lower monthly payments that are easier to make, and thus simplifying the payment process. For example, instead of making a credit card payment, mortgage payment, and car payment, you can make one payment to the new lender.

Other types of consolidation include home equity loans and lines of credit. The federal government offers consolidation for people with multiple student loans. Consolidation offers may be made by private companies and financial institutions including banks and credit unions. Secured loans require collateral, which is

something the debtor owns that can be used to back the loan if they don't make the regular payments, such as a house or the title of a car. Secured loans usually have lower interest rates than unsecured debt consolidation loans and are often easier to qualify for. You may also qualify for a tax deduction for a secured loan, but if you fail to repay the loan you risk losing your collateral.



Debt-Relief Programs

Debt-relief programs may help you, but you

may take a big hit at tax time. The government sees debt forgiveness as income, and you may have to pay taxes on the debt. If you don't pay taxes, you could be fined and charged interest too. If that happens, you may end up with bigger financial problems. Carefully consider the consequences of debt-relief programs before going that route. You should also be sure you understand the terms of any agreements, such as any fees the agency may charge you. This might be a percentage of your payments, for example.





Personal Loans

You may seek a personal loan to consolidate debts such as credit cards.

A local bank or credit union might give you very favorable terms on such a loan, if you qualify, with an interest rate that is much lower than your original debts. You may be able to reduce your monthly payments as well. Analyze the long-term cost of a personal loan to make sure it is in your best interest. Be sure you understand the terms and what it will cost you.



Credit Counseling

A credit counselor can help you manage money and debt. There are nonprofit credit counseling organizations and private companies that provide counseling services. You may be able to find one through your financial institution, workplace, credit union, or school. However, even nonprofit groups may charge fees, so be aware of the cost of such services before enrolling.

Also ask about counselors' certification and the type of training they have had. Credit counselors can help you create a budget and then stick to it.

This budget should include an analysis of your spending and suggestions of how you can save money or earn more income. They can help you assess your individual financial situation and develop a plan to avoid debt problems in the future.

Advice on choosing a reputable credit counselor is on the next page.



Debt Management Plans

If you are more than \$3,000 in debt and are unable to repay what you owe, you may need to consider a debt management plan (DMP).

Before enrolling in a DMP, research the organization or business offering you the plan. For example, visit the Better Business Bureau website www.bbb.org to look for complaints. The Federal Trade Commission offers advice on how to choose a credit counselor and evaluate a DMP at: <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0153-choosing-credit-counselor>. You can also review the Federal Trade Commission's list of approved credit counselors at the back of this volume.



HOW TO CHOOSE A REPUTABLE CREDIT COUNSELOR

The Federal Trade Commission offers advice on how to choose a reputable credit counselor. Here are some questions to ask to help you find the best counselor for you.

- **What services do you offer?** Look for an organization that offers a range of services, including budget counseling, and savings and debt management classes. Avoid organizations that push a debt management plan (DMP) as your only option before they spend a significant amount of time analyzing your financial situation.
- **Do you offer information?** Are educational materials available for free? Avoid organizations that charge for information.
- **In addition to helping me solve my immediate problem, will you help me develop a plan for avoiding problems in the future?**
- **What are your fees?** Are there set-up and/or monthly fees? Get a specific price quote in writing.
- **What if I can't afford to pay your fees or make contributions?** If an organization won't help you because you can't afford to pay, look elsewhere for help.
- **Will I have a formal written agreement or contract with you?** Don't sign anything without reading it first. Make sure all verbal promises are in writing.
- **Are you licensed to offer your services in my state?**
- **What are the qualifications of your counselors?** Are they accredited or certified by an outside organization? If so, by whom? If not, how are they trained? Try to use an organization whose counselors are trained by a non-affiliated party.
- **What assurance do I have that information about me (including my address, phone number, and financial information) will be kept confidential and secure?**
- **How are your employees paid?** Are they paid more if I sign up for certain services, if I pay a fee, or if I make a contribution to your organization? If the answer is yes, consider it a red flag and go elsewhere for help.

SOURCE: Federal Trade Commission

<https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0153-choosing-credit-counselor>



You can also find a certified credit counselor through the National Foundation for Credit Counseling at: <https://www.nfcc.org/what-we-offer/debt-management-plans/>. A credit counseling organization can set up a DMP by developing a payment schedule with your creditors. The creditors may agree to certain terms, such as reduced interest rates or fees. You then deposit money with the credit counseling organization, which makes the payments. You should be able to set up automatic transfer of the funds with your bank.

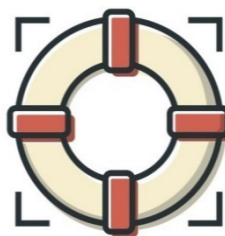
The payment plan should be on a timetable so you know at the start how long it will take to pay off your debt—terms are usually three to five years. Discuss with the counselor the types of debt that can be included—it may include student loans and medical bills as well as credit card debt. Make sure that the monthly payment is something you can afford before enrolling in a DMP.

DMPs have some drawbacks, however. You may be required to cut up credit cards and agree to avoid making any charges while you are enrolled—if so, you should have a plan to deal with any emergency that comes up, such as a medical bill or job loss. If you do not have any savings, will the payment plan allow you to put any money aside for emergencies?

If the credit counseling organization fails to make a payment, you are responsible and it will affect your credit history. Also, check your monthly statements carefully to ensure any rate changes have been applied. Make sure the statements from the creditors and credit counseling agency match up.

Participation in a DMP will appear on your credit record. If you drop out, you will lose the repayment terms negotiated with your creditors, including interest rate reductions.

A DMP is one of three major types of debt consolidation. Others are debt consolidation loans and debt settlement.



Debt Settlement Companies

If you have a lot of credit card debt, a debt settlement company might seem like a good solution. The company negotiates a deal with your credit card companies, so that you only owe a fraction of your debt. Some things seem like they're too good to be true, and that can be the case with most debt settlement offers.

Debt settlement companies are usually for-profit companies. Agents will contact your credit card



USE CAUTION WHEN SHOPPING FOR DEBT RELIEF SERVICES

Avoid any debt relief organization — whether it's credit counseling, debt settlement, or any other service — that:

- Charges any fees before it settles your debts or enters you into a DMP plan
- Pressures you to make "voluntary contributions," which is really another name for fees
- Touts a "new government program" to bail out personal credit card debt
- Guarantees it can make your unsecured debt go away
- Tells you to stop communicating with your creditors, but doesn't explain the serious consequences
- Tells you it can stop all debt collection calls and lawsuits
- Guarantees that your unsecured debts can be paid off for pennies on the dollar
- Won't send you free information about the services it provides without requiring you to provide personal financial information, like your credit card account numbers, and balances
- Tries to enroll you in a debt relief program without reviewing your financial situation with you
- Offers to enroll you in a DMP without teaching you budgeting and money management skills
- Demands that you make payments into a DMP before your creditors have accepted you into the program

Watch out for Debt Scams too!

Advance Fee Loans: Some companies guarantee you a loan if you pay them a fee in advance. The fee may range from \$100 to several hundred dollars. Resist the temptation to follow up on these advance-fee loan guarantees. They may be illegal. It's true that many legitimate creditors offer extensions of credit through telemarketing and require an application or appraisal fee in advance. But legitimate creditors never guarantee that you will get the loan — or even represent that a loan is likely. Under the FTC's Telemarketing Sales Rule, a seller or telemarketer who guarantees or represents a high likelihood of your getting a loan or some other extension of credit, may not ask for — or accept — payment until you get the loan.

