

THE TENANT'S CAMERA IS A WITNESS

How to Properly Document Move-In, Move-Out & Problems During Your Lease

A Practical Tenant Documentation Newsletter

A move-in or move-out video should be more than a quick walkthrough of an apartment. If a dispute later develops over property condition, repairs, security deposits, damage, habitability, or responsibility for a defect, the usefulness of the recording may depend on whether someone else can understand **what happened, where it happened, when it happened, and what the recording actually shows**.

The goal is not simply to accumulate photographs and videos. The goal is to create an organized, contemporaneous record that can be authenticated and compared with other evidence.

YOUR VIDEO SHOULD ANSWER FIVE QUESTIONS

Every important photograph or recording should help establish:

WHAT happened?

WHERE did it happen?

WHEN did it happen?

WHO observed or reported it?

WHAT happened next?

Think of your documentation as creating a timeline rather than merely taking pictures.

1. MAKE DATE AND TIME PART OF THE EVIDENCE

Phones ordinarily preserve metadata, but tenants should consider creating additional visible evidence of when important photographs and videos were made.

One useful technique is to use a **digital watch or another independently functioning date-and-time display**.

At the beginning of an important video: show the digital watch clearly enough that the date and time can be read; keep the recording running; move directly from the watch to the room, appliance, leak, wall, ceiling, window, or other condition being documented; and avoid unnecessary cuts or edits.

For photographs, take several images: one showing the watch and condition together where practical, another establishing the surrounding area, and close-ups showing the defect.

Why use a digital watch? A visible watch does not magically prove that a recording was made at that exact moment - a clock can be set incorrectly. But it can provide **corroborating evidence** that becomes substantially more useful when it agrees with the original file metadata, maintenance requests, emails, texts, inspection reports, receipts, witness observations, and other contemporaneous records.

Do not intentionally alter a watch, camera clock, timestamp, metadata, or file to manufacture a date or time.

2. NARRATE - DON'T JUST FILM

Silent video may show a condition without explaining why it matters. Use calm, factual narration.

"Today is August 17, 2026. The time displayed on my watch is 8:44 a.m. I am recording the kitchen beneath the sink. I first observed water collecting here this morning. I am now showing the cabinet, supply lines, floor, and surrounding area."

Then let the camera establish what you described. Avoid turning the recording into an argument. Instead of saying, "The landlord never fixes anything and this place is horrible," document observable facts: "Water is dripping from this connection approximately once every three seconds. The bottom of the cabinet is wet. I am showing the surrounding floor. I am submitting a maintenance request today."

The second narration is generally more useful because it separates **observation from accusation**.

3. THE MOVE-IN VIDEO: ESTABLISH YOUR BASELINE

Make your move-in documentation **before furniture and personal property obscure the premises**, whenever possible. Begin outside the residence. Identify the property without unnecessarily publishing private information if the recording may later be shared publicly.

Then conduct a systematic walkthrough. Record the entry door, locks, walls, ceilings, floors, windows, blinds, closets, cabinets, counters, sinks, faucets, toilets, tubs/showers, appliances, electrical fixtures, HVAC components, balconies or patios, and any property supplied with the rental.

For every existing defect, capture three perspectives:

Orientation shot: Shows which room you are in.

Medium shot: Shows where the defect is located.

Close-up: Shows the defect itself.

A close-up of damaged flooring is much stronger when another photograph establishes exactly **where that flooring is located**.

Test things on camera. Where safe and appropriate, demonstrate operation rather than merely showing appearance. Turn faucets on. Flush toilets. Open and close windows. Operate blinds. Turn lights on and off. Open appliances. Test doors and locks. Record visible leaks, unusual discoloration, damaged surfaces, missing equipment, and other observable conditions. If something does not operate properly, show the attempted operation on video.

4. DOCUMENT THE MOVE-IN INSPECTION FORM TOO

If management gives you a move-in condition report, photograph or scan the completed document before returning it. Do not rely exclusively on the landlord or management company to retain your copy.

When possible, preserve your completed inspection form, photographs corresponding to each listed defect, your walkthrough video, the email or portal submission transmitting the report, confirmation that it was received, and the original, unedited files. Your written report and visual evidence should corroborate one another.

