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How to spot a Craigslist rental deposit scam

<https://cyberguardlab.com/blog/craigslist-rental-deposit-scam>

Independent US household comparison site. Not the vendor. Paid links below may earn a commission. Confirm first-year price, renewal, device limit, and refund terms at checkout.

CYBERGUARDLAB · GUIDE

How to spot a Craigslist rental deposit scam

Too-good rentals that demand deposits before a tour.
Deposit before tour

Walk away

Verify the owner

Tour before paying

No gift-card rent

A Craigslist rental deposit scam advertises a too-good apartment or house, then demands a deposit, first month's rent, or "application fee" before you can tour-or after a rushed virtual tour. Do not wire money, buy gift cards, or Zelle a stranger for a key you have not seen in person. Do not sign papers emailed from a free address without verifying ownership. If you already sent a deposit, stop contact, save records, and report to the FTC and local police.

This guide covers fake rental listings and deposit bait on classified sites-not timeshare exit schemes. It overlaps with fake check overpayment and apartment application scams. No software purchase required.

Paid link

Norton 360 | See the Norton first-year offer



[See the Norton first-year offer](https://cyberguardlab.com/norton)

Offer page: <https://cyberguardlab.com/norton>

1. How Craigslist rental deposit scripts work

- * Remote landlord story - Out-of-town or deployed owners demand payment before keys, often with stolen photos (FTC rental listing scams).
- * Deposit-before-tour - Holding fees "expire tonight" while other applicants are wiring today.
- * Fake-check wrap - A check for moving costs asks you to refund the difference (fake check scam).
- * Uncontrolled showing - Someone shows a property they do not manage, then collects money and disappears.

2. Red flags before you send money

Cue | Likely legitimate | Likely scam

Tour | In-person showing or verified agent | Deposit required before any real-world viewing

Rent vs market | Close to nearby comps | Far below neighborhood rates with a soft excuse

Payment | Traceable methods to a named landlord after paperwork | Gift cards, crypto, wire, or instant cash apps

Ownership proof | You can verify owner or licensed agent | Refuses ID, deed, or management company contact

Communication | Local phone and consistent identity | Only email; story keeps changing

Documents | Standard lease you can review calmly | Urgent sign-and-pay PDF from a free mailbox

3. Safer habits (buy-nothing)

- * Never send a deposit before you tour the unit or confirm a trusted agent.
- * Reverse-image search listing photos when something feels off.
- * Refuse gift cards, crypto, and hold-my-unit wires.
- * Check county property records or ask a local realtor to sanity-check the listing.
- * Use Craigslist's official flagging tools; keep talks in channels you can document.
- * If someone sends a check and asks for a partial return, see fake check scam guidance.

4. If you already paid

- * Stop all further payments and cease contact except as advised by law enforcement.
- * Save the ad URL, photos, emails, payment receipts, and usernames.
- * Contact your bank, wire service, or cash-app support immediately (FTC if you were scammed).
- * If gift cards were used, contact each issuer's fraud department.
- * Report at ReportFraud.ftc.gov and file a local police report.
- * If you opened attachments or logged into a portal, change passwords and ignore recovery callers.

FAQ

Can a real landlord ever ask for a deposit by Zelle?

Some individuals do, but it is high risk. Prefer methods with clearer records after you verify the person and the property.

The rent is only a little low. Could it still be a scam?

Yes. Slight discounts plus remote-only landlords and deposit-before-tour rules are still common fraud patterns.

How is this different from a timeshare exit scam?

Timeshare exit targets people who already own a timeshare. Craigslist rental deposit scams target people hunting for a place to live.

Should I use a roommate finder instead?

Any platform can host fakes. Verify the unit, never pay blind, and beware overpayment refunds.

What if I already signed a PDF lease?

Signing a document from a scammer does not make the payment safe. Still report and pursue bank recovery steps.

Do I need paid antivirus to avoid a rental deposit scam?

No. Touring first and refusing gift-card deposits is enough. Buy-nothing is valid.

If you still want a paid suite

Avoiding a Craigslist rental deposit scam does not require paid antivirus. Careful habits and official support paths are a valid buy-nothing stack. If you want multi-device paid protection later, use only these on-site paid links: TotalAV ([paid link](#)), Norton ([paid link](#)), Bitdefender ([paid link](#)), McAfee ([paid link](#)), Avast ([paid link](#)).

Sources

- * Rental Listing Scams (FTC)
- * ReportFraud.ftc.gov
- * IdentityTheft.gov
- * Fake Check Scams (FTC)

Also read

- * How to spot an apartment rental application scam
- * How to spot a fake check scam
- * How to spot a timeshare exit scam
- * How to spot a Zelle or Cash App payment scam
- * How to report a scam to the FTC