



Essential Money Guides

The path to financial well-being begins with understanding the basics of personal finance.

Take the first step with these Essential Money Guides, covering topics such as credit and debit card use, budgeting, and the keys to establishing and maintaining good credit. Read on to discover the essentials of smart money management.

Budgeting Basics



Credit History



Credit Card Basics



Debit Card Basics



Identity Theft



Prepaid Card Basics





ESSENTIAL MONEY GUIDES

Budgeting Basics

Learn to create and stick to a budget.

Create Your Budget

A budget helps you pay your bills on time, be prepared for emergencies and reach your financial goals. Take control of your finances by following these five steps.

1. Set Guidelines

If you choose to spend more on some expenses, remember to reduce other costs accordingly. Set guidelines on how much money should go toward different expenses.

2. Add Up Your Income

To set a monthly budget, you need to know how much money you're earning. Make sure you include all income like salary, interest, pension and any other sources.

3. Estimate Expenses

Reevaluate needs and wants when determining monthly fixed and flexible expenses.

4. Find the Difference

Subtract your expenses from your income to find how much disposable income you have. If it's a negative number, reduce your expenses.

5. Track, Trim and Target

After creating your budget, track your actual income and expenses. You may be surprised to see what you spend on unnecessary expenses. Adjust your budget to fit your lifestyle and financial goals.

Elements of a Budget

There are some basic guidelines on how much of your income should go toward different expenses (after taxes). You can adjust these numbers to fit your finances.



Smartphone apps and online services can help you create a personalized budget and will automatically track your spending for you.

Average Americans' Spending Habits

- 25%** Housing
- 20%** Transportation
- 14%** Life Insurance & Pensions
- 10%** Groceries
- 10%** Health Care
- 10%** Utilities
- 8%** Entertainment

Source: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015



Reevaluate your budget any time there are significant changes in your income or expenses, like a salary raise or a change in rent.

Getting Started

The first step in creating a budget is to determine how much income you have and how you're spending it. Use our Budget Worksheet to gain a better understanding of your current budget and how much you should be saving and spending in order to reach your financial goals. Remember that fixed expenses stay the same from one month to the next, while flexible expenses are costs that change each month.

Budget Worksheet

Monthly Net Income	
Income #1	\$
Income #2	\$
Interest	\$
Other	\$
Total Income	\$
Monthly Flexible Expenses	
Food/Groceries	\$
Entertainment	\$
Medical	\$
Utilities	\$
Other	\$
Total Flexible Expenses	\$
Monthly Fixed Expenses	
Housing	\$
Debt Payments	\$
Transportation	\$
Insurance	\$
Other	\$
Total Fixed Expenses	\$
Total Expenses	
Total Monthly Income	\$
Total Monthly Expenses <small>(Add flexible and fixed expenses)</small>	\$
Total for Saving & Investing <small>(Subtract total monthly expenses from total monthly income)</small>	\$

Get SMART About Expenses

With your budget in place, let the tracking begin. After determining where your money is going, it will be easier to make decisions and gain control of your spending. Cutting back is usually a better place to start than completely removing an expense. After trimming extra spending, it helps to have a goal to save for each month. Setting a goal needs to be SMART:

S	Specific enough to suggest action.
M	Measurable to know when you have met your goal.
A	Attainable goals that are reasonable and possible.
R	Relevant goals that make sense for your life.
T	Time-related objectives with a target date.



Reallocate the money you have saved each month and divert it to an emergency fund for unexpected expenses.

This guide is one of a series on *Essential Money Guides*.

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- Credit History
- Credit Card Basics
- Debit Card Basics
- Identity Theft
- Prepaid Card Basics

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ESSENTIAL MONEY GUIDES

Credit History

Your credit history and how it affects your future.

What Is a Credit History?

To predict your financial future, many businesses look at your financial past through your credit report. A credit history is a profile within a credit report that shows how you've handled money in the past.

Your credit report is kept on file by three independent credit bureaus: Experian, TransUnion and Equifax.

It May Include Information Like:

- How promptly you have paid off credit cards and loans.
- How reliably you have paid other bills, like rent and utilities.
- Your total outstanding debts.
- Your available credit on mortgages, bank cards, auto loans and other lines of credit.

You are entitled to receive a free copy of your credit report once every 12 months. Order yours online from annualcreditreport.com or call 1-877-322-8228. You will need to verify your identity with your name, birth date, address and Social Security number.

Who Can See Your Credit Report?

