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FREE BEGINNER'S GUIDE

The 730 Blueprint Kit

A simple, step-by-step guide to understanding your credit score and starting to improve it — even if you're starting from zero.

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Credit Scores 101

Your credit score is a three-digit number — usually between 300 and 850 — that tells lenders how likely you are to repay borrowed money. It's calculated from the information in your credit reports, which are kept by three national bureaus: **Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion**. A higher score means better approval odds and lower interest rates on credit cards, car loans, and mortgages.

What the Score Ranges Mean

300–579	**Poor**	Hard to get approved; deposits often required
580–669	**Fair**	Approvals possible, but at higher interest rates
670–739	**Good**	Solid approval odds and decent rates
740–799	**Very Good**	Better-than-average rates
800–850	**Exceptional**	Best rates and terms available

The 5 Things That Make Up Your Score

FICO — the score most lenders use — weighs five factors:

- **Payment history (35%)** — Do you pay your bills on time? This is the single biggest factor.
- **Amounts owed (30%)** — How much of your available credit are you using? Lower is better.
- **Length of credit history (15%)** — How long your accounts have been open.
- **New credit (10%)** — How many accounts you've applied for recently.
- **Credit mix (10%)** — Having a healthy mix of cards and loans over time.

The takeaway

Nearly two-thirds of your score comes from just two habits: paying on time, every time, and keeping your balances low. Master those two and everything else gets easier.

Step 1: See Where You Stand — For Free

Before you can improve your credit, you need to know what's on it. Federal law gives you free access to your credit reports, and you never need to pay a company to see them.

Get Your Free Credit Reports

Go to **AnnualCreditReport.com** — the only official, government-authorized source. You can now pull your report from each of the three bureaus **free every week**, so there's no reason to guess about what lenders see.

What to Look For When You Read Your Report

- **Personal info** — Is your name, address, and employment history correct?
- **Accounts** — Do you recognize every account listed? Are balances and limits accurate?
- **Payment history** — Are any payments marked late that you actually paid on time?
- **Collections & public records** — Anything you don't recognize or that's too old to be listed (most negative items must come off after 7 years)?
- **Hard inquiries** — Any credit applications you never made? That can signal identity theft.

> **Watch out**
>
> Your free reports do NOT include your credit score — that's normal. Many banks and card issuers show your score for free in their app. Avoid any site that asks for a credit card to show you 'your free report.'

Checking Your Own Credit Never Hurts Your Score

Pulling your own report or score is a "soft inquiry" and has zero impact on your credit. Check as often as you like — once a month is a great habit while you're rebuilding.

7 Quick Wins to Start Improving Your Score

You don't need tricks or expensive services — just consistent habits. Here are the moves that make the biggest difference, roughly in order of impact:

1. Never miss a payment again

Set up autopay for at least the minimum on every account. One 30-day late payment can drop a good score by 50–100 points and stays on your report for 7 years.

2. Get your card balances under 30% of the limit

If your limit is $1,000, keep the reported balance under $300 — under 10% is even better. Paying your balance before the statement closes lowers what gets reported.

3. Ask for a credit limit increase

A higher limit with the same balance instantly lowers your utilization. Many issuers let you request this online without a hard inquiry — ask first.

4. Don't close your oldest cards

Closing old accounts shortens your credit history and cuts your available credit. If a card has no annual fee, keep it open with a small recurring charge on autopay.

5. Become an authorized user

If a family member with a long, well-paid card history adds you as an authorized user, their positive history can boost your file. You don't even need to use the card.

6. Start with a secured card or credit-builder loan

If you're starting from scratch, a secured credit card (backed by a small deposit) or a credit-builder loan from a credit union builds payment history safely.

7. Dispute every error you find

Wrong late payments, accounts that aren't yours, and outdated negative items can be removed for free — see the next page.

Fixing Errors on Your Credit Report

Credit report errors are common — and you have a legal right under the Fair Credit Reporting Act to dispute them **for free**. You never need to pay a credit repair company to do this.

How to Dispute in 4 Steps

- **Step 1 — Gather proof.** Statements, payment confirmations, or letters that show the item is wrong.
- **Step 2 — File with the bureau.** Dispute online, by mail, or by phone with each bureau reporting the error (Equifax, Experian, TransUnion). Mailing a letter with copies (never originals) of your proof creates the best paper trail.
- **Step 3 — Notify the furnisher too.** Send the same dispute to the company that reported the info (the card issuer, lender, or collector).
- **Step 4 — Wait for results.** Bureaus generally must investigate within 30 days and send you the outcome. If the item can't be verified, it must be removed.

A Note on Medical Debt

The three bureaus no longer include **paid** medical collections or medical collections **under $500** on credit reports, and unpaid medical collections generally don't appear until they're at least a year old. If an old paid medical bill is still showing, dispute it. (Rules in this area have shifted recently and some states add extra protections, so double-check current rules for your state.)

Avoid credit repair scams

No one can legally remove accurate negative information from your report, no matter what they charge. Be wary of anyone who demands payment up front, tells you to dispute accurate info, or asks you to create a 'new credit identity.'

5 Credit Myths That Keep People Stuck

Myth 1: "Carrying a balance builds credit."

False — and expensive. Paying your statement balance in full every month builds credit just as well and costs you $0 in interest. The card issuer reports your on-time payment either way.

Myth 2: "Checking my credit will lower my score."

Checking your own credit is a soft inquiry and never affects your score. Only applications for new credit (hard inquiries) have a small, temporary impact.

Myth 3: "I should close cards I'm not using."

Closing cards usually hurts: it reduces your available credit (raising utilization) and can shorten your credit history. Keep no-fee cards open.

Myth 4: "Paying off a collection removes it from my report."

Paying a collection doesn't automatically delete it (medical collections are the big exception). It can still help — newer scoring models ignore paid collections, and you can ask the collector for a 'pay-for-delete' in writing before paying.

Myth 5: "I make too little money to have good credit."

Income isn't part of your credit score at all. A person earning $30,000 who pays on time and keeps balances low can outscore a six-figure earner who doesn't.

Your 30-Day Starter Checklist

Print this page. Check off each item as you go — most people can finish the whole list in under a month.

Week 1 — Know where you stand

- ☐ Pull all three credit reports free at AnnualCreditReport.com
- ☐ Find your current score in your bank or credit card app
- ☐ Highlight anything on your reports that looks wrong or unfamiliar

Week 2 — Stop the bleeding

- ☐ Set up autopay (at least the minimum) on every account
- ☐ Add calendar reminders 3 days before each due date as backup
- ☐ List each card's balance and limit; calculate your utilization

Week 3 — Make your moves

- ☐ Pay down the card closest to its limit first
- ☐ Request a credit limit increase (ask: no hard inquiry?)
- ☐ File disputes for any errors you found in Week 1
- ☐ No credit yet? Open a secured card or credit-builder loan

Week 4 — Build the habit

- ☐ Re-check your utilization after payments post
- ☐ Schedule a monthly 10-minute 'credit check-in' on your calendar
- ☐ Set one goal: e.g., +40 points in 6 months

CreditWork | cwconsultants.net | contact@creditwork.net

This guide is for educational purposes only and is not financial, legal, or credit advice. Everyone's situation is different — consider consulting a qualified professional or a nonprofit credit counselor (such as an NFCC member agency) about your specific circumstances. Score ranges and factor weights reference FICO and are approximate.