

## Housing Guide: 10 Things to think about before signing a housing contract

By Emily Huebener

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**A**s I sat down to write this article, it forced me to think about a lot of things. I couldn't believe that I was sitting here researching housing for my 5th year on campus making the transition from an undergraduate to the unforeseen territory of graduate school. When I look back over the past four years, I truly realize how much I love this University. The friendships I've made, the classes I've taken, the random things that occur on nights out... they truly make your college experience. However, something that has influenced me in ways I never would have expected, is my housing choice for the year. You truly make more memories on spontaneous events in your own living space or come to realize how thankful that you are living where you are than you might think.

From a dorm room to a sorority house, to my own apartment, and now finally, a house for my last year, I have gained some insight into the housing market at U of I along the way. Not only have I lived in each type of housing, but I've lived on each corner of campus as well. They all have their perks or things that aren't so glamorous, but I think that there is a list of common things for which we can all keep an eye out. I'd like to spend a little time explaining the top 10 things to think about when choosing housing, especially if this is your first time choosing where to live at the University of Illinois.

Many students do not even realize that they have options where to live their first year on campus, and I'm hoping the following items give you something to think about. Choosing where to live is an important decision, as it can affect your entire experience here on campus. And because all student's have different needs, I hope this list gives you enough insight to find the best housing option for you.

### 1. Safety

I'd like to make the assumption that up until this point, you have lived in the safety and comfort of your parent or guardian's home. But this new found freedom comes with a significant choice: Where will you feel safe? You should definitely take a tour of all prospective housing options. Not only will you feel better, but your parents will feel better leaving you for the next few years to go off on your own. Websites can make properties look glamorous, but speaking from personal experience, once you go take a look, you may find that the surrounding area is run down or known for theft, etc. In addition, you should find how secure your building is. What is the lock situation, is there a security access code, do the keys work correctly? Safety is also about planning ahead. Does the building have sufficient sprinkler systems and smoke detectors, or even an easy way to evacuate the building in case of an emergency? Of course these aren't common campus events, but it's always nice to be prepared.

### 2. Room Type

What type of room can you see yourself living in? Do you need a lot of space, can you handle a roommate, what are your living habits? Are you used to having siblings around and sharing your living environment, or are you an only child used to a quiet house? All of these things should be considered when choosing your housing choice. This will help you decide if you need a single, a double, or even a deluxe-double or triple type setting. However, everything will be better for you if you have a good quality living environment. Is it clean? Do items appear to be broken or outdated? How large is the room, and for what you would have to pay, is this room worth that? What comes with the room? Try and see the actual room in which you would be staying, and evaluate what comes with the room to see if you would be happy there.

### 3. Quality of Room

This is a question every person should ask before committing to live some place. A price may originally look attractive and appealing to you, but then you realize that it is not much more than open space. How much space will the room give me to set up my things, especially if I have to share this with a roommate?

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Will I feel crowded? What is the layout and do I have options of arranging the room myself? What furniture is provided? Do I need to provide a desk? Is the room carpeted or some other type of flooring? When looking for a place to live, you should definitely consider if the place is air-conditioned or if you will need to provide fans for yourself. This room is going to be your home for the next 9 or so months, so you might as well make it your own and enjoy living there! This is why it helps to plan ahead and find out what you need to bring and what you don't. There is nothing worse than over packing and having no space to store things! Check to see if places have to-bring lists to help in your planning.

### **4. Bathrooms**

Bathroom setups can be a difficult situation depending on what type of person you are. Are you comfortable with sharing a bathroom with everyone on your floor? Do you need a private bathroom or can you handle a suite-style room where you only share your bathroom with a few people? Do they get cleaned on a regular basis? How comfortable do you feel leaving your items with other people around? Your bathroom situation is definitely your personal preference, but it is vital to assess what you need before moving in!

### **5. Academic and Social Activities**

As you will learn, where you live is not just a building especially if you live in a student dormitory. It is much more than physical space, but rather, it is about what you do while you are there! What social or academic opportunities exist while living there? Each building offers different activities and programs to further your learning experience or to help foster your academic success. Some dorms even offer resume critique sessions or cultural diversity workshops. Find a place that will support your interests so you can stay involved while expanding your mind as well.

