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US EDITION

Know Your Rights: Credit & Debt

Print this, pin it up, keep it. When a lender or collector leans on you, knowing the rules turns panic into a plan. Here's what's actually true where you are.

Your reports are free — from one place

Get your Equifax, Experian and TransUnion reports free, and only, at AnnualCreditReport.com — the single federally authorised source. Avoid lookalike sites that ask for payment. Check each bureau, because their data isn't always identical.

You can dispute what's wrong (FCRA)

Under the Fair Credit Reporting Act you can dispute information that is inaccurate, incomplete, or unverifiable. The bureau must investigate — normally within 30 days (up to 45 if you send extra documents) — and correct or delete anything it can't verify. You can dispute with the bureau, the furnisher, or both.

What can't be removed — and the line you don't cross

The FCRA does not allow removal of accurate, verifiable information. Accurate negative items generally stay up to 7 years (Chapter 7 bankruptcy up to 10). Challenging accurate items with false claims is illegal under the Credit Repair Organizations Act (CROA). Only ever dispute genuine errors.

Dealing with collectors (FDCPA)

For a debt in collection, the Fair Debt Collection Practices Act lets you request validation of the debt — proof of the amount and that the collector is entitled to collect it. Collectors must follow conduct rules: no harassment, no calls at unreasonable hours, and they must stop contact in certain circumstances if you ask in writing.

Free, regulated help — always

You can file complaints free with the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB) or the Federal Trade Commission (FTC). For identity theft, start at IdentityTheft.gov. You never need to pay a credit-repair company to use any of these official routes.

Being in debt isn't a moral failing — it's a maths problem with a solution. Knowing your rights is the first move. Go at your own pace.