CHAPTER 1

Write your criteria before you advertise

If your criteria live only in your head, they will change with your mood, your vacancy pain, and the last person you talked to. Put them on paper before the ad goes live.



Written criteria do three jobs. They screen applicants before they call. They make your yes and no defensible - you are applying a standard, not judging a person. And they protect you from yourself on day 19 of a vacancy, when standards quietly start to slide.



NOTE:

Written criteria stop your standards from sliding on day 19 of a vacancy. If it is not on the criteria sheet, it is not a reason to approve or deny.

What belongs in your criteria

- **Income:** gross household income at least 3 times the monthly rent, from verifiable sources.
- **Rental history:** verifiable history for the past 2 to 3 years; no eviction filings or judgments in the past 3 to 5 years (set your window and keep it).
- **Credit:** a minimum pattern, not just a score - for example, no large unpaid landlord or utility collections. If you use a score cutoff, write the number down.
- **Criminal history:** reviewed individually, looking at nature, severity, and how long ago - not a blanket ban. See Chapter 2.
- **Occupancy:** a clear limit, commonly 2 people per bedroom, plus any local code limits.
- **Pets, smoking, vehicles:** state the policy plainly, and apply any assistance-animal rules correctly - assistance animals are not pets.
- **Move-in money:** first month, deposit, and any lawful fees, due in full before keys change hands.

Your one-page criteria sheet

Fill this in once per property. Post the summary in your ad, hand the full sheet to anyone who asks, and screen against it - not against memory.

Item	Your standard (example)
Income	Gross income ≥ 3 x rent ($1,400 rent = $4,200/month)
Income proof	Last 2 pay stubs, or benefits letter, or 2 months of bank statements
Credit	Report reviewed; no unpaid landlord debt; score guideline: ____
Rental history	2+ years verifiable; landlord references checked
Evictions	No filing or judgment in past ____ years
Occupancy limit	____ people maximum for this unit
Pets / smoking	Policy: _____
Application fee	$____ per adult (only where lawful; disclose before they apply)
Move-in total	$____ due before keys, by cashier's check or verified funds

Do not move the goalposts mid-vacancy

If a standard is not working, change it *between* vacancies, in writing, for the next round. Changing it for one applicant in front of you is where inconsistency - and complaints - start.

One more habit: date your criteria sheet and keep old versions. If a decision is ever questioned, the sheet in effect on that date is your best evidence that you applied the same standard to everyone.