

YOU and YOUR CREDIT: Managing Your Credit¹

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How much debt can you realistically carry?

The debt service-to-income ratio compares your total annual debt repayments (including rent or mortgage) to your gross annual income (income before taxes and any deductions). A desirable ratio is .36 or less. For example, a household earning \$40,000 annually should not have debt payments totaling over \$14,400 per year.

How much credit can you afford?

Your gross income \$ _____

36% of your gross income \$ _____

Source: USDA Rural Development



Credits: lovelyday12 / iStock / Getty Images Plus

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Credit Card Worksheet.

This worksheet can help you analyze your credit cards, costs, terms, conditions and your needs to select the best credit card(s) for you.

INTEREST APR's	Card A	Card B	Card C
Purchases			
Cash Advances			
Balance Transfers			
INTEREST RATE			
Fixed			
Variable			
Introductory			
Tiered			
GRACE PERIOD IF YOU:			
Carry a balance			
Pay off balance each month			
Cash advances			
FINANCE CHARGE—HOW COMPUTED:			
Average Daily Balance			
Two-cycle Billing			
Minimum finance charge			
Other			
ADDITIONAL FEES			
Late Fees			
Over the Limit			
Annual			
Other			
Other			
Other			
OTHER FEATURES			
Rebates			
Frequent flyer miles			
Insurance			
Other			
Source: Federal Reserve Bank			

Inventory of Credit Cards and Loans. It is important to keep this information in a secure place with your other valuable papers in case of an emergency like fire, hurricanes, etc.

Creditor Name/address	Account #	Phone #	Interest Rate	Current Balance	Due Date	Monthly Payment

Total Monthly Amount: _____

Date of Inventory: _____

Additional Comments

A Closer Look at the Cost of Credit—The Minimum Payment Trap

Making Minimum Payment (4% of amount borrowed)

ITEM	RETAIL PRICE	APR	INTEREST PAID	REALLY PAID FOR ITEM	YEARS TO PAY OFF
TV	\$500	18%	\$216	\$716	4 years, 11 months
Computer	\$1,000	18%	\$516	\$1,516	7 years, 3 months
Furniture	\$2,500	18%	\$1,416	\$3,916	10 years, 3 months

This chart assumes you are not making additional purchases and you are making payments on time. You can call your credit card company and ask them for the number of years it will take to pay off the current balance if you only make the minimum payments.

Making More than the Minimum Payment? It Pays Off.

ORIGINAL BALANCE	APR	MONTHLY PAYMENTS	TOTAL # OF MONTHLY PAYMENTS	TOTAL YEARS TO PAY OFF	TOTAL OF PAYMENTS
\$2,500	18%	Minimum	123	10 years	\$3,916
\$2,500	18%	Minimum + \$25	50	4	\$3,258
\$2,500	18%	Minimum + \$50	33	3	\$2,839

This chart assumes you are not making additional purchases and you are making payments on time.

Request a Lower Interest Rate

If you have been with a credit card company for several years and are in good standing, you can request a lower interest rate. The steps include:

1. **Dial the 800 number** on the back of your card.
2. **Use this sample script:** Hi, my name is (your name). I have been a credit card holder with your company for the last (number) years. My account is in good standing and I would like to continue using it. However, I would like you to consider giving me a lower interest rate on this account, or I may switch to a card with a better rate.

3. **Record the name of the person** with whom you spoke, the date, your interest rate, and then a date six months later when you can make your request again. If they refuse to give you a lower rate, try again the next day to reach someone more helpful. After successfully lowering your interest rate, wait six months and ask again.

Record of Lower Interest Rate Inquiries

Credit card	Phone number	Person you spoke to	Interest Rate	Date	Date to call again

Source: Bankrate.com

Balance Transfers—Know What You Are Getting

Transferring a high-interest card to a card with a low rate can save a bundle of cash and speed up your path to lower your debt. But be careful. The rules are different for each card.

- Check the time limit.** Most interest rates last only 6–9 months, then revert to a more traditional rate.
- Know what the interest rate really covers.** Does it cover just the balances transferred? Many exclude any new purchases made. The credit card company will apply all of your payment to the zero or low-rate balances first, until they are paid off. That means your new purchases will continue to revolve on the card and rack up the higher interest cost.
- Beware of the hefty fees.** Most cards have a balance transfer fee. The cost varies, so check it out. You want to consider only those cards that have a cap on their transfer fees.
- Watch out for the bait and switch.** Just because you applied for the zero percent rate doesn't mean you'll get it. Card companies will sometimes issue you the card but

assign a higher rate if your credit score is low. Be sure to READ the agreement terms that come with the card before you transfer a balance or make a purchase.

- Always pay on time.** The zero rate or low rate will disappear the minute you are late. The interest rate can be bumped up to high as 30 percent plus the late fee.

Remember, while a balance transfer is pending, continue to make minimum payments by the due date to the old card. When you receive a billing statement from the old card, make sure it has a zero balance.

A helpful online tool is PowerPay. This tool helps consumers organize their debts and make decisions about debt management, payoff schedules, consolidation, and how to most efficiently use additional funds to reduce debt. The program is available at <http://www.powerpay.org>. Your local UF/IFAS Extension agent can help you get your information organized and interpret the program results.

Worksheet for Balance Transfer

OLD CARD	
Toll-free # for customer service	
Account #	
Balance	\$
APR	%
Grace period	days
Due date	
NEW CARD	
Toll free # for customer service	
Account #	
Balance	\$
Introductory APR	%
Date introductory rate expires	
Date balance transfer APR expires	
APR after introductory rate expires	%
APR after late payments	%
Balance transfer fee	\$
Annual fee	\$
Grace period	days
Due Date	