

CLEAN UP YOUR CREDIT REPORT YOURSELF!

Pulled your credit report lately? Is the information in your report correct? Has someone been using your identification to obtain credit? Here's how to find out what your credit report contains and what you can do about it.

Begin by pulling your credit reports from all three credit bureaus. If you have been denied credit based upon your credit report, you can request a free copy of your report within 60 days of receiving the notice of the action. You are entitled to one free report a year if you can prove that you are unemployed and plan to look for a job within 60 days, if you are on welfare, or if your report is inaccurate because of fraud. The charges may vary from state to state, but a credit reporting agency cannot charge more than \$8.50 for a copy of your report. You may get a copy of your credit report from the following credit reporting agencies.

EXPERIAN
(888) 397-3742
www.experian.com

TRANS UNION
(800) 888-4213
www.transunion.com

EQUIFAX
(800) 685-1111
www.equifax.com

If you have any errors: Photocopy the report, highlight the errors, and send it to the credit bureau, along with a letter of explanation. If you have not received a response from the bureau within 30 days, the errors should be dropped from your record. (Section 611d of the Fair Credit Reporting Act of 1970).

If you have duplicate information: Photocopy the report and highlight any duplications. Send the highlighted copy with a letter stating that you want the inquiry and the account information merged. Mark your calendar for 30 days for a response.

If you have information that should have "aged off": Creditor inquiries stay on your report for a minimum of six months; employer inquiries remain on your report for two years. Delinquencies, garnishments, repossessions, court orders, eviction for nonpayment, and missed child support stay on your report for seven years. Bankruptcies remain on your report for 10 years from the date of filing. If an item remains on your report longer than this, send a highlighted copy and a letter requesting the bureau to update your account. You should receive a response within 30 days.

If you have unsolicited inquiries: Photocopy and highlight the report and send it with a letter requesting the inquiries be deleted. Remember, the law states that your report can be pulled by anyone with "legitimate business needs." This includes employers, car dealers, or others, even if you haven't given a written release authorizing the use of your report. Be very careful who you give your personal information to, even in a casual conversation.

If you do not have a follow up within 30 days: Speak with a customer-service-level manager at the bureau directly. Be polite but firm. Get the name of any customer service representative who tells you a manager is not available. Once you have a manager on the phone, be sure you know his or her name and full title. Clearly explain what service you need and the timeline in which you would like your concerns addressed. Follow up your conversation with a registered letter outlining your agreements and directed to the customer service manager. If your needs are not met, move up to the next level of management. Remain polite but assertive.

If you do not get a copy of your corrected credit report: Not only are you entitled by law to get a copy of your corrected report at no charge (Section 611d), the agency also must send revised reports to anyone who has inquired within the last six months. Send a letter stating that you want a free copy of your corrected report or you will take action under Section 616 of the Fair Credit Reporting Act for “willful noncompliance.” Send a copy of the letter to the Federal Trade Commission.

Put in a consumer statement: You may add a 100-word statement to your credit file, explaining why your report suffered any bumps or bruises or explaining a dispute. Anyone who looks at your report will see your explanation. This is free and easy.

Contact your creditors: Negative information contained in your credit history can be removed only by the creditor who reported it. Be very wary of anyone who claims he or she can remove or clean ratings from your record. If you stay on good terms with your creditors while you are delinquent, they are far more willing to help you rebuild credit. If you agree to pay off a portion of your debt in exchange for a better rating, be sure you get it in writing from the original creditor—not a collection agency! Get any agreements to alter or change the rating in writing from the creditors. Send a copy of the written agreement to the bureau, to become a permanent part of your file.

Ask for supplemental credit information: Get written recommendations from your landlords, utility companies, phone company, or any other good credit you may have that does not show up on your credit report. Submit the recommendation letters with any credit application.

Document everything: Keep copies of all letters sent, mark your calendar, get names and titles of EVERYONE with whom you speak. Keep a log of your interactions. Send letters by registered mail to have proof of the dates and locations your letters were received.

If someone is using your I.D. to obtain credit: Write a letter to the credit bureaus, explaining which accounts were fraudulently opened and request that they put a fraud statement in your file. This statement will explain to potential creditors that your I.D. is being used illegally and they must call you prior to opening new credit accounts. Write to the creditors that opened accounts and explain that someone is illegally using your I.D. to obtain credit. They will send you an “Affidavit of Forgery,” which you must complete and send back before they will begin an investigation. Keep copies of all correspondence and a record of all conversations, including the name and title of the person with whom you talked. Follow up with the creditor within a week to ensure they received your completed “Affidavit of Forgery.” If you have not heard about the disposition on your account within 30 days, check to determine the progress of the investigation.