5. WHEN SOMETHING BREAKS DURING THE LEASE, CREATE AN "INCIDENT RECORD"

Move-in and move-out are not the only important moments. If a serious condition develops during the tenancy, document it when discovered.

"Today is September 14, 2026. The watch shows 6:32 p.m. I am documenting water that I discovered beneath the bathroom vanity at approximately 6:20 p.m. I have not moved or cleaned the affected area except as necessary to prevent additional damage."

Then record the condition. If appropriate, document it again after notifying management and after repairs.

Condition discovered -> notice provided -> condition continues or changes -> repair attempted -> final condition.

That sequence can be far more informative than a single photograph.

6. DOCUMENT NOTICE - NOT JUST THE PROBLEM

A photograph can establish that a defect existed. It does not necessarily establish that another person knew about it. That is why **notice documentation** matters.

After documenting an issue, report it using the method required by the lease when reasonably possible. Preserve the submission. Save maintenance-request confirmation pages, emails, text messages, portal messages, work orders, inspection notices, photographs, and responses.

If you telephone management, make a contemporaneous note containing the date, time, telephone number called, person spoken with, substance of the conversation, and any promised action.

Be careful about secretly recording conversations. Audio-recording and privacy laws vary by jurisdiction and circumstances. Verify applicable law before recording another person's conversation.

7. CREATE FOLLOW-UP VIDEOS

Some conditions cannot be demonstrated by one recording. If a leak continues for seven days, periodically document the progression. If a ceiling stain expands, show the progression. If repairs are performed, document the condition afterward. If an appliance repeatedly fails, document separate occurrences rather than representing one occurrence as proof of every failure.

Name files logically:

2026-09-14_Bathroom-Leak_Discovery.mp4

2026-09-14_Bathroom-Leak_After-Notice.mp4

2026-09-17_Bathroom-Leak_Continued.mp4

2026-09-21_Bathroom-Leak_Post-Repair.mp4

That organization can transform dozens of miscellaneous recordings into a coherent chronology.

8. NEVER DESTROY YOUR ORIGINAL FILES

This is one of the most important rules. **Keep the original photograph or video exactly as captured.**

If you create a shortened video, add arrows, enlarge an image, create a collage, insert captions, or otherwise edit a file for presentation, preserve the untouched original separately.

A useful folder structure is:

ORIGINALS

WORKING COPIES

DOCUMENTS

COMMUNICATIONS

TIMELINE

Back up important evidence to more than one reliable location. Do not repeatedly download, screenshot, compress, or send files through social-media applications if doing so will replace the only original copy.

9. DON'T RELY ON SCREENSHOTS ALONE

Screenshots are useful, but whenever possible preserve the underlying source too. For example, if you screenshot a maintenance portal, also preserve the confirmation email, PDF, downloaded record, or other original information available through the system. Likewise, retain complete email threads rather than only cropped screenshots of selected sentences. Context can matter.

10. USE A REFERENCE OBJECT WHEN SIZE MATTERS

Photographs can make dimensions difficult to judge. When documenting a crack, hole, water stain, damaged area, or similar physical condition, consider placing a ruler or measuring tape beside it. First photograph the condition without obstruction. Then take another photograph with the measurement visible. Do not manipulate the condition merely to make it photograph better.

11. RECORD CONDITIONS BEFORE CLEANING OR REPAIRING THEM

Safety comes first. Stop active water, electrical, fire, gas, or other hazards when reasonably necessary and seek appropriate emergency assistance.

But when circumstances safely permit, document an important condition **before substantially changing it**. If water suddenly appears on a floor, for example, a short video before cleanup may preserve information that disappears afterward. Then document the cleanup and resulting condition as appropriate.

12. THE MOVE-OUT VIDEO SHOULD BE METHODICAL

After your belongings have been removed and ordinary cleaning is complete, conduct another systematic walkthrough. Whenever possible, follow approximately the **same route used for your move-in video**.

This allows comparison: **Move-In Condition -> Events During Tenancy -> Move-Out Condition**.

