

DAIGLE LAW OFFICE - *after hours*

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An 8 Step Plan for

REBUILDING YOUR CREDIT after Bankruptcy

Now that your bankruptcy is over, you'll want to begin repairing your credit. A good credit score is important. As you probably already know, it determines the amount of credit you can get and the interest rate you will be charged. A low score may mean you don't get the credit you need to buy a car or home. A low score could even mean lost job opportunities, higher insurance rates, and a big deposit with your utility company.

A bankruptcy can remain on your credit report for up to 10 years, but you need not have bad credit for that long. As more time elapses from your bankruptcy filing, your bankruptcy will become less significant to potential creditors.

If you follow our advice, you should be able to establish a much improved credit score within just a year or two after bankruptcy. The key to success is showing that you can handle credit responsibly. Here's how to do it.



STEP 1: CLEAN UP YOUR CREDIT REPORT.

Your creditors will look at your credit report to decide whether to offer you credit so you want to make sure that it is accurate. You want to eliminate any errors on your report that will lower your score unnecessarily.

Begin by ordering your reports from the Annual Credit Report Service at AnnualCreditReport.com, 877-322-8228, or P.O. Box 105281, Atlanta, GA 3034-5281. Obtain a report from each of the Big Three reporting agencies: Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion. You are entitled to a free report from each of Big Three every 12 months.



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Make sure that your personal information (residence and employment history) are correct. Incorrect personal information can lead to other people's accounts being reported as yours.

Next make sure your credit reports show a zero balance for all accounts that were part of your bankruptcy. These should be noted as "Discharged in Bankruptcy" or "Included in Bankruptcy." Also make sure that accounts that were not part of the bankruptcy filing are not reported with a bankruptcy status.

Review the accounts that weren't part of your bankruptcy. Look for other erroneous information, such as:

- Late payment notations when you believe you paid on time.
- Credit accounts that do not belong to you.
- Duplicate entries, e.g., a collection agency is listed separately from the original creditor.
- Closed accounts listed as open.
- Account closed by you that does not say "closed by consumer."
- Credit histories for someone with a similar name.
- Premarital debts of your spouse.
- Paid accounts listed as unpaid.
- Credit inquiries that you did not authorize or were not from creditors included in your bankruptcy.

Check also for items that should be removed because they are too old:

- Accounts on which the last purchase or payment was made more than seven years ago.
- Credit inquiries more than two years old.

If you find an inaccuracy on your credit report, you can dispute it online, by phone, or by mail. Contact information for each of the Big Three agencies is available at [AnnualCreditReport.com](https://www.annualcreditreport.com). Explain exactly what is wrong and if possible support your claim with documentation.

STEP 2: CREATE A BUDGET & STICK TO IT.



Begin by tracking your expenses for a month or two. Record everything you spend, no matter how small. Don't forget to factor in expenses that you pay annually or quarterly, such as insurance premiums. Convert them to a monthly amount (e.g. \$1200 a year for car insurance means you need to budget \$100 a month) and add them to your spending record. Once you have all these numbers add them up.

Next apply your monthly income to the expenses. If you have enough to cover your bills with some extra, allocate the extra to savings or paying down any remaining debt that was not discharged in the bankruptcy (e.g. student loans). If your expenses exceed your income, see if there are ways to increase your income or reduce your expenses. Try to pare your expenses back so that you can save 10 to 15 percent of your income each month for an emergency fund. Electronic budgeting apps and financial advisors can assist you with budget planning. Some nonprofits offer these services free or for a nominal charge.



STEP 3: PAY ALL YOUR BILLS ON TIME, INCLUDING DEBTS NOT DISCHARGED IN BANKRUPTCY.

Once you have your budget, establish a routine process for paying your bills each month. Some ideas include:

- Setting up a paper or electronic calendar so you can see due dates at a glance and dates by which a payment must be sent to arrive in time.
- Arranging for automatic text or email reminders from your creditors.
- Asking your creditors to change your payment due dates to better align with your cash flow.

- Establishing one or two regular bill paying days each month. These could be on or immediately after your regular paydays.
- Using online bill pay and scheduling payments in advance. Just make sure to keep tabs on how much money is in your account so you won't overdraw your account.
- Using financial apps and software to assist with budgeting, saving, and bill paying.