Credit Repair: Be suspicious of claims from so-called credit repair clinics. Many companies appeal to people with poor credit histories, promising to clean up their credit reports for a fee. But anything these companies can do for you for a fee, you can do yourself — for free. You have the right to correct inaccurate information in your file, but no one — regardless of their claims — can remove accurate negative information from your credit report. Only time and a conscientious effort to repay your debts will improve your credit report. Federal — and some state — laws ban these companies from charging you a fee until the services are fully performed.

SOURCE: Federal Trade Commission,
<https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0150-coping-debt>



companies to negotiate a reduced debt with your creditors.

But, it's not that easy. When you enter into an agreement with a debt settlement company, they will set you up with a payment plan. You'll pay the debt settlement company an agreed upon amount each month. These payments don't go to your creditors, instead they go into an escrow account managed by the debt settlement company. These payment plans can last for several months or for a few years, to allow the debt settlement company the time to negotiate with your creditors, and allow you to build up enough money in your escrow account to pay the negotiated settlement in one lump sum.

Typically, while all of this is happening, the debt settlement company will tell you not to pay your credit card bills. That means that you will have late payments on your credit report, you'll have late fees and penalties, and your credit card balances will continue to grow.

Credit card companies are not obligated to accept the offer that a debt settlement company provides. That means that you could have been paying into the escrow account for months and months, but if your credit card company does not accept the negotiated offer, you still owe them the original amount, plus interest, late

payments, and fees. That means that you are in a worse financial position than where you started.

The debt settlement company will charge you fees for their services, though you should not have to pay fees until your debt has been settled.

Before entering into a debt settlement agreement, do your homework and be sure you understand the terms and read the contract carefully. Visit <https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0145-settling-credit-card-debt> for more information before you sign a contract.

Using a debt settlement company has some major drawbacks. Your participation remains on your credit report for seven years and can have a big effect on your credit score. The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) often classifies forgiven debt as income, so you may be burdened with a large income tax payment.

Debt settlement programs may work for credit card debt and other unsecured debt through private lenders, but these programs are not accepted for some debt, such as student loans.





Student Loans

Student loans may be federal or private, and some have unique terms. If you

have difficulty paying your student loans, you should contact the loan servicer and discuss your situation.

Ask about changing your repayment plan or seeking temporary relief from making payments. However, such changes may incur interest and even fees for some loans.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the U.S. Department of Education has paused student loan payments through May 1, 2022. That means that borrowers don't need to pay their student loans until that time. Loan interest rates have been reduced to 0% and collections on defaulted loans have been stopped. Check with your loan provider for specific details.

A great deal of information about student loans is available through the U.S. Department of Education at: <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/>.

You can also consult another guide in this series, *Financial Literacy Basics: Understanding Student Loans & How to Pay Them Back* for more information.



Types of Student Loans

Student loans fall under three main categories:

Federal Loans, State Loans and Private Loans.

FEDERAL STUDENT LOANS

William D. Ford Federal Direct Loan Program

- Direct subsidized loans, which are for students with financial need enrolled in undergraduate or career school programs.
- Direct unsubsidized loans, which are for students in undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs who do not demonstrate financial need.
- Direct PLUS Loans, which may cover educational expenses other loans do not. These loans are made to the student and parents and require a credit check for parents.
- Direct Consolidation Loans, which may enable students to combine federal student loans into one loan, eliminating the need to make multiple payments.



STATE LOANS

You may also qualify for state loans, either in the state where you live or in the state where you go to school. Contact your school's financial aid office or visit your state's Department of Education website for more information.

PRIVATE LOANS

Private loans are similar to personal loans. The financial institution to which you apply will look at your credit history to decide if you are eligible for an education loan and to set the interest rate. The terms of federal student loans—including interest rates—are generally better than private education loans. You will probably benefit most if you turn to private sources only if federal loans will not cover your education costs. Some lenders may charge fees, which could offset any low interest rates and actually cost you more.

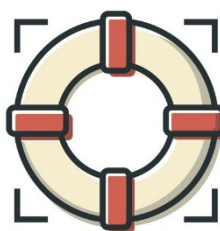


Student Loan Consolidations

You may be able to consolidate several federal student loans with a direct consolidation loan. This allows you to pay off your student loans and instead make one monthly payment on the new loan. This process does not

require you to pay a fee. Always carefully consider the terms of a consolidation. You may be able to negotiate lower monthly payments, though you may significantly extend the time you spend paying off the debt. This could mean you will pay more interest.

Compare your current terms to any offer and be sure you understand the interest rate of the new, consolidated loan. You may also have enjoyed some borrower benefits with your original loans—such as interest rate discounts, principal rebates, and loan cancellation benefits—that you will lose if you consolidate.



Student Loan Deferment & Forbearance

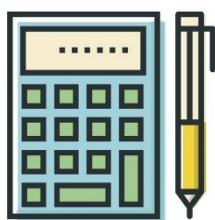
If you are temporarily experiencing financial problems, you might instead consider a deferment or forbearance.

Deferment is a period when repayment of the loan principal and interest are temporarily delayed. You may not have to pay additional interest, depending on the loan. You can learn more about the terms and qualifications for various types of loans at:

<https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/repay-loans/deferment-forbearance>.



If you don't qualify for a deferment, you may be able to qualify for **forbearance**. This allows you to stop making payments, or reduces the size of payments, for up to a year. You will still be charged the interest on the debt. The lender may grant discretionary forbearance in cases of financial hardship or illness. You may receive mandatory forbearance in some situations, including participation in a medical or dental internship or residency program, being a member of the National Guard who has been activated by a governor, and seeking teacher loan forgiveness by performing a qualifying teaching service.



Income-Based Repayment Plans

If you are not making enough money to repay your student loans, you may be eligible for an income-based repayment (IBR) plan. This means the amount you pay is based on the amount you earn.

Contact your loan servicer to find out about this plan and visit the following for more information:

<https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/repay-loans/understand/plans/income-driven>.



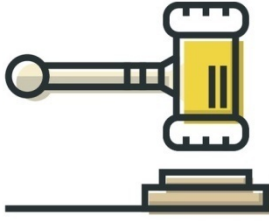
Student Loan Debt Forgiveness

Some student loans may be cancelled or forgiven in some circumstances. These include disability, death, bankruptcy, and programs such as teacher loan forgiveness or public service loan forgiveness.

If you are hoping to get public loan forgiveness, you should enroll in an IBR plan. You must make your monthly payments for 120 months before you qualify for loan forgiveness. For more information about loan forgiveness, see: <https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/repay-loans/forgiveness-cancellation>. Discuss your situation with your loan provider.

Consult *Financial Literacy Basics: Calculating the Cost of College & Understanding Student Loans* for more information.





Bankruptcy

You may have looked at all the numbers—your income, loans, and bills—and just can't figure out a way to pay your bills and get out of debt. If you can't find any way to pay off debt, either through budgeting or debt-reduction options, you may have to think about bankruptcy.

Bankruptcy is a legal status. Personal bankruptcy can clear your slate of most debt. It may stop wage garnishment (when the government has your employer withhold some of your pay) and foreclosure. Experts say bankruptcy offers the most help to those with more than \$15,000 in debt. Sounds good, right? But bankruptcy has some severe drawbacks.

Filing bankruptcy will usually cost money, because you will probably need a bankruptcy lawyer. The American Bar Association may be able to help if you are unable to afford a lawyer. Visit their website for more information:

http://www.americanbar.org/groups/legal_services/flh-home.html.

Bankruptcy will remain on your credit report for **seven to ten years**. It will have a negative impact on your credit in the future.

