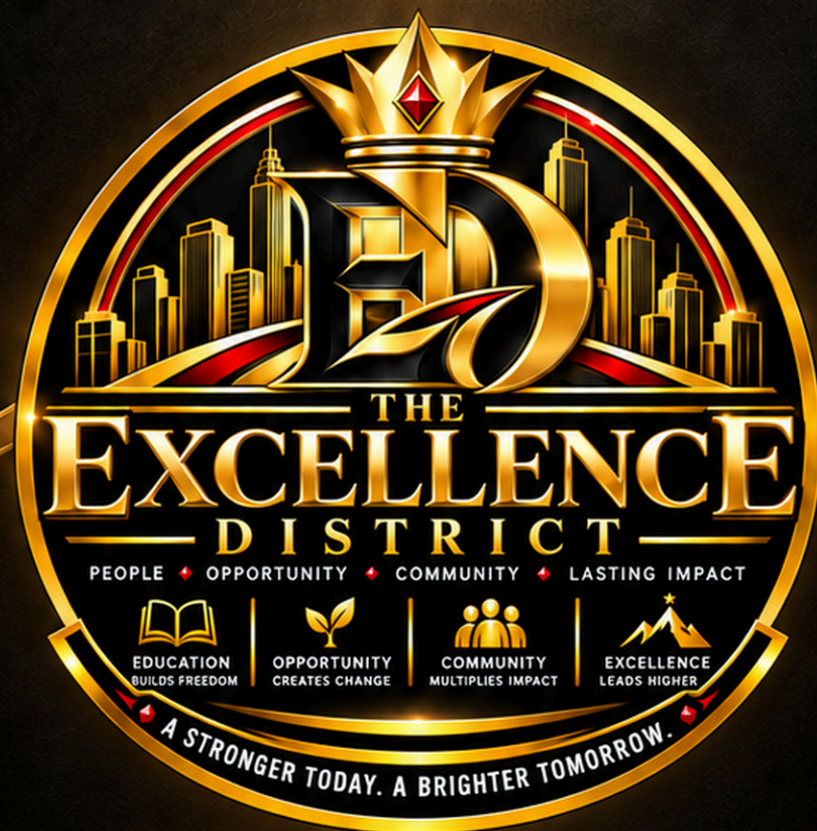




Your Credit Rights

A plain-language guide to credit
reports, disputes, and protection

Resources Center · Money

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Your Credit Rights

A plain-language guide to how credit reports work, the federal laws that protect you, how to correct real errors for free, and how to avoid the scams that target people trying to repair their credit.

How to use this guide. Read Sections 1–2 to understand the system, use Section 3 when you find an error, and keep Section 5 nearby whenever someone offers to "fix" your credit. Every step here can be done yourself, at no cost.

I. How your credit score works

A credit score estimates how likely you are to repay borrowed money. Lenders, landlords, insurers and some employers use reports and scores to make decisions. FICO scores range from 300 to 850; a score of about 670 or higher is generally considered good, and 740 or higher very good.

Factor (FICO)	Approximate weight	What helps
Payment history	35%	Paying every account on time
Amounts owed	30%	Keeping card balances low compared with limits
Length of credit history	15%	Keeping older accounts open and in good standing
New credit	10%	Applying for new credit only when needed
Credit mix	10%	A healthy mix over time — never borrow just for the mix

Because the score is built from your report, **accuracy matters**. One wrong late payment or an account that is not yours can cost you approvals and raise your interest rates. That is why the law gives you the right to see your reports and dispute errors.

2. The laws that protect you

Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA) — 15 U.S.C. § 1681 et seq.

- **Accuracy.** Credit bureaus must follow reasonable procedures to assure maximum possible accuracy (§ 1681e(b)). Companies that report information ("furnishers") may not report information they know is inaccurate (§ 1681s-2(a)).
- **Right to dispute.** If you dispute an item, the bureau must investigate, generally within 30 days, and correct or delete information it cannot verify (§ 1681i).
- **Permissible purpose.** A bureau may share your report only for purposes the law lists — for example, a credit application you made, insurance underwriting, an account review, or employment screening with your written permission (§ 1681b). Your permission is required in some cases, not all.
- **Time limits.** Most negative items may be reported for about seven years; most bankruptcies for up to ten (§ 1681c).
- **Free reports and freezes.** You may get free reports from each national bureau through AnnualCreditReport.com — currently available weekly — and place or lift a security freeze for free.

Fair Debt Collection Practices Act (FDCPA) — 15 U.S.C. § 1692 et seq.