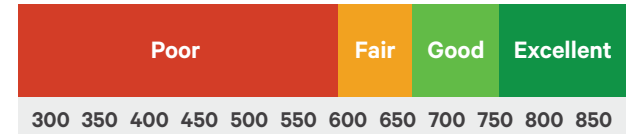
Your credit report can and most likely will be reviewed by anyone planning to give you a loan or credit, such as:



Anyone with a legitimate business need can access your credit report, though a potential employer typically requires your written consent to do so.



You can download free resources and estimate your FICO® credit scores online at whatsmyscore.org.



Your Credit Score

When you apply for credit, lenders determine risk by checking your credit scores (also known as FICO® scores). Credit scores are calculated by measuring your ability to repay credit and are recorded in your credit reports. FICO® scores range from 300 to 850, and only 1 percent of Americans have a perfect score according to the Fair Isaac Corporation (FICO). The higher your score, the lower your perceived risk to a lender, and the more likely you are to receive favorable credit terms. If you have a low credit score, you may be rejected or charged a higher rate of interest.

Eight Tips to Keep Your Credit Score Strong

- ✓ Complete credit applications carefully and accurately.
- ✓ Use your credit cards responsibly: don't let them reach their limit or spend beyond your means.
- ✓ Attempt to pay your credit card balance in full each month, but at least make the minimum payment by the due date.
- ✓ If you have problems paying your bills, contact your creditors. They'll often work with you to figure out a payment plan.
- ✓ If you move, let your creditors know your new address as soon as possible to avoid missing bills or other important correspondence.
- ✓ If your credit card is lost or stolen, report it immediately.
- ✓ Review your credit reports periodically and report any errors immediately.
- ✓ Establish a consistent work history.



If your credit card is lost or stolen, report it to the issuer immediately to protect your credit score from being affected.

Correcting Credit Report Errors

If your credit report contains any mistakes, credit bureaus are legally bound to correct them at no charge if you inform them of the problem in writing within 30 days of receiving your report. Be sure to include documentation to support your claim. If you're not satisfied with the result of the bureau's investigation, you can send a written statement of up to 100 words to clarify your claim. In many cases, the bureau will include your statement with any future reports that contain the disputed information.

Avoid "Fast Fixes" For Accurate Credit Problems

If you've had any late payments, foreclosures, or repossessions, this information stays in your credit report for up to 7 years. If you've filed for bankruptcy, this information can stay in your report for up to 10 years.

Late Payments, Foreclosures, Repossessions

7 Years

Bankruptcy

10 Years

Beware of companies who claim they can "fix" or "remove" these issues for a fee: it is legally impossible to alter an accurate credit history.

If you find yourself in financial trouble, contact the National Foundation for Credit Counseling (NFCC), the nation's largest national nonprofit credit counseling network, by calling 1-800-388-2227 or visiting nfcc.org.

Credit Bureaus

Equifax

Report Order: 1-800-685-1111
Fraud Hotline: 1-888-766-0008
equifax.com







Experian

Report Order: 1-888-397-3742
Fraud Hotline: 1-888-397-3742
experian.com

TransUnion

Report Order: 1-877-322-8228
Fraud Hotline: 1-800-680-7289
tuc.com

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ESSENTIAL MONEY GUIDES

Credit Card Basics

What you need to know about managing your credit card.

The Convenience of Credit

Credit cards can be powerful financial tools for you and your family, and as with all financial products, they need to be used carefully. A credit card is a powerful payment option that allows you to purchase necessary items now and pay later.

Advantages to Using a Credit Card:

- Being able to buy needed items immediately and earn rewards for purchases.
- Credit cards can also offer more security than other options, as they protect from fraud and eliminate the need to carry large amounts of cash.

With These Advantages Come Responsibilities

Using a credit card is like taking out a loan. If you don't pay your card balance in full each month, you'll start paying interest on that loan.

- Credit cards have to be managed wisely in order for you to avoid paying interest and accruing debt.
- Understand all terms and conditions.
- Stay on top of payments and realize the true cost of purchases made with credit.
- Maximize the benefits of credit while minimizing the risks to become a responsible credit card owner.

Choose Wisely

The best way to maximize the benefits of credit cards is to understand your financial lifestyle—what you need, what you want and how much money you spend. Begin your search for a credit card by determining key factors like how often you'll use it, whether you'll want to use it overseas and if the financial institution that offers it has a branch near you. It's important to make sure you know the terms of the credit card in the following areas:

- Annual Percentage Rates (APRs) and whether rates are fixed or variable
- Annual, late and overdraft-limit fees
- Credit limit on account
- Grace periods before interest begins accruing
- Rewards including airline miles or cash back



Many banks offer lucrative travel rewards deals if you are willing to pay the annual credit card fees.