Bankruptcy cannot discharge some types of debt, including alimony, child support, debt incurred after filing for bankruptcy, some student loans, and some taxes. It also cannot discharge debt from personal injury to another person caused by the debtor (such as driving under the influence), and offers no protection to cosigners of your debts.

Some forms of bankruptcy are for businesses or municipalities and others are for individuals and couples. Chapter 7 bankruptcy is the most common chapter of personal bankruptcy. It remains on your credit report for ten years. Under this chapter, some of your property is sold and the proceeds are used to pay creditors. Chapter 13 bankruptcy remains on your credit report for seven years. It is the second-most-common chapter of bankruptcy under which people file. Chapter 13 allows individuals with regular incomes to have their debts adjusted and pay the debts over a period of time under this plan, usually three to five years.

Most debtors are required to undergo credit counseling before filing for bankruptcy. Some property, such as a primary home, may be exempt from sale to settle debts. The court may deny a debtor a discharge for several reasons, including if the debtor withholds information about finances, conceals or fraudulently transfers



property, or commits perjury (lies under oath).



Ways to Save

The more you save, the more you can use to pay off debt or avoid incurring additional debt.

Some big savings could come from selling a car and using public transportation, finding a less-expensive apartment or house, or getting a roommate (or several) to share living expenses if your lease allows. In some areas, you may be able to share a car or pay to use a car only when you need to. You may find a lower-cost insurance plan. In addition to these big decisions, you may be able to save money in other areas of your life as well.

If you use a debit card, you could be paying fees per transaction. Find out if your financial institution limits your free monthly uses of the card. You may want to consider withdrawing the cash you will be using from each paycheck in one transaction rather than in several. Maybe you can use only automatic teller machines (ATM) owned by your bank or credit union.

Compare utility rates, and the rates for your internet and cell phone plans.

You might find a lower rate by switching providers, for example. Browse electricity rates in your area on websites such as <https://www.electricrate.com>. Be sure to check the terms of the rate, which may be for several months or a year, and look for any fees involved.

You may also be able to get assistance with home energy costs through a program for low-income households. Visit www.benefits.gov for information and eligibility requirements.

Another way to save on energy is to use less! Turn off the lights as you leave the room. Close the blinds and shades on hot days to keep your house cooler. A programmable thermostat can also help decrease your energy use when you're not home.

If you pay a monthly cell phone rate as part of a plan, consider how you use the phone. If you pay for unlimited data but don't use much each month, or use the phone only for emergencies, you may save money with a pay-as-you-go plan.

You may also qualify for assistance for a cell phone or your internet plan through the Lifeline program for low-income households. Visit <https://www.lifelinesupport.org> for information and eligibility requirements.



Are you spending too much money on food? You can save on grocery bills by shopping at discount stores, clipping coupons, finding sales, and buying in bulk. Use your store's weekly sales circular to plan your meals for the week, and stick to your list—you will eliminate waste and avoid running out of food mid-week. Plan to use leftovers in another meal—grilled chicken can be dinner one day, and leftovers can be used on salad or in a casserole another day.

Use store rewards cards to take advantage of special offers and sales. Scan the shelves for the unit price of items—this allows you to compare costs of different sizes of items. If the unit price per ounce of a small package is higher than the unit price for larger packages, the small size is not the best price. Larger packages of food usually cost less when you compare the unit price. But, make sure it's an amount you can use. Freeze or store what you won't use right away to make sure you don't have food waste.

Meat can be expensive so consider going meatless one or more days a week, or buy "family pack" sizes and portion into freezer bags and freeze for later use. Get your protein from less-expensive options, such as beans and lentils, eggs, cheese, seeds and nuts, and canned tuna.



- Buy food that's on sale.
- Create a shopping list and stick to it.
- Plan your meals for the week, and use up leftovers.
- Compare unit prices to get the best deal.

Is your money disappearing into snack vending machines? Buy a large package of treats and divide it into individual portions. Buy bags of veggies and carry servings to work for a healthy snack. Drink more water and less soda. A small bottle of water flavoring is a good buy if you don't like plain water because it will flavor many glasses or bottles of water for a fraction of the cost of flavored drinks. Instead of stopping for daily coffees, buy a coffee maker and brew your own for much less—the money you save in coffee shops will quickly pay for the new appliance.

If you spend a lot of money on entertainment, such as restaurant meals and movies, consider cutting back on going out.

- Find less-expensive places, or go out for lunch instead of dinner—



the prices are usually lower for the same meals.

- You might try getting together with like-minded friends who also want to cut back on spending. Instead of dining out, dine in—organize a potluck night or make a large amount of an inexpensive food, such as a casserole.
- Instead of going to an evening show, attend a movie matinee, when many theaters have a lower admission price. Some communities also have theaters that show second-run films, which may be less expensive.
- Call your theatre about unadvertised discounts. Many theatres offer discounts for seniors, young adults, and might even offer “pay what you can” discounts.
- Volunteer at local events. Many events and festivals offer free admission to volunteers.
- If you stream music, consider a less-costly streaming service.
- Try to make one day a week a “no spend day.” Have dinner at home, make it a game night, visit the local park or try another free activity.
- Can you reduce your cable television package or find a new

cable provider? Does a streaming service offer shows or movies you like? Maybe you can eliminate the need for a subscription altogether—rent weekly movies or borrow them from a library. Many libraries now offer music and movie streaming services that you can use for free.



Plan Ahead

While you are paying down your debt, try to put a small amount aside into savings. Once you have reduced debt, you can focus more attention on building up your savings.

Put aside some money each month to create an emergency fund that will cover all your living expenses for several months. Some experts suggest having six months of wages saved. This can protect you from getting into debt because of an unexpected illness, car repair, job loss, or some other problem in the future.

Some banks offer a “rounding up” program that allows you to round up your purchases to the next dollar, and then puts the extra money into your savings account. That can be an easy, and painless, way to start



putting money aside for an emergency fund.

If your employer offers any matching funds toward a retirement plan, take advantage of it. Every dollar will help you reach retirement and stay out of debt when you are no longer working.



Credit Scores

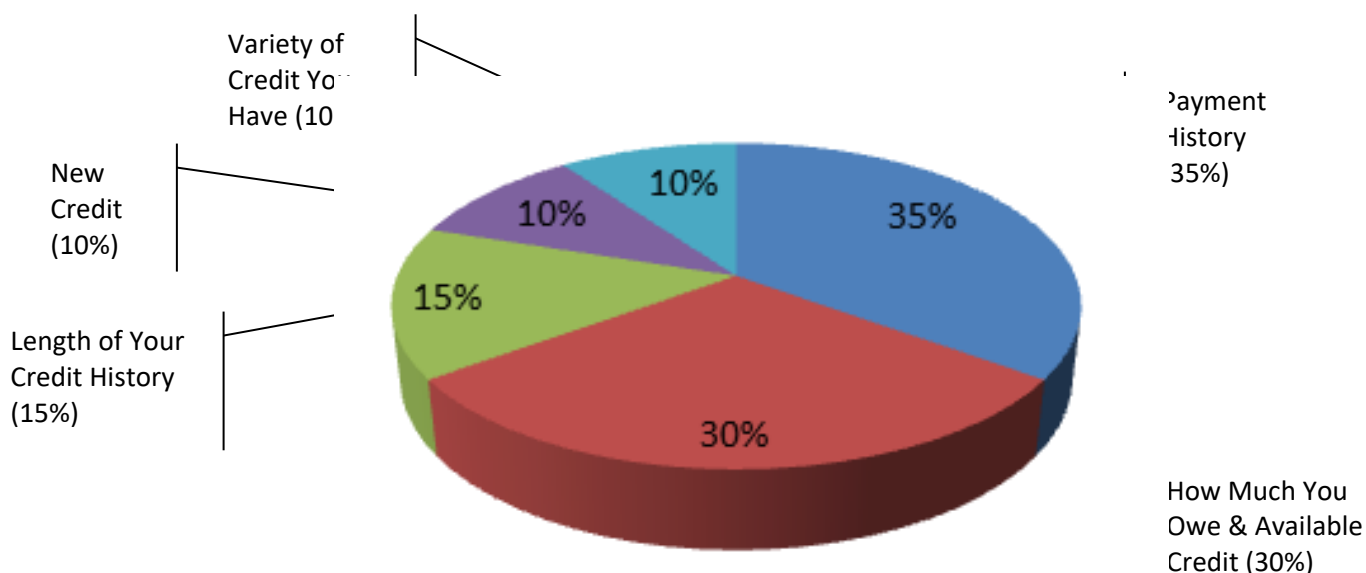
Banks and credit card companies use credit scores to decide whether to extend credit to you