Record empty closets and cabinets. Show floors after furniture is removed. Record walls, ceilings, bathrooms, appliances, windows, doors, and other relevant areas. Open cabinets and closets rather than simply walking past them. If something operates correctly and responsibility for it could later become disputed, demonstrate its operation where practical.

13. DOCUMENT THE FINAL EXIT

Do not necessarily stop documenting at the apartment door. Depending upon the circumstances, preserve evidence of final condition of the premises; return of keys, remotes, parking passes, or access devices; written surrender notice; move-out inspection; forwarding-address submission; delivery receipts or acknowledgments; communications concerning possession; and security-deposit correspondence.

If keys are placed in a designated drop box, documentation of the permitted return method and the actual return can help establish the chronology. Do not expose lock codes, access credentials, or other security information in recordings that may be publicly shared.

14. CREATE A MASTER EVIDENCE LOG

Your files become much easier to understand when accompanied by a simple evidence index. For each significant item, record:

Date | Time | Location | File Name | Condition | Notice Given | Follow-Up

Example:

**9/14/26 | 6:32 PM | Bathroom | Bathroom-Leak-001.mp4 | Active leak beneath vanity | Portal request submitted
6:46 PM | Recheck 9/15**

Now the video is connected to the larger chronology.

THE “WITNESS TEST”

Before ending an important recording, ask yourself: **If I were unavailable to explain this video later, could another person understand what it shows?**

Can the viewer determine the room? Can the viewer determine the approximate scale? Can the viewer distinguish the defect from its surroundings? Does the recording show when it was created through corroborating evidence? Can you connect the recording to written notice? Can you produce the original file? Can you explain who recorded it and what happened immediately before and afterward?

If the answer is yes, you are creating documentation - not merely collecting pictures.

THE GOLDEN RULE: CORROBORATION

Do not make your entire position depend upon one photograph, one video, or one timestamp.

The strongest documentation usually consists of **independent pieces of evidence pointing toward the same chronology**:

Original photo/video + visible digital-watch date/time + file metadata + written maintenance request + confirmation of receipt + follow-up documentation + inspection/work-order records + witness evidence where applicable.

A digital watch is therefore best treated as **one layer of corroboration**, not infallible proof by itself.

DOCUMENT FACTS, NOT A STORY YOU WANT THE EVIDENCE TO TELL

Credibility matters. Do not stage damage. Do not intentionally change timestamps. Do not exaggerate.

Do not describe something as mold, sewage, a code violation, or another technical conclusion merely because it looks like one unless you have a proper basis for that characterization. Instead, describe what you can actually observe:

“Dark discoloration approximately six inches across is visible beneath the window.”

Then separately preserve any inspection, laboratory, contractor, medical, governmental, or expert evidence that identifies what the condition actually is. Your objective should be a record that remains accurate even when examined by someone who disagrees with you.

BEFORE YOU DELETE THAT VIDEO...

A rental dispute may arise weeks or months after the underlying event. Storage is inexpensive compared with trying to reconstruct evidence that no longer exists.

Preserve your original files, organize them chronologically, retain your communications, and maintain backups for an appropriate period after the tenancy and resolution of any deposit, damage, insurance, administrative, or legal dispute.

FINAL TAKEAWAY

Don't simply say what happened. Build a contemporaneous record capable of showing what happened.

A carefully narrated move-in video establishes the beginning. Contemporaneous incident documentation establishes what happened during the tenancy. Written notices establish communication. Follow-up recordings establish duration and progression. A detailed move-out video establishes the ending.

And original files, timestamps, records, and corroborating documentation connect everything into a defensible timeline.

EDUCATIONAL DISCLAIMER

This newsletter provides general educational information about documenting rental-property conditions and preserving records. It is not legal advice, does not create an attorney-client relationship, and does not guarantee that any photograph, video, timestamp, statement, or other material will be admitted into evidence or given any particular weight by a court, agency, insurer, landlord, or other decision-maker. Evidence, recording, privacy, landlord-tenant, and preservation laws vary by jurisdiction. Readers facing an actual dispute should review applicable law and consider consulting a qualified attorney in their jurisdiction.