Some debts may not have been discharged in your bankruptcy (e.g. student loans, a car loan, a mortgage). Paying these on time will gradually improve your credit score. Keep up with payments on accounts not reported to the credit agencies, as they could be reported if you fall behind. A good payment history is the most important factor in determining your credit score.

STEP 4: APPLY FOR NEW CREDIT.



Once you have a budget and expense management routine in place, it is time to think about applying for new credit. It is likely that all your credit cards were closed as a result of the bankruptcy. You'll need to get new credit to build your credit. To generate a FICO number, you must have one credit account that's been open for at least six months and an account that's been reported by a lender to a credit bureau during that same time. Expect to start small. Here are a few options you can try:

- Find a credit card company that offers cards to people who recently came through bankruptcy. You can expect the credit limits to be low and the interest rates to be high. You'll probably also have to pay an annual fee.

A word of warning: You may be surprised to receive multiple credit card offers right after your bankruptcy is completed. Don't be swayed by all these offers. You want to choose wisely! The banks know you won't be

able to file for bankruptcy again for several years, so you are actually a better risk than you were before. Just make sure to read the fine print on any new debt you apply for, as many companies intentionally prey on people who recently filed bankruptcy by offering new lines of credit stuffed with fees, minimum payments, and extremely high interest rates.

- Apply for a secured card. You'll need to keep some money on deposit at the issuing bank. The bank will then give you a card for a credit limit that's 50 to 100 percent of the deposit. You'll still probably have to pay an annual fee and a high interest rate. Find a bank that won't report your card as secured and will eventually give you an unsecured card and lift your credit limit after some months (usually at least 6) with a good payment history.
- Apply for a secured loan. This works just like a secured credit card. For example, you agree to leave \$500 in your savings in exchange for a loan of \$500. Don't spend the loan proceeds. Deposit them in your saving and use them to make your payments. That way you will be sure to have enough money. The purpose of the loan is not to allow you to buy anything; it's solely to improve your credit.
- Ask a domestic partner or family member to add you to his or her account as an authorized user. You must be prepared to use the credit wisely and only with the card holder's agreement and consent. The card holder is ultimately responsible for paying the bill. If the bank reports to the credit bureaus, you don't even need to use the card to benefit. Like secured credit cards, not all banks report authorized users to credit bureaus, so make sure to inquire first.
- Get a gas card. Gas cards are usually easier to get than major credit cards so you might try to start with one.



STEP 5: PAY YOUR NEW CREDIT CARD OR LOAN ON TIME.

As mentioned above, a good payment history is the single most important factor in your credit score. Make sure you have a method in place to ensure timely payments on your new account. For example, open your bill as soon as you receive it; make a note of the payment date; and make sure you send the payment so that it will reach the creditor by the due date. If you have trouble remembering, sign up for an automatic email or text reminder from the creditor. Better yet, set up automatic payments from your bank account, but make sure you have enough money to cover the payment.

(Overdraft protection is a good idea.) Pay the balance off each month.

STEP 6: KEEP YOUR CREDIT BALANCE LOW RELATIVE TO YOUR LIMIT.



After payment history, the next most important factor in your credit score is your balance as a percentage of your credit limit. Try to keep your charges at or below 30% of your credit limit. Most important, do not charge more than you can afford to pay.



STEP 7: DON'T MAKE MULTIPLE APPLICATIONS FOR CREDIT.

Don't open more than one or two new lines of credit right after bankruptcy. About 10% of your credit score is determined by whether you have recently applied for new accounts. While you will need to apply for new credit to begin rebuilding your score, keep the accounts to a minimum and spread out your applications over time.

Your FICO score can go down if you apply for multiple new credit lines in a short period of time. So apply sparingly. In addition, creditors are leery of approving someone who makes several applications at once. It gives the impression that you are desperate.

STEP 8: CONTINUE TO MONITOR YOUR CREDIT REPORTS AND SCORES.



Check your credit score regularly while you are actively improving your credit. Watching that number go up can make you feel like your hard work is really paying off. Watching your credit reports and score will also enable you to see if anything out of the ordinary appears to be happening, investigate it if it does, and report any abnormalities.