or provide a loan. Anyone eighteen or older can have a credit score, but many companies won't offer credit cards to anyone younger than twenty-

one unless they have an authorized user, such as a parent, on the card account.

People and businesses talk about "good" credit scores, but it depends on what the score is for. To get a mortgage, loan, or credit cards, you will need a credit score that is good for that type of loan. About 90 percent of credit companies use scores calculated using Fair Isaac Corporation (FICO) software, though some use VantageScore, PLUS Score, TransRisk Score, or Equifax Score, which are similarly calculated. FICO scores are based on a person's ability to repay a loan, and are calculated based on information about you and many other people in similar

CREDIT SCORE CALCULATIONS



situations. To have a FICO score, you usually need to have at least one account that has been open for at least six months. Your payment history—whether you pay your bills on time every time—is very important in calculating your score. According to FICO, 35 percent of your score is based on payment history. Another 30 percent is based on how much you owe (how much credit is available), 15 percent on the length of your credit history (longer history equals less risk), 10 percent on your new credit (if you've opened multiple new credit accounts), and 10 percent on the variety of credit you have (revolving credit lines, such as credit cards; installment debt such as car loans and student loans).

The credit bureaus—Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion—use FICO to calculate scores for people based on the information the credit bureaus have, so each may give the same person a different credit score. The bureaus look at how much you've borrowed, how much you owe, and your payment history. Companies usually offer their best terms, such as low interest rates, to people with the best credit scores. They want to loan money to people who are most likely to repay the loans. With a good credit score, you are more likely to have a loan approved.

You may also have to agree to a credit check when you apply for a job,

because potential employers may see you as more reliable and trustworthy if you have a good credit history.

Some landlords also evaluate potential tenants using credit history because they want to be sure you will pay your rent. It can even affect your ability to get utilities hooked up because you may have to pay a deposit or find someone who will agree to pay your bills if you don't. Your credit score can even affect your insurance rates in some states.

FICO scores range from 300 to 850—a higher score means a lower risk. In very general terms, a score of 650 or lower is usually seen as bad credit. FICO scores from 651 to 700 are considered fair, while scores from 701 to 759 are regarded as good. Any FICO score of 760 or higher is considered excellent credit.

For a mortgage, a minimum of 500 is usually needed for a Federal Housing Administration (FHA) loan, and at least 620 for other types of mortgages. People with a score of at least 760 are likely to get the lowest interest rates, which means they are likely to have lower monthly payments and pay less interest over the term of the mortgage. People with better credit scores are likely to qualify for larger loan amounts as well.

Experts say that the best credit card rewards offers go to those with credit scores of at least 720. The credit card



companies offer very little information about how they make credit decisions, however. Carefully evaluate any offer.

Some experts believe a credit score of at least 720 should allow a borrower to get a low interest rate on a car loan. Sub-prime car loans may be available with much lower scores in the range of 500. As with mortgages, a better credit score should help you get a loan with better terms, so you could pay less each month and less interest overall.



How to Find Out Your Credit Score

There are a few main ways to get your credit score, including from a credit card or other loan statement, a non-profit counselor, or for a fee from a credit reporting agency.

You actually have more than one credit score. Credit scores are calculated based on the information in your credit reports. If the information about you in the credit reports of the three large consumer reporting companies is different, your credit score from each of the companies will be different. Lenders also use slightly different credit scores for different types of loans.

There are four main ways to get a credit score:

- **Check your credit card or other loan statement.** Many major credit card companies and some auto loan companies have begun to provide credit scores for all their customers on a monthly basis. The score is usually listed on your monthly statement, or can be found by logging in to your account online.
- **Talk to a non-profit counselor.** Non-profit credit counselors and HUD-approved housing counselors can often provide you with a free credit report and score and help you review them.
- **Use a credit score service.** Many services and websites advertise a “free credit score.” Some sites may be funded through advertising and not charge a fee. Other sites may require that you sign up for a credit monitoring service with a monthly subscription fee in order to get your “free” score. These services are often advertised as “free” trials, but if you don’t cancel within the specified period (often as short as one week), you could be on the hook for a monthly fee. Before you sign up to try one of



these services, be sure you know what you are signing up for and how much it really costs.

- **Buy a score.** You can buy a score directly from the credit reporting companies. You can buy your FICO credit score at myfico.com. Other services may also offer scores for purchase. If you decide to purchase a credit score, you are not required to purchase credit protection, identity theft monitoring, or other services that may be offered at the same time.

Some credit score sources provide an "educational" credit score, instead of a score that a lender would use. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau published a report on the differences between educational scores and those used by lenders. For most people, an educational score will be close to the scores lenders use and can be helpful for consumers. But the scores can be quite different for some. The CFPB report found that there was a meaningful difference for one out of four people. When choosing where to get your credit score, find out what kind of score it is.



Building Good Credit

You can build good credit even if you don't have a credit

history. First, establish a budget to understand how much you earn and how much you owe. A budget will help you make sure you pay your bills on time, which will help establish your credit history. Next you can focus on building good credit through credit cards and diversified credit, such as a small personal loan, a student loan, or an auto loan.

You can probably qualify for a credit card for people who are building credit. These include student credit cards, although you will probably have to get a parent to co-sign your application. This means the co-signer is responsible for paying the bill if you don't. If you are able to save some money, you can get a secured credit card. For these cards, you deposit money to open the card. The issuer will use the deposit as collateral if you don't pay your bill.

Secured credit cards are usually basic, meaning they don't offer users special features. Before applying, be sure the company reports to the credit bureaus so your account helps build your credit score. Many people build credit by getting a retail credit card from a store, such as a department store, where they shop. These cards



usually have high interest rates and low credit limits.

You may want to diversify the types of loans you have with a small loan. You might take out a small personal loan and pay it back quickly. You may want to get a student loan if you need one, or a car loan. It's important to be sure you can afford to repay any loans, on time, to build good credit.



Maintaining Good Credit

You can maintain good credit by paying your bills on time. It's even better if you can make more than the minimum payment to repay the loan more quickly. This will help you to pay less interest. As your credit score improves, your lenders may give you more credit. For example, your credit card limit might go up. Be sure you don't charge more than you can afford just because it's available. Your minimum monthly payments will also get larger, and this could make it more difficult for you to pay your bills on time.