Use Your Credit Card Responsibly

Except in case of emergency, you should use your credit card the way you would use a debit card. Don't charge purchases that you can't afford to pay for. You should keep track of your spending and ensure you can make your payments on time. Missed payments and compound interest can lead to debt, so manage your spending and make payments on time.



Secured cards can be a good option for those who don't qualify for unsecured credit cards. They limit the credit line to an initial cash deposit carried on the card.

Understand Your Rights

Credit card holders are entitled to protections. Zero liability means you are not responsible for fraudulent charges when you report them promptly. In some cases, you have the right to dispute purchases with merchants for unsatisfactory products or services. If you see fraudulent activity on your card or need to dispute a charge, call your financial institution immediately.

Write It Out

Do you have a clear idea of how much debt you have? Many people may avoid thinking about their debt load because it causes stress. Learn to cope with debt by paying it off strategically.

- Start by making a list of everything you owe, whether it's a mortgage, a credit card or student loans.
- Focus on paying off the most urgent debts—loans with the highest interest rates cause the greatest financial impact if you don't pay them off.
- Cut back on other spending so you can pay off debt faster. It will save you money in interest and allow you to focus on other financial goals.

The True Cost of Credit

If you don't pay off your credit card balance every month, the interest that adds up could mean you'll be paying more than you planned. See how much extra you might pay on a \$1,000 credit card purchase with varying interest rates.

Total Purchase Amount The balance due on your credit card	\$1,000	\$1,000	\$1,000
Credit Card APR The annual interest rate on your credit card	10%	15%	25%
Monthly Payment The minimum monthly payment	\$40	\$40	\$40
Number of Months to Pay Off Purchase Amount* Time it will take to pay off the balance	29	31	36
Total Finance Charge The total amount of money you will pay in interest alone	\$126.02	\$206.50	\$427.22
Total Cost The final amount you will pay for your purchase	\$1,126.02	\$1,206.50	\$1,427.22

*In general, this assumes that your account has no new charges and that your Annual Percentage Rate does not change.

Debt Management Resources

There's help available when you're struggling financially. If you think you're falling behind in payments, credit counseling resources are available at little or no cost.

National Foundation for Credit Counseling

1-800-388-2227

nfcc.org

The Federal Trade Commission

1-877-382-4357







ftc.gov/bcp/menus/consumer/credit/debt.shtm

American Consumer Credit Counseling

1-800-769-3571

consumercredit.com

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Debit Card Basics

What you need to know about using your debit card.

Using Debit Cards

While credit cards allow you to purchase now and pay later, debit card transactions are paid instantly, not in the future. A debit card is tied directly to a checking account, so when you make a purchase with that card, money is withdrawn from your account.

Consumers concerned with debt load can limit their spending by using debit cards, which only allow them to spend what is in their limited checking account funds.

Choosing a Debit Card

Selecting a debit card can be simpler than choosing a credit card—for example, you won't need to think about interest rates—but there are a few key factors to consider.

- Look for banks or credit unions with branches near you.
- Investigate fees the bank will charge if you withdraw money from another institution's ATM.
- Consider transfer fees if you think you'll want to move money between your checking and savings accounts frequently.
- Select a debit card that will let you manage purchases, checks and bill paying from your smartphone.

Tips for Using Your Card

When using a debit card, consider these tips for managing your account.

- Keep sales and ATM receipts or copies.
- Always know your current bank account balance and available funds.
- Keep track of all transactions, including withdrawals that are still pending.
- Review monthly statements carefully. If you suspect a mistake or fraudulent use, contact your financial institution immediately.



Your financial institution may send alerts to your mobile phone when debit card activity exceeds your dollar limit, your online ID or passwords change, or large transactions are made.

Secure Your Information

Use of your debit card will require a Personal Identification Number (PIN) for security. Choose a unique number. Avoid obvious choices like your address or birthday. Keep the PIN private.



To keep your debit card PIN safe, avoid giving it out over the phone or in an email.

Know Your Limits

Many debit cards have daily spending and cash withdrawal limits that protect you in case your card is stolen. Remember, your card might be declined if you exceed your limits, even if you have enough money in the bank. Know your limits and contact your lender if you need to raise or lower amounts.

