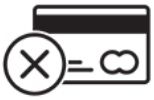
TEAM RED money

Your secret weapon for saving more

Our money guru, **Nicole Lapin**, knows exactly how to make your finances look good—stellar, even. Follow her three-step guide to boost your credit score so you can get pretty much *anything* you ask for.



MAYBE YOU THOUGHT you were done being graded in this life, but there's one score that still matters. It's your credit score, which affects your interest rates when you borrow money (as I know you will for a mortgage, a business, or a car). The higher your credit score, the lower your rate and the more you'll save over time. Sounds great, right? I check my score through my credit card company each month. If yours is over 700, give yourself a pat on the back, but if not, don't fret—just follow these easy steps to raise it.



GET ERRORS FIXED

When I opened my first credit report, there were items I didn't recognize, including a collection claim from a doctor's office in Texas that reported I'd missed a payment of $250—but I had never even been to Texas.

Mistakes on your credit report aren't common, but they do happen. If I had ignored this claim or paid up to avoid a dispute, it could have remained on my report for seven years from the original bill's due date and continued to ding my credit score. (This is true for debts you actually owe too.) Since this was an error, I immediately called the doctor's office to dispute the charge, and it ultimately dropped the claim. A couple of months passed before I saw the change on my report, but it was worth the wait to see my score jump.



USE YOUR CREDIT CARDS

If you're the type to pay with cash, expect to see a low number when you check your credit score. Paying only with paper is a great way not to overspend, but nothing will get you denied a loan faster.

If you have no credit history, creditors (a.k.a. the folks giving you money) have zero proof they can trust you to pay them back, and that makes them nervous. A credit card will give you a credit line you can use to prove you're responsible. If you're already swiping your plastic, follow my rule and spend just up to a small portion of your total credit limit: For instance, if my limit is $10,000, I won't spend more than $2,500 each month. A low spending ratio has a huge influence on the algorithm that determines your credit score.



PAY DOWN CARD BALANCES

Making full payments on time each month can help boost your score, but if you're already behind, attack the debt on one card at a time rather than chipping away at several. (Still pay all your minimums, of course.)

Each time you clear a debt, your score can get bumped up. But even if it might feel cathartic to close a card out once you've paid it off, resist the urge. Each card adds to your overall credit limit, and you want your limit to be high so your spending ratio stays low. Keep the cards you have in play by using them for small, recurring charges, and step away from new card offers. Now be patient—you won't see your score change overnight, but soon the good-credit karma will come to you.

Nicole Lapin is the author of *Boss Bitch* and is one of the stars of the nationally syndicated show *Hatched*.

ICONS: THE NOUN PROJECT.

Photographed by LAURA GRIER