Decorating Your First Apartment

Whether you are moving out of a dorm room or your parents’ house, renting your first apartment is an exciting experience. Decorating your new apartment to suit your tastes and styles is a terrific first step in the journey toward your new, independent life.

Begin by determining your most pressing needs, such as furniture and storage requirements. Make sure you take into account your apartment’s dimensions and how you will move things in and out. Next, and perhaps most importantly, figure out a budget to help you decide just how much you can afford to spend before heading to the store. Bear in mind that there is a difference between being able to purchase an item and being able to afford it.

Create a Decorating Plan

First, create a plan to make the most of your space and decorating budget. Check out your new apartment to get a feel for the size and shape of the rooms; the location of electrical outlets, cable hookups and phone jacks; and any other interesting features like bay windows or intricate woodworking. Knowing where the phone needs to be plugged in or where the television has to go to reach the cable hookup will help you determine a rough layout for each room. If you want cable television or a dedicated fax or modem line, be sure to allow for these in your budget.

See which rooms get the most daylight and where you will need light fixtures. Assess any furniture you already own and decide where it should go in your new place.

Next, make a list of priorities for new furniture and other home furnishings such as a comforter and blankets, rugs, a television and kitchen supplies. Furniture that meets several needs, such as a convertible sofa or a chest that doubles as an end table, are good pieces with which to start. Make sure you include basics such as:

- A bed, futon or convertible couch for sleeping
- A table or desk
- Places to sit, such as chairs, a couch, loveseat or recliner
- Lights, such as lamps, track lights or overhead fixtures
- Kitchen and bath items, such as plates, glasses, pots and pans, towels and a shower curtain

Budget for Your Purchases

Outfitting your first apartment usually means working within a limited budget. Before buying, comparison shop in your area or use an Internet shopping guide to get a feel for price ranges and styles. Resale stores, used-furniture outlets and garage and estate sales can be great sources for furniture and other home items. Discount stores also offer inexpensive items for every room in your apartment.

Determine a total decorating budget and a price range for each piece of new furniture. As you determine what to buy, remember that your personal tastes will evolve over time. It may make more sense to go with inexpensive furnishings now so you can try out and experiment with different styles.

Giving Your Apartment a Personal Touch

Your goal in furnishing your new apartment might be to create a comfortable environment that says, "You are home," when you walk in.

To make your new apartment feel like home, start by determining which types of furnishings you like best. Websites, magazines, books, your friends’ apartments and home stores are good places to look for design inspiration. For example, you may prefer a clean look with neutral-colored walls, streamlined furniture and no clutter. Perhaps your style may be bohemian with a mix of colors, one-of-a-kind accessories and vintage furniture.
Other styles to consider:

> Match your passion for world music with ethnic furnishings from Asia, South America or Africa.
> Look for retro objects and furniture from the 1920s and 1930s art-deco period or modern furniture and accessories designed for clean-lined functionality. Even the styles of the 1950s are coming back!
> Visit antique shops, second-hand stores and yard sales for affordable, durable furnishings.
> See if there are any furniture factories in your area. They often have outlets offering deep discounts. You may want to rent a trailer to save on shipping costs if you are buying several pieces.

Think about how you can blend your old furnishings into a style you like. Try using unique objects and mementos to personalize your apartment's overall look. Framed photographs and prints, perhaps your own works, are a great way to add your own custom touch.

**Buying Furniture**

Since new furniture is expensive, advance planning is essential. Keep in mind that you will probably move at some point, so furniture that can be disassembled or easily moved is desirable. Before heading to the store, make sure you measure the dimensions of the space for any new pieces of furniture. Measure doorways and hallways so you will know in advance if you will have trouble moving your new couch into the living room or that queen-size mattress into a small bedroom. You can gain an extra inch or two by carefully taking the door off its hinges.

Check with stores about their delivery policies and charges. Ask whether you can take your furniture with you the same day. Keep in mind that if you are ordering brand-new furniture with custom upholstery it can sometimes take weeks before your new furniture will arrive.

**Enhancing a Small Apartment**

If your landlord allows you to paint, you can make a small room appear larger with light colors on the walls and ceiling. To make your apartment feel bigger, keep your furnishings spare and uncluttered. A decorative mirror and well-placed lights can also give the illusion of a larger room.

**Maximizing Storage Space**

Most first apartments are small and require some creativity to store extra clothes and belongings. Look for furniture that contains storage space. An ottoman that opens up to hold extra blankets or a chest that holds your television and also stores out-of-season sweaters can be tremendous space savers. Also look for ways to make the most of the space you already have. You can increase kitchen-cabinet space by using a wall rack for pots and pans. Maximize closet space with organizers for clothes and shoes, and add space to your bathroom with a shower rack to hold soap and shampoo. A small cabinet that fits under a sink or above a towel rack also can add extra space at minimal cost. It may be worthwhile to rent a small storage space rather than clutter your living space with pieces you cannot use but with which you are not willing to part.

**Additional Information**

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