If you are having trouble making minimum monthly payments, contact your credit card companies and ask them to set up an alternative payment plan. They may agree to waive late charges or give you a lower monthly payment or reduced interest rate. You

may also consider a balance transfer credit card to eliminate some payments and lower your interest rate.

A longer credit history helps your credit score. Even if you have credit cards that you don't use, keeping them can boost your score. You can cut them up or keep them for an emergency. Any card with an annual fee is probably not worth keeping, however, because you can use that money elsewhere. Since 30 percent of your credit score is based on available credit, you can pay off some debt to improve your score.

Credit card usage counts more in this area than other types of debt. Try to use no more than 10 percent of your available credit. This means that if your credit card limit is \$1,000, you should charge no more than \$100.

Credit checks can affect your credit score. Many credit inquiries can lower your score, so if you are applying for a loan, try to work quickly. File applications within about a thirty-day period if you can. Many credit checks within two weeks will usually only count as one inquiry for FICO.





Checking Your Credit Report

By law, you are entitled to a free copy of your credit report every year from each of the three major credit bureaus. Starting in 2020, because of the economic impact of COVID-19, the three major credit bureaus are offering free weekly credit reports. Visit AnnualCreditReport.com to request your reports. They don't include your credit scores, but you will see the information used to calculate your score. You can also contact FICO or another credit bureau to purchase reports with credit scores. Some sites that offer free credit score reports may offer only a score based on information rather than the FICO score. Some banks and credit card companies may also provide FICO scores to customers.

Experts recommend that you get copies of your credit report from all three major credit reporting agencies. The reports will include identifying information, credit history, public records, and inquiries. Check the identifying information for accuracy. Your name may be spelled multiple ways, for example, because several companies may have provided variations. The credit history section includes information about your creditors and accounts, including how much you owe, other names on the

accounts, status of the loans, and your payment history. Some reports include the amount of each payment. Some may include notes, for example, "charged off," which means the creditor has given up on ever collecting the debt. The public records section includes any information such as bankruptcies, judgments, and tax liens. It does not include information about arrests, lawsuits, or any other information that is not related to finances. The inquiries section provides information about everyone who has requested your credit report, including landlords, banks, and credit card companies. Hard inquiries are those you have set in motion, for example, when you apply for a credit card. Soft inquiries are from creditors who are monitoring your account, potential employers, and companies that want to prescreen you for offers of credit.

A government study in 2013 found that one in five consumers had errors on their credit reports from the three major bureaus. One in twenty errors cost the consumers financially, in the form of higher interest rates, for example. You can take steps to correct mistakes by disputing them with the credit bureau. Each report includes contact information for the credit bureau that provided it and an online dispute form. The credit bureaus will investigate by contacting the creditors, who have up to 45 days to respond. While the dispute is being



investigated, the information you are challenging will show on the credit report as under dispute. If you are unsatisfied with the investigation, you can file a complaint online with the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau at:

(<https://www.consumerfinance.gov/complaint/#credit-reporting>).

If you prefer to dispute a credit report by mail, circle the information that you are disputing on a copy of the report. Write a letter that explains what you are disputing and include your explanation. Request that the company remove or correct the information. The letter should include your complete name and address, the date, the complete name and address of the credit bureau, and a list of enclosures (a copy of the credit report, copies of bills showing payment, etc.).

Your letter might say, for example:

Dear Sir or Madam:

I dispute the following information in my file, which I have circled and numbered on the enclosed copy of the credit report I received.

Item 1 [identify the name of source and type of item, such as credit account] is [inaccurate or incomplete] because [explain why it is inaccurate or incomplete]. I am requesting that [the item be removed, corrected, etc.] to correct this information.

[Item 2, etc., as needed.]

Enclosed are copies of [payment records, court documents, or any other proof you can provide] supporting my position. Please investigate this matter and [correct or delete] the items listed as soon as possible.

Sincerely,
[Your name]





How to Get a Good Credit Score

The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau sets out these guidelines to get, and keep, a good credit score. Doing these things will help you improve your credit score as well.

- **Pay your loans on time, every time.** One way to make sure your payments are on time is to set up automatic payments, or set up electronic reminders. If you've missed payments, get current and stay current.
- **Don't get close to your credit limit.** Credit scoring models look at how close you are to being "maxed out," so try to keep your balances low compared to your total credit limit. If you close some credit card accounts and put most or all of your credit card balances onto one card, it may hurt your credit score if this means that you are using a high percentage of your total credit limit. Experts advise keeping your use of credit at no more than 30 percent of your total credit limit. You don't need to keep balances on credit cards to get a good score. Paying off the balance each month helps get you the best scores.
- **A long credit history will help your score.** Credit scores are based on experience over time. The more experience your credit report shows with paying your loans on time, the more information there is to determine whether you are a good credit recipient.
- **Only apply for credit that you need.** Credit scoring formulas look at your recent credit activity as a signal of your need for credit. If you apply for a lot of credit over a short period of time, it may appear to lenders that your economic circumstances have changed negatively.
- **Fact-check your credit reports.** If you spot suspected errors, dispute them. If you have old credit card accounts you are not using, keep an eye on them to make sure that an identity thief is not using them.





Payday Loans

Payday loans are short-term loans that are due on your next payday.

These are usually for small amounts (often up to \$500). To get the loan you must give the lender access to your checking account or give the lender a check in advance for the full balance, which the lender is able to deposit when the loan comes due.

The terms of these loans vary with the lender. The loans may be due in one lump-sum payment, or paid in small installments over time. The lender may give the borrower cash, a check, or a prepaid debit card, or deposit the money electronically into your checking account.

Both the amount you can borrow and the fees charged may be subject to state laws. The finance charge, or cost of the loan, varies. It could be \$10 to \$30 for every \$100 borrowed. When you do the math, these high finance charges are the same as an annual percentage rate (APR) of 300 to 600 percent. Yikes! As a comparison, credit card APRs range from 12 percent to 30 percent.



Predatory Lending Practices

Some payday loans are considered predatory lending practices, because the borrower can't afford to pay them. Predatory lending is any practice that inflicts abusive or unfair loan terms on a borrower, or uses coercive, deceptive, exploitative, or unscrupulous actions to persuade a borrower to accept the terms for a loan the borrower can't afford or doesn't need or want. Many include high fees and costs, such as document preparation charges that are not clearly explained or found buried in the fine print.

Predatory lenders often target people who are poor, uneducated, or desperate—for example, someone who has no way to pay the bill for a car or home repair or a medical emergency. Many people with poor credit who cannot qualify for lines of credit with a bank or other traditional sources fall victim to predatory lending practices.

Many people have lost their homes when they were unable to pay mortgages secured through predatory lending practices. For example, a loan servicer refinances a mortgage with a new loan, called a balloon mortgage. The balloon mortgage has lower payments at first. But, later, the payments grow larger and larger, until



the borrower can no longer make them. The lender then may offer another refinance, with high fees and interest. This is an example of how people can be trapped in a debt cycle.

Car title loans are common risky short-term loans. A borrower gets a small loan for a short time, pays a fee to the lender, and gives the lender the title to a vehicle. If the borrower is unable to repay the loan, the lender can take possession of the vehicle.

Always be cautious when considering any loan. Short-term loans can be particularly expensive. Instead, if you are faced with an unexpected debt, consider applying for a small loan from a credit union or other traditional financial institution or use a credit card. The terms of traditional loans are usually better, with lower interest rates. You may also be able to borrow money from family and friends. Repay the debt as quickly as possible, and focus on building up some savings for future emergencies.





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List of Approved Credit Counseling Agencies by the U.S. Department of Justice

(updated as of February 4, 2022)

\$\$\$\$\$0\$ BK Class, Inc.