### **6. Resident Advisor (RA)**

Some people view their RA as an annoying person who checks up on them in the dorm, while others think they are their new best friend. Regardless of your opinion, the RAs are there for you to keep you safe and answer your questions. So, you might as well like the people you will be interacting with for the next year. How many RAs/ student? How involved do they get and what are their responsibilities? Is there an RA/ floor or just for the building? RAs can be a great resource, so see what information is available!

### **7. Food Service**

We've all heard them... the horror stories of dorm food or how we don't feel like cooking today. Do plenty of research ahead of time so you don't end up having a constant struggle with your food situation for the year. There is nothing worse than dreading going to the cafeteria, after all, this is your DINNER (or breakfast or lunch)... When taking a tour, most places will allow you to see the setup of their kitchen/cafeteria eating area. Is it kept clean and sanitary? Are there a variety of options or do you have special dietary needs? Can every place accommodate those needs? Do I like what I see here? Also, be aware of your surroundings because as we all know, appearances aren't always what they seem. A larger eating area may be no better than a smaller, quiet setting. And to reiterate, just like you have housing options, you have food options. Of course it will never be the home-cooking you are used to, but not all dorm food is created equal.

### **8. Services**

No matter how much we plan, things will go wrong or plans change. When choosing housing, you need to evaluate how responsive maintenance staff or other on-site support staff will be. Make sure they are receptive to your maintenance requests and needs. However, it is always a good idea to stop by their office or pick up the phone and call just to double check they received your request in the first place. You should also consider how knowledgeable, approachable, and friendly their staffs are. If you feel

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comfortable working with them, you are more likely to get done what you need because you aren't afraid to speak up!

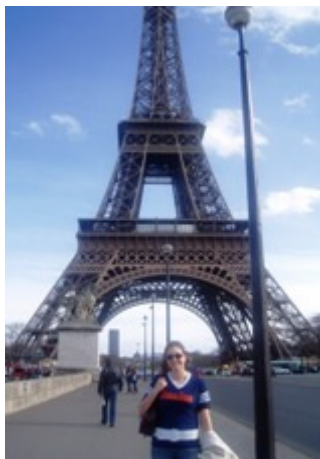
### 9. Amenities

In the fast-paced life of a college student, anything to save us time is an added bonus. Let's face it, we love convenience. Finding housing that is close to work-out facilities, or even has one located in your building is a definite benefit. In addition, look around while taking your tour and see what lounges and common rooms are provided for additional space, especially if you need a place to study late or night or a break from your roommate. When it's cold outside, not having to go to the library to finish that assignment makes you feel pretty good about your housing choice! It is also a good idea to check what you can and cannot bring to your rooms, to avoid later hassles of fire hazards or trying to send things home that you couldn't have in the first place. Once again, it's all about finding as much information as you can beforehand.

### 10. Parking

Honestly, a car is not a necessity on a large campus like this where you can walk almost anywhere in under 20 minutes and you have a bus system that will take you anywhere. However, as you get older or even as a freshman, you realize what a luxury having a car is and you want to bring it to campus with you. Living at a place with plenty of parking options is an added benefit. Some housing options have raffles because there are limited parking options; others are first come first serve. And if you do not feel comfortable leaving your car on the street with city parking, then you will want to inquire about this ahead of time. It is also a good idea to find out how much parking costs and what sort of coverage the various parking spots provide. Parking prices vary across campus and they usually fill up fast, so it's always good to get a jump start!

### Housing Wrap Up



Whew! That's a lot to think about! No wonder it is such an important choice, right? Of course there are other items that will factor in to your personal preference, but I hope that I was able to help you begin searching for what is right for you. As I mentioned before, I have stayed in every type of housing in different parts of campus (including an apartment in France for studying abroad)! With that being said, I realize no matter how much you plan in advance or how much you think you know about something, there will be your ups and downs. Maybe you and your roommate aren't perfect for each other, or maybe that perfect location is ruined with construction randomly waking you up in the morning every day for a month. However, your housing choice makes your college experience, especially as a new student. My freshman year was unforgettable, and I owe a large part of that to the people I met in my dorm, and the employees that helped me along the way. My randomly chosen suitemate is now my best friend, and roommate of 2 years. Just be smart when choosing your housing, and do it for you, not your friends. What is right for you may not be right for them! I hope you enjoyed this housing tutorial, but that's all I have for now. Stay tuned for more housing adventures!