- Third-party debt collectors may not harass you, lie, or threaten actions they cannot take.
- Reporting credit information they know is false is a violation (§ 1692e(8)).
- Under the CFPB's Regulation F, a collector may not sue or threaten to sue on a debt after the statute of limitations has run (12 C.F.R. § 1006.26(b)).
- You may bring a claim against a collector in court for FDCPA violations; the FCRA's furnisher-accuracy claims generally require that you first dispute through a credit bureau.

Two different clocks

Clock	What it controls	What it means for you
Reporting period (FCRA)	How long an item can appear on your report	An old debt can still show on your report even after it is too old to sue on.
Statute of limitations (state law)	How long a creditor has to sue	After it runs, a collector may not sue — but in some states a payment can restart it. Ask before you pay an old debt.

Privacy rights

Under the Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act and Regulation P (12 C.F.R. Part 1016), banks must give you a privacy notice and let you opt out of certain sharing with unaffiliated companies. You can also stop most prescreened credit offers at [OptOutPrescreen.com](https://www.OptOutPrescreen.com), the official site run by the bureaus. The Privacy Act of 1974 covers records held by *federal agencies*, not banks or bureaus.

3. Correcting a real error — step by step

1. **Get your reports.** Go to **AnnualCreditReport.com** — the only official free source — and download reports from Equifax, Experian and TransUnion.
2. **Mark what is wrong.** Wrong name or address, accounts you did not open, payments shown late that were on time, balances or statuses that are incorrect, duplicate accounts.
3. **Dispute with the bureau.** Use each bureau's online dispute page or send a letter by certified mail. Say exactly what is wrong, why, and what correction you want. Attach copies (never originals) of proof such as statements or payment confirmations. Keep copies of everything.
4. **Dispute with the company that reported it.** You may also write directly to the lender or collector (the furnisher); it must investigate and report the result.
5. **Watch the 30-day window.** The bureau must send you the results. If the item is changed, you can ask the bureau to send the corrected report to anyone who pulled it recently. If the item stays, you may add a brief statement to your file and ask how the information was verified.
6. **Escalate if needed.** If a bureau or company does not fix a documented error, submit a complaint at **consumerfinance.gov/complaint**. The CFPB forwards it and companies generally respond within 15 days. Describe the facts and the correction you want.

Accurate negative information cannot be removed just because you dispute it. The process exists to fix errors. Anyone who promises to erase accurate, current information is not telling the truth.

If you are a victim of identity theft

Report it at **IdentityTheft.gov**. With an FTC Identity Theft Report and proof of identity, a bureau must block information that resulted from the theft, generally within four business days (§ 1681c-2). Use this only for genuine identity theft — filing a false report is a crime.

Hard inquiries you did not authorize

If an inquiry came from a company you never contacted, first ask that company what application it relates to. If you did not authorize it, dispute it with the bureau; if it is part of identity theft, use IdentityTheft.gov as above.

4. Protect your credit going forward

- **Freeze your credit** at Equifax, Experian and TransUnion. It is free, does not affect your score, and stops most new accounts being opened in your name. Lift it temporarily when you apply for credit.
- **Consider a fraud alert** if you think your information is exposed; placing it with one bureau notifies the other two.
- **Keep your file clean.** Ask the bureaus to correct outdated addresses and misspelled names when you dispute.
- **Check specialty reports.** Companies such as LexisNexis, Innovis, ChexSystems and Early Warning Services also keep files. You can request a free copy, dispute errors, and in many cases place a freeze.
- **Build positive history.** Pay on time every month, keep balances well below limits, and if you are starting out consider a secured card or being added as an authorized user on a well-managed account.

5. Avoid credit repair traps

"Credit Privacy Numbers" (CPNs) are a scam. They are often stolen Social Security numbers, frequently belonging to children or deceased people. Using one on a credit application is a federal crime.

Under the **Credit Repair Organizations Act** (15 U.S.C. § 1679 et seq.), credit repair companies must give you a written contract, may not charge you before the promised services are fully performed, and must let you cancel within three business days. Walk away from any company that:

- asks for payment up front;
- promises to remove accurate negative information or guarantees a score;
- offers a "new credit identity," a CPN, or tells you to use an EIN instead of your SSN;
- tells you not to contact the bureaus yourself;
- asks you to put false information on an application.

Free official resources

Need	Where to go
Free credit reports	AnnualCreditReport.com
Complaints and guides	consumerfinance.gov (CFPB)
Identity theft recovery	IdentityTheft.gov (FTC)
Stop prescreened offers	OptOutPrescreen.com
Georgia consumer complaints	consumer.georgia.gov
Free legal help (metro Atlanta)	atlantalegalaid.org

General education only — not legal, financial or credit-repair advice, and not an offer of any product or service. Laws and rules change; confirm current requirements with the official sources above or a qualified professional. Reviewed October 12, 2026.