2711 E. Melrose Street
Gilbert, AZ 85297

877-376-7122

www.myonlinebankruptclass.com

Provides Services via: Internet

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

\$\$\$\$\$Simple Class, Inc.

304 S. Jones Boulevard
Suite 1027 Las Vegas, NV 89107 866-742-6259
Las Vegas, NV 89107

866-742-6259

www.simpleclass.net

Provides Services via: Internet

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IN KS KY LA MD ME MI
MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK PA PR RI SC SD TN TX UT
VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

001 Debtorcc, Inc.

378 Summit Avenue
Jersey City, NJ 07306

1-800-610-3920

www.debtorcc.org

Provides Services via: Internet

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

1\$ Wiser Consumer Education, Inc.

1400 Preston Road
Suite 499
Plano, TX 75093

877-274-9479

www.1dollarwiser.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY



123 Credit Counselors, Inc

1000 NW 57th Court
Suite 860
Miami, FL 33126

305-269-9201

www.a123cc.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

1stopbk.com Inc.

362 Sweetbriar Lane
Lakeland, FL 33813

888-988-3410

www.1stopbk.com

Provides Services via: Internet

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

A Debt Coach Credit Counseling Service, Inc.

71 Cavalier Blvd.
Suite 224
Florence, OH 41042

888-767-9155

adebtcoach.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person

Operates in: AR CA FL GA HI KY LA MO NE OH TX VA WA

Abacus Credit Counseling

17337 Ventura Boulevard
Suite 205
Encino, CA 91316

800-516-3834

www.abacuscc.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY



Access Counseling, Inc.

633 W. 5th Street
Suite 26001
Los Angeles , CA 90071

800-205-9297

www.accesscounselinginc.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Advantage Credit Counseling Service, Inc.

River Park Commons, 2403 Sidney Street
Suite 225
Pittsburgh, PA 15203

888-511-2227

www.advantageccs.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD ME MI
MN MO MS ND NE NH NJ NM NY OH OK PA RI SC SD TN TX UT VA VT WA WI
WV WY

Allen Credit and Debt Counseling Agency

800 Dakota Ave.
North Huron, SD 57350

888-415-8173

www.allencredit.com;www.acdcas.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Alliance Credit Counseling, Inc.

8000 Corporate Center Drive #114
Charlotte, NC 28226

704-540-2477

www.knowdebt.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY



American Consumer Credit Counseling, Inc.

130 Rumford Avenue
Suite 202
Auburndale, MA 02466

866-826-6924

www.ConsumerCredit.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

American Debt Resources, Inc.

84 Larkfield Road
East Northport, NY 11731

800-498-0766

www.americandebtresources.com

Provides Services via: Telephone, In Person

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

American Financial Solutions of North Seattle Community Coll

600 University Street
Suite 2409
Seattle, WA 98121

800-894-7240

www.myfinancialgoals.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD ME MI
MN MO MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA RI SC SD TN TX UT VA
VI VT WA WI WV WY

Aurora Family Service, Inc.

1020 N 12th St.
2nd Floor
Milwaukee, WI 53223

414-482-8801

www.creditcounselingwi.org

Provides Services via: In Person

Operates in: WI



Biblical Financial Concepts, Inc.

406 5th Street East
Oneonta, AL 35122

877-240-1398

www.standsurecs.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Black Hills Children's Ranch, Inc.

1644 Concourse Drive
Rapid City, SD 57703

605-348-1608

www.pioneercredit.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Cambridge Credit Counseling Corp.

67 Hunt Street
Agawam, MA 01001

800-403-3433

www.cambridge-credit.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD ME MI
MN MO MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OK PA RI SC SD TN TX UT VA VI VT WA
WI WV WY

Catholic Charities of the Diocese of Green Bay, Inc.

1825 Riverside Drive
Green Bay, WI 54301

920-272-8234

www.newcatholiccharities.org

Provides Services via: In Person

Languages: Hmong, Spanish

Operates in: WI

Catholic Charities of the Diocese of St. Cloud

157 Roosevelt Rd.
Suite 200
St. Cloud, MN 56301

320-650-1664

www.ccstcloud.org

Provides Services via: In Person, Telephone

Operates in: MN



CC Advising, Inc.

703 Washington Ave.
Suite 200
Bay City, MI 48708-5732

1-855-980-6690

www.ccadvising.com

Provides Services via: Internet

Languages: Russian, Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Center for Child and Family Services, Inc.

2021 Cunningham Drive
Suite 400
Hampton, VA 23666

757-826-2227

www.debtfreeonline.com

Provides Services via: In Person

Operates in: VA

Chautauqua Opportunities, Inc.

17 West Courtney Street
Dunkirk, NY 14048

716-366-3333

www.chautauquaopportunities.com

Provides Services via: In Person

Operates in: NY

Chestnut Health Systems, Inc.

1003 Martin Luther King Drive
Bloomington, IL 61701

309-820-3501

www.chestnut.org/credit

Provides Services via: In Person, Internet, Telephone

Operates in: IL

Christian Credit Counselors, Inc.

5838 Edison Place
Suite 130
Carlsbad, MI 92008

760-804-8515

www.christiancreditcounselors.org

Provides Services via: In Person

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: CA



Consolidated Credit Counseling Services, Inc.

5701 West Sunrise Blvd
#200
Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33313

1-800-728-3632

www.consolidatedcreditcounselingservices.org

Provides Services via: In Person
Operates in: FL

Consumer Credit Counseling of Springfield, Missouri, Inc.

1515 S. Glenstone Ave
Springfield, MO 65804

417-889-7474

www.cccsoftheozarks.org;**www.shredyourdebt.org**

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person
Languages: Spanish
Operates in: AR IL IN KS KY MO OK TN

Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Buffalo, Inc.

40 Gardenville Parkway
Suite 300
West Seneca, NY 14224

716-712-2060

www.consumercreditbuffalo.org

Provides Services via: Telephone, In Person
Languages: Spanish
Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Huntington

1130 Memorial Blvd
Huntington, WV 25701

304-522-4321

www.goodwillhunting.org

Provides Services via: Telephone, In Person
Operates in: KY OH WV

Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Northern Illinois, Inc

13707 W. Jackson Street
Suite B
Woodstock, IL 60098

815-338-5757

www.illinoiscccs.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person
Languages: Spanish
Operates in: IL



Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Puerto Rico, Inc.

1607 Avenue Ponce de Leon
Cobian's Plaza, Suite GM-9
San Juan, PR 00909

787-722-8835

www.consumerpr.org; www.floridaconsumercredit.org

Provides Services via: In Person, Internet, Telephone
Languages: Spanish
Operates in: FL PR

Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Rochester, Inc.

1050 University Avenue
Suite A
Rochester, NY 14607

585-546-3440

www.cccsofrochester.org; www.RethinkingDebt.org; www.cccsofcha

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person
Languages: Spanish, Other Americas
Operates in: CT FL GA IA IL IN MA MD MI NH NJ NY OH PA SC TN VA VT

Consumer Credit Counseling Service of Southern Oregon, Inc.

820 Crater Lake Avenue
Suite 202
Medford, OR 97504

541-779-2273

www.improvedcredit.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person
Operates in: CA OR

Consumer Credit Counseling Service of the Mid-Ohio Valley, Inc.

2435 Dudley Avenue
Parkersburg, WV 26101

304-485-3141

www.wvcccs.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person
Languages: Spanish
Operates in: OH WV

Consumer Credit Counseling Service of the Midwest, Inc. dba

690 Taylor Road
Suite 150
Gahanna, OH 43230

800-355-2227

www.apprisen.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person
Languages: Spanish
Operates in: IL IN KS KY MI MO OH TN WV



Consumer Credit Counseling Service of the Savannah Area, Inc

7505 Waters Avenue
Suite C-11
Savannah, GA 31406

912-691-2227

www.cccsavannah.org

Provides Services via: Telephone, In Person
Operates in: GA SC

Consumer Credit Counseling Service, Inc.

1201 W. Walnut
Salina, KS 67401

785-827-6731

www.kscacs.org

Provides Services via: In Person, Internet, Telephone
Languages: Spanish
Operates in: KS

Consumer Credit Counseling Services of Maryland and Delaware

6315 Hillside Court
Suite B
Columbia, MD 21046

800-642-2227

www.cccsmd.org

Provides Services via: Internet
Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA HI IL IN KY LA MA MD ME MI MN MS
NJ NM NY OH OK OR PA SC SD TN TX VA VT WA WI WV

Consumer Credit of Des Moines

6129 SW 63rd Street
Des Moines, IA 50321

515-287-6428

www.consumercredit-dm.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person
Operates in: IA MN

Consumer Debt Counselors, Inc.

831 W. Morse Blvd
Winter Park, FL 32789

407-599-0057

www.consumerdebtcounselors.com

Provides Services via: In Person, Internet, Telephone
Languages: Spanish
Operates in: FL GA IL LA NY WA



Consumer Education Services, Inc., DBA Start Fresh Today

3700 Barrett Drive
Raleigh, NC 27609

919-785-0725

www.cesisolutions.org;www.startfreshtoday.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Credit Advisors Foundation

1818 South 72nd Street
Omaha, NE 68124

402-393-3100

www.creditadvisors.org;www.yourbankruptcypartner.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person

Languages: Korean, Spanish, Thai

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Credit Card Management Services, Inc. d/b/a Debthelper.com

1325 N. Congress Ave.
Suite 201
West Palm Beach, FL 33401

800-920-2262

www.debthelper.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Languages: French, Haitian, Creole, Portuguese, Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Credit Counseling Center

832 Second Street Pike
Richboro, PA 19054

215-348-8003

www.creditcounselingcenter.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Credit Counseling of Arkansas, Inc.

1111 Zion Road
Fayetteville, AR 72703

479-521-8877

www.ccoacares.com

Provides Services via: Telephone, In Person

Languages: Marshallese, Spanish

Operates in: AR MO OK



Cricket Debt Counseling

219 SW Stark Street
Suite 200
Portland, OR 97204

503-353-0400

www.cricketdebt.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Debt Counseling Corp.

990 So. Second Street
Suite 4
Ronkonkoma, NY 11779

631-582-4300

www.debtcounselingcorp.org

Provides Services via: Internet, In Person

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: CA CT FL GA IL KY LA MA MD ME MO NJ NY OH OR PA SD TX VA WA
WI WV

Debt Education and Certification Foundation

112 Goliad Street
Benbrook, TX 76126

866-859-7323

www.bkcert.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Debt Management Credit Counseling Corp.

1100 South Powerline Road
Suite 101
Deerfield Beach, FL 33442

954-418-1466

www.dmcccorp.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY



Debt Reduction Services, Inc.

6213 N. Cloverdale Road
Suite 100
Boise, ID 83713

208-378-0200

www.debtreductionservices.org

Provides Services via: Internet

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD ME MI
MN MO MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA RI SC SD TN TX UT VA
VT WA WI WV WY

Dollar Learning Foundation, Inc.

21550 Oxnard Street
3rd Floor PMB #001
Woodland Hills, FL 91367

877-366-6070

www.dollarbk.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Evergreen Financial Counseling

2156 Church St. SE
Salem, OR 97302

800-581-3513

www.evergreenclass.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Family & Community Services, Inc.

705 Oakwood Street
Suite 118
Ravenna, OH 44266

330-297-0080

www.fcsserves.org;<https://fcsserves.org/program/consumer-cre>

Provides Services via: In Person, Telephone

Operates in: OH PA WV

Family Credit Counseling Service, Inc. d/b/a Family Credit M

4304-06 Charles Street
Rockford, IL 61108

815-484-1600

www.familycredit.org;www.stopthinksave.org;www.kathrynandeli

Provides Services via: In Person

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: IL



Family Financial Education Foundation

724 Front Street
Suite 340
Evanston, WY 82930

307-789-2010

Provides Services via: Telephone, In Person

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Family Foundations of Northeast Florida, Inc.

40 E. Adams Street
Suite 120
Jacksonville, FL 32202

904-396-4846**www.familyfoundations.org**

Provides Services via: In Person, Internet, Telephone

Operates in: FL

Family Service Association of Sheboygan, Inc.

1930 N. 8th Street
Sheboygan, WI 53081

920-458-3784**www.cccsonline.org**

Provides Services via: Telephone, In Person

Operates in: MN WI

Family Services, Inc.

8084 Rivers Ave.
Suite 100
North Charleston, SC 29406

843-628-3000**www.originsc.org**

Provides Services via: In Person, Internet, Telephone

Operates in: SC

Garden State Consumer Credit Counseling, Inc., d/b/a Navicor

200 U.S. Highway 9
Manalapan, NJ 07726

732-409-6281**www.navicoresolutions.org**

Provides Services via: Internet

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY



Goodwill Industries of North Central Wisconsin, Inc.

1800 Appleton Road
Menasha, WI 54952

920-886-1000

www.goodwillncw.org

Provides Services via: In Person, Internet, Telephone
Operates in: WI

GreenPath, Inc., dba Greenpath Financial Wellness

36500 Corporate Drive
Farmington Hills, MI 48331

248-553-5400

www.greenpath.com

Provides Services via: Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Hananwill Credit Counseling

115 North Cross Street
Robinson, IL 62454

877-544-5560

www.hananwill.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Operates in: AR AZ CO FL GA IA IL IN KS KY LA MA MD MI MN MO NE NJ NV OH OK
PA TN TX VA WA WI

Housing and Credit Counseling, Inc.

1195 SW Buchanan Street
Suite 101
Topeka, KS 66604

800-383-0217

<https://housingandcredit.org>

Provides Services via: In Person, Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: KS MO

InCharge Debt Solutions

5750 Major Blvd
Suite 300
Orlando, NV 32819

866-729-0049

www.personalfinanceeducation.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY



Lutheran Social Services of South Dakota

705 East 41st Street
Suite 100
Sioux Falls, SD 57105

605-330-2700

www.lsssd.org

Provides Services via: Internet
Languages: Spanish
Operates in: IA MN NE SD

MG Financial Counseling Inc.

2548 W. 235th Street
Torrance, CA 90505

800-306-6432

Provides Services via: Telephone
Languages: Spanish
Operates in: CA FL TX

Money Management International, Inc.

12603 Southwest Freeway
Suite 450
Stafford, TX 77477

(877) 964-2227

www.moneymanagement.org

Provides Services via: In Person, Telephone
Languages: Spanish, Swedish
Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

MoneySharp Credit Counseling Inc.

203 N. LaSalle
Suite 2100
Chicago, IL 60601

866-200-6825

www.moneyssharp.org

Provides Services via: Internet
Languages: Spanish
Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

National Budget Planners of South Florida, Inc.

350 Sonic Avenue
2nd Floor
Livermore, FL 94551

800-582-8839

www.nationalbudget.org

Provides Services via: Telephone, In Person
Languages: Spanish
Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA ME MI
MN MO MP ND NE NJ NM NV OH OK OR PA PR SC SD TX UT VA VI WA WV WY



National Debt Management, Inc.

17520 West 12 Mile Road
Suite 105
Southfield, MI 48076

248-200-2106

www.nationaldebtmtgt.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person

Languages: Arabic

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Northwest Counseling Service, Inc.

6521 North Broad Street
Philadelphia, PA 19126

215-324-7500

www.nwcsinc.org;www.nreiinstitute.org;www.ascheexec.org

Provides Services via: Telephone, In Person

Languages: Other, Asia

Operates in: DC DE FL NJ NY OH PA TX VA

Northwest Michigan Community Action Agency, Inc.

3963 Three Mile Road
Traverse City, MI 49686

231-947-3780

www.nmcaa.net

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person

Operates in: MI

One Stop Career Center of PR, Inc.

Plaza Universidad 2000
839 Calle Anasco, Suite 5
San Juan, PR 00928

787-296-1785

www.onestopcareerpr.org

Provides Services via: In Person, Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: PR

Rushmore Consumer Credit Resource Center

2310 N. Maple Avenue
Rapid City, SD 57701

605-348-4550

www.cccsbh.com;www.acce-online.com

Provides Services via: Internet

Operates in: ND NE SD WY



SafeGuard Credit Counseling Services, Inc

67 Fort Salonga Road
Northport, NY 11768

800-673-6993

www.safeguardcredit.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: CA IA IL MN MO NY PA TX VT WI

Springboard Nonprofit Consumer Credit Management, Inc., dba

4351 Latham Street
Riverside, CA 92501

951-781-0114

www.bkhhelp.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone, In Person

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

Summit Financial Education, Inc.

4800 E. Flower Street
Tucson, AZ 85712

1-800-780-5965

www.summitfe.org

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD ME MI
MN MO MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA RI SC SD TN TX UT VA
VT WA WI WV WY

Take Charge America, Inc.

20620 North 19th Avenue
Phoenix, AZ 85027-3585

623-266-6100

www.takechargeamerica.org

Provides Services via: Internet

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

The Family Center of Columbus, Inc.

1350 15th Avenue
Columbus, GA 31901

706-327-3239

www.thefamilyctr.org

Provides Services via: In Person, Internet, Telephone

Operates in: GA



The Kingdom Ministries, Inc.

2690 Spottswood Ave.
Memphis, TN 38114

901-552-5131

www.thekingdomministries.com

Provides Services via: Telephone, In Person

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MD ME MI
MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK PA PR RI SC SD TN TX UT
VA VI VT WA WI WV WY

The University of Tennessee Extension

2621 Morgan Circle
218 Morgan Hall
Knoxville, TN 37996-4530

865-974-8198

<https://ag.tennessee.edu/fcs/Pages/default.aspx>

Provides Services via: In Person

Operates in: KY TN

Urgent Credit Counseling, Inc.

219 SW Stark Street
Suite 200
Portland, OR 97204

866-233-1940

www.urgentco.com

Provides Services via: Internet, Telephone

Languages: Spanish

Operates in: AK AR AZ CA CO CT DC DE FL GA GU HI IA ID IL IN KS KY LA MA MD
ME MI MN MO MP MS MT ND NE NH NJ NM NV NY OH OK OR PA PR RI SC SD
TN TX UT VA VI VT WA WI WV WY



Where to Get a Free Credit Report

You're entitled to one free copy of your credit report every 12 months from each of the three nationwide credit reporting companies. Starting in 2020, because of the economic impact of COVID-19, the three major credit bureaus have been offering free weekly credit reports. Order online from annualcreditreport.com, the only authorized website for free credit reports, or call 1-877-322-8228. You will need to provide your name, address, social security number, and date of birth to verify your identity.

Beware of other “Free Credit Report” websites

Other websites that claim to offer “free credit reports,” “free credit scores,” or “free credit monitoring” are not part of the legally mandated free annual credit report program. In some cases, the “free” product comes with strings attached. For example, some sites sign you up for a supposedly “free” service that converts to one you have to pay for after a trial period. If you don’t cancel during the trial period, you may be unwittingly agreeing to let the company start charging fees to your credit card.



Glossary

This glossary contains the most important terms used in this publication.

Bad Debt	Debt, such as credit card debt, that will not increase in value or help you earn more money.
Balance Transfer	Using a lower-interest or no-interest credit card to pay off a high-interest credit card.
Collateral	Something of value used to back up debt.
Compound Interest	Interest that must be paid on the principal amount and other interest added onto it.
Credit	Money that is given to you to use.
Debt	Money that is owed.
Debt-to-Income (DTI) Ratio	A comparison of your monthly income and debt; the lower the percentage, the better the ratio.
Debtor	A person who borrows money and owes a debt.
Deferment	A temporary delay on student loan payments without having to pay interest.
Fixed Expenses	Expenses, such as a mortgage payment, that do not vary from month to month.
Forbearance	Permission to stop making student loan payments or to make reduced student loan payments for up to a year while still paying interest.
Good Debt	Debt, such as student loans and a mortgage, that will help you earn more or increase in value.
Home-Equity Loan	A loan based on the value of your house.
Interest	Money a debtor must pay to borrow principal.
Principal	Amount of money borrowed, not including interest.
Secured Debt	Debt backed by something of value, such as a home.



Simple Interest

Interest based only on the principal.

Variable Expenses

Expenses, such as groceries, that vary from month to month.



SOURCES

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<http://money.howstuffworks.com/personal-finance/debt-management/debt1.htm>
<http://www.bankrate.com/finance/credit-cards/want-a-lower-credit-card-rate-just-ask.aspx>
<http://www.businessinsider.com/compound-interest-and-credit-card-debt-2013-2>
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<http://www.realsimple.com/work-life/money/eliminate-credit-card-debt>
<http://www.uscourts.gov/services-forms/bankruptcy/bankruptcy-basics/chapter-7-bankruptcy-basics>
<https://lifel hacker.com/5849885/should-i-take-advantage-of-credit-card-balance-transfer-offers>
<https://lifel hacker.com/5850711/build-credit-by-using-the-right-prepaid-credit-cards>
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<https://studentaid.ed.gov/sa/repay-loans/consolidation>
[https://www.360financialliteracy.org/Get-Started/What-do-YOU-want-to-do/Your-Plan/\(goal0\)/151216](https://www.360financialliteracy.org/Get-Started/What-do-YOU-want-to-do/Your-Plan/(goal0)/151216)
<https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0150-coping-debt>
<https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0153-choosing-credit-counselor>
<https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0155-free-credit-reports>
<https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0205-using-credit-card>
<https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0332-credit-debit-and-charge-cards>
<https://www.consumerfinance.gov/ask-cfpb/how-do-i-get-and-keep-a-good-credit-score-en-318/>
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<https://www.credit.org/2011/04/07/debt-to-income-ratio/>
<https://www.debt.org/bankruptcy/>
<https://www.debt.org/consolidation/>
<https://www.debt.org/management-plans/>
<https://www.debt.org/settlement/>
<https://www.discover.com/credit-cards/resources/balance-transfer>
<https://www.ftc.gov/faq/consumer-protection/get-my-free-credit-report>
<https://www.justice.gov/ust/list-credit-counseling-agencies-approved-pursuant-11-usc-111>
<https://www.thebalance.com/what-is-interest-315436>
<https://www.wellsfargo.com/goals-credit/smarter-credit/credit-101/debt-to-income-ratio/>





<https://greyhouse.weissratings.com>

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