When you make a purchase, withdraw money from your account or pay bills in amounts that exceed your account balance, you may be subject to overdraft fees. Some financial institutions offer overdraft protection, and they'll cover your check or debit transaction so it doesn't bounce. But you may be charged fees for being overdrawn and for each purchase that uses overdraft protection. Balance your account regularly to avoid added fees.

Temporary Holds on Cards

Sometimes when you use your debit card for a "credit-type" transaction like reserving a hotel room, your financial institution may put a temporary hold on your account. Once the transaction is complete and the final bill is settled, the hold will be released.

Many people opt to use a credit card in these situations so they don't tie up their checking account balance.

Extra Protections

Many of the same features and protections offered by credit cards are also offered by debit cards, including:

Zero Liability

You are generally not liable for unauthorized purchases on your debit card as long as you notify your financial institution immediately.

Funds and Fraud

Federal law mandates that financial institutions replace funds for losses resulting from fraudulent use within 10 business days of notification.







The Right to Dispute

You may have dispute resolution options should an issue arise with a debit card purchase. This often applies to signed purchases only, but check with your card issuer.

Plan Ahead

Like credit cards, debit cards are accepted at millions of locations worldwide. Before you travel, remember to notify your financial institution of your plans. Using your card across state and international lines can cause your institution to flag and even freeze your card.

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ESSENTIAL MONEY GUIDES

Identity Theft

How to safeguard your identity and financial information from theft.

What to Do If Your Identity Is Stolen

When your personal and financial information falls into the wrong hands, the consequences can be devastating. Identity thieves can steal money from your accounts, open new credit cards and apply for loans. This can have lasting effects on your credit score, so it's important to take steps to protect your identity.

Credit Bureaus

Contact the fraud departments of each of the credit bureaus listed on the back of this guide immediately if you are a victim of identity theft. Request a fraud alert on your file; doing so will not damage your credit score. You can also request a security freeze, preventing credit issuers from obtaining access to your credit files without your permission, hence keeping thieves from opening up new credit cards or loans.

Law Enforcement

Report identity theft to your local police department. If the crime occurred in an area other than where you live, you may wish to report it to law enforcement there as well. The police will create an identity theft report and give you a copy that you can send to the three credit bureaus.

Federal Trade Commission (FTC)

The FTC does not investigate identity theft cases, but can share your information with investigators.

Banks and Credit Card Issuers

Report the theft to your credit card issuers and banks and request replacement cards with new account numbers. If some of your checks were stolen, you can ask your bank to stop payment on them.

Five Ways to Protect Yourself

There are some simple steps you can take to reduce the risk of becoming a victim of identity theft or card fraud.

1. Practice Safe Internet Use

Delete spam emails that ask for personal information, and keep your anti-virus and anti-spyware software up-to-date. Shop online only with secure web pages (check the address bar for "https" next to an image of a lock). Never email credit card numbers, Social Security numbers or other personal information.

2. Destroy Personal Financial Records

Shred unneeded credit card statements, ATM and debit card receipts and other documents that contain personal financial information.

3. Guard Your Social Security Number

Thieves seek your Social Security number because it can help them access your credit and open bogus accounts. Never carry your card; instead, memorize your number and store the card securely.

4. Check Your Credit Report

Regularly review your credit reports for suspicious activity. You can request one free copy of each report per year at annualcreditreport.com or contact the three credit bureaus directly.

5. Beware of Scams

Never give out personal information via phone or email to someone claiming to represent your bank, credit card company, a government agency, a charity or other organization. If you think the request is legitimate, contact the company directly to confirm their claims.



Children are at high risk for identity theft and fraud. Identity thieves can use their Social Security numbers to illegally obtain jobs, credit accounts, mortgages and car loans. Use the same precautions handling your child's personal information as with your own and follow the same theft report procedures.

Tips For Travelers

Whether you're traveling for business or pleasure, be on the alert for opportunities that thieves may try to take advantage of:

Receipts. Don't leave credit card receipts on restaurant tables; sign and hand them directly to the server. Keep your copy of all receipts.

Wallets. Instead of carrying your wallet in your pocket or bag, consider using a travel pouch worn under your clothing to keep it out of sight.

Checks. Leave your checkbook at home, safely stored in a locked safe or drawer.

Phones. Always protect your smartphone with complex passwords or passcodes. Turn off Bluetooth as a security measure, and be aware that many free Wi-Fi networks are not secure.

Mail. Put a delivery hold on your mail whenever you travel. It can be delivered the day after you return from your trip.

Hotels. Lock up all valuables in rooms or hotel safes while you are out, including laptops, passports and other documents containing personal identifying information.

Airplanes. Don't put any items that contain your Social Security number, card or account numbers in checked luggage. Always carry those items securely in carry-on luggage.



Send police reports to the credit bureaus by certified mail, return receipt requested.

Identity Theft Resources

If you are a victim of identity theft, your first action should be to contact the fraud departments of the three main credit bureaus listed below. Request that a fraud alert be placed in your file.

Federal Trade Commission's Identity Theft Hotline

1.877.IDTHEFT (1-877-438-4338)

Credit Bureaus

Equifax

Report Order: 1-800-685-1111 / Fraud Hotline: 1-888-766-0008
equifax.com







Experian

Report Order: 1-888-397-3742 / Fraud Hotline: 1-888-397-3742
experian.com

TransUnion

Report Order: 1-877-322-8228 / Fraud Hotline: 1-800-680-7289
tuc.com

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ESSENTIAL MONEY GUIDES

Prepaid Card Basics

What you should know about using prepaid cards.

What Are Prepaid Cards?

A prepaid card can be loaded with funds to make purchases anywhere a debt card is accepted. It looks like a debit or credit card and is a safe alternative to carrying cash and paying check-cashing fees. They are a good option for traveling and are a popular gift-giving idea because they are widely accepted.

Unlike credit cards, you cannot take on debt with a prepaid card, nor are prepaid cards linked to your bank account like debit cards. A prepaid card has a zero balance until money is added to it. When you make a purchase with a prepaid card, the amount is subtracted from the balance on the card. Once the balance reaches zero, the card is empty.

With Prepaid Cards You Can:

- ✓ Make purchases in person, online or by phone
- ✓ Give gifts to friends and family
- ✓ Withdraw cash from an ATM or bank
- ✓ Receive wages or funds by direct deposit to the card
- ✓ Pay bills
- ✓ Once the card balance reaches zero, it can be thrown away unless it is a reloadable card

Types of Prepaid Cards

Open Loop. An electronic payment network-branded card honored wherever the network is accepted.

Closed Loop. A card used for transactions exclusively at a particular merchant's locations.

Reloadable Cards. A prepaid card that you can add money to.

Gift Cards. A non-reloadable card that can be given as a gift and used until the balance is zero.

Teen and Student Cards. Parents can teach teens and students financial responsibility while monitoring their spending with these cards.

Travel Cards. An alternative to cash and traveler's checks, some cards offer lost luggage reimbursement, emergency card replacement and zero liability.

Payroll Cards. A card provided by your employer to receive your paycheck.

Government Cards. Used by government agencies, they can pay certain benefits such as unemployment insurance.



Some prepaid cards can have money reloaded onto them so they can continue to be used. Others, such as gift cards, can be discarded when all of the funds are spent.

Prepaid Card Features

There are many prepaid cards out there, and choosing the right one is important. What features are most important to you?

Reloadable

Some prepaid cards allow you to add money once the balance reaches zero. Gift cards are not reloadable.

Liability Protection

Some prepaid cards will protect your balance in case the card is lost or stolen. Look for a card that offers a zero-liability policy.

Expiration Dates

While many cards do not expire, some carry monthly maintenance fees, which can reduce your card balance. Prepaid cards are best for storing money you intend to spend in the short term.

Low Fees

Is there an activation fee charged when you set up the card? What are the fees charged for ATM withdrawals? Take note of any fees associated with the card you choose.

Protect Yourself and Your Money

Once you've chosen a prepaid card or received one, it's up to you to keep your money safe.

Use the Card Carefully

Keep track of your balance so you don't get charged a fee for trying to spend more than is available. If your wages or other benefits are deposited directly onto the card, make sure you know the amount and timing of the deposit.

Keep Your PIN Secret

Pick a number that's hard for someone else to guess—not your birthday or address. Don't tell it to anyone or write it where it could be easily found.

Remember Important Info

Make sure you know your card issuer's policies for lost or stolen cards and keep your card number and the customer service phone number in a safe place at home.

Act Quickly

If your card is lost or stolen, let the card issuer know right away. Most card issuers will freeze the funds so the card can't be used and send you a new card with your remaining balance on it.







Prepaid Card Resources

To learn about prepaid card insurance coverage, visit the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation site at [fdic.gov](https://www.fdic.gov)


Or call 1-877-275-3342 (877-ASK-FDIC)

To see frequently asked questions about prepaid cards, visit the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau website at [consumerfinance.gov](https://www.consumerfinance.gov)

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