10 TIPS

for
saving
money
at the
grocery
store

If you ask ten friends, “What is your best tip for saving money at the grocery store?” you are likely to get ten different answers. That’s because there is no single best way to save money on groceries. The more tools you have at your disposal and the more often you use them, the more money you will save.

Toward that end, we present our list of Ten Tips for Saving Money at the Grocery Store. Give them a try and add the ones that work for your family to your savings “toolbox.” Even if you only use one or two of these tips each week, your time and effort will pay off at the register.

1. PLAN A WEEK OF MEALS.

Weekly meal-planning can result in significant savings, especially if you take a smart approach:

- Plan your meals around what is on sale that week.
- Plan 3-4 meals only . Fill out the week with leftovers.
- Incorporate less expensive alternatives to a traditional family dinner, e.g., breakfast for dinner or meatless Monday.
- Think about cost-saving food swaps. For example, consider swapping ground turkey or chicken, for ground beef; chicken thighs, for chicken breasts; and dried beans, for canned beans.

2. BE SMART ABOUT HOW YOU USE COUPONS.

You already know to use coupons, but you will save even more if you wait for an item to go on sale, and then apply a store coupon and a manufacturer’s coupon for that item. If you also can take advantage of “club member” savings at your local store, then you know you are getting the best deal.

3. MAKE A LIST; TAKE YOUR LIST WITH YOU; AND STICK TO IT.

If all you do is jot down a few “don’t forget” items, you inevitably will buy items you don’t need and forget items you do need. Take inventory of your pantry and fridge each week, so that you know what you need and what you don’t. Then, use your meal plan and your coupons to build a detailed list for the week.

Alternatively, download a shopping list app (e.g., Out of Milk). These apps have tools to help you get and stay organized, as well as sample lists to inspire you. Plus, if you tend to forget your list, an app can be a big help. As long as you have your phone, you have your list. For more on grocery list apps, see www.bestproducts.com/eats/food/g1505/grocery-shopping-list-apps/?slide=6.





4. CHOOSE PRODUCE CAREFULLY.

- Buy what is in season, e.g., berries and melons in the summer; apples and pears in the fall. If you must have strawberries in the winter, go for the frozen kind.
- Be selective about buying organic. For some produce (e.g., spinach) it might make sense to spend the extra money for organic; for other produce (e.g., avocados), it may not. Review the Environmental Working Group's "Shopper's Guide to Pesticides in Produce" [www.ewg.org/foodnews/full-list.php] to help inform your decisions.
- Slice it yourself. Pre-sliced fruits and vegetables and bagged salads may be convenient, but you pay a steep mark-up for that convenience. Buy the whole pineapple or watermelon or head of lettuce, and cut it yourself.

5. BUY SPICES IN BULK.

You can buy a wide range of spices in bulk, and the savings are significant. Plus, because you only buy what you need, your spices will be fresh, making the dishes you cook with them taste better. If your go-to supermarket doesn't have a bulk aisle with spices, it will be worth your time and effort to make a trip to a store near you that does.

6. CHOOSE GENERIC.

Most of the time, the ingredients in the generic brand are the same or essentially the same as in the name brand, and there is no difference in taste or quality. If, however, you just can't go generic, then make sure you:

- Stock up when the name-brand item is on sale; and
- Get rewarded for your loyalty. Visit the manufacturer's website for coupons and sign up to receive special offers by email.

7. PAY WITH CASH.

If you can only spend the cash you have in hand, it's easier to limit yourself and avoid the little splurges that will bust your budget.

8. LEARN TO LOVE LEFTOVERS.

Throwing away food = throwing away money. Stop doing it. Meal planning will help to reduce food waste. Here are few more ideas you can try:

- Move items that are about to expire to a designated spot in the front of the refrigerator to remind you that they need to be eaten;
- Start a new family tradition: Empty the Fridge Friday.
- Transform leftovers into a new meal. If you need some inspiration, check out supercook.com/#/recipes or Google "recipes made with leftovers."

9. INVEST IN A WATER FILTER.

Help save the planet and put more money in your pocket by skipping the bottled water and buying a water filter instead. You can get a pitcher with a built-in filter or a basic in-sink faucet filter for around \$20.

10. IF YOU DO NOTHING ELSE . . .

Even if you are running low on time and patience, do these three things:

- Go alone. More people = more items in your cart.
- Never (never!) go to the grocery store hungry.
- Limit your time in the store. The more time you spend at the grocery store, the more money you spend. Make it a goal to shop for groceries once a week, and always be efficient once you get there.

These three tactics work like magic. With very little effort, they make all sorts of "extra" items disappear from your receipt. Try to pocket these "invisible" savings every week.

Make Someone Happy; Send a Thank You Note

(And You Will Be Happy Too)

Is there a person in your life who deserves your thanks: a teacher or other mentor; a co-worker who showed you the ropes; a family member, friend, or neighbor who stood by you in hard times? Perhaps the circumstances never gave you the opportunity to express thanks. Or maybe you feel that the person knows you are grateful and would only be embarrassed by your note. You may also be afraid that you cannot find the right words and the other person will think your note is lame or insincere.

All of us share these fears and they may be holding us back from taking a simple step that will improve our own and others' well-being. Research shows that expressing gratitude is strongly associated with feelings of happiness, emotional resilience, and strong relationships. Yet people hesitate to do it.

A study by two psychologists looked into this puzzle. Hundreds of study participants (the expressers) wrote brief gratitude emails to people who had a positive impact on their lives (the recipients). These were not the typical thanks for a birthday or holiday gift, but were for things like help finding a job, or getting into college, or support during a rough patch. The expressers predicted how they thought the notes would be received and the recipients were asked how they actually felt on reading the notes.

The surprising conclusions:

- The expressers significantly underestimated how surprised and pleased the recipients were to be thanked. Many of the recipients reported that they were “ecstatic” to receive the notes, rating their happiness at 4 out of 5.
- The expressers overestimated how embarrassed or awkward the recipients would feel on reading the notes.
- The expressers significantly underestimated how competent and articulate the recipients perceived the expressers to be.

In other words, the recipients of the thank you notes, by and large, were thrilled to get them; did not feel particularly embarrassed or awkward; and thought the expressers did a good job writing them.

So get out that pen and paper or open your email program. You don't have to be a Shakespeare or Hemingway. You don't have to write a book. Just a couple of simple, sincere sentences will do. Many expressers spent less than 5 minutes on their notes. The recipient won't criticize your prose. Almost certainly, he or she will be delighted to get your note and you will be glad you wrote.



Watermelon, Tomato & Strawberry Salad With Burrata



Sweet watermelon, vine-ripened tomatoes and juicy strawberries, on top of melt-in-your-mouth burrata, sprinkled with fresh herbs and pine nuts. This salad is delicious.

INGREDIENTS

1 burrata cheese
2 pounds watermelon, cut into 1 1/2 " cubes
1 3/4 pounds heirloom tomatoes, cut into 1 1/2" cubes
1 pint strawberries, trimmed and halved
2 T basil, chiffonade
2 T mint, chiffonade
3 T pinenuts
2 T white balsamic vinegar
2 T olive oil
Maldon salt to taste
Pepper to taste

INSTRUCTIONS

1. Using your hands open a burrata cheese and spread it over a serving platter. Scatter watermelon, tomatoes and strawberries over the burrata. Sprinkle with herbs and pinenuts.
2. Put vinegar in a small bowl and whisk in olive oil to create an emulsion. Drizzle the dressing over the fruit and season with salt and pepper.

Halloween is one of the most popular and widely celebrated holidays in the United States. October 31st brings with it black cats, jack-o'-lanterns, ghost stories, and creative costumes, but where did these traditions come from?

Alternately known as All Hallow's Eve or All Saint's Eve, most historians attribute the earliest origins of Halloween to the Celts, who celebrated the end of the summer harvest season each year with a festival called Samhain. This occurred directly before their November 1st New Year celebration, when it was thought that the boundary between the earthly realm and spiritual plane waned, increasing the chance for visitation by the souls of loved ones and supernatural beings like fairies.

To commemorate Samhain, the Celts would wear costumes and engage in practices like bobbing for apples and lighting bonfires. They would also try to tell each other's fortunes and communicate with the spirit realm.

In later centuries, the spread of Christianity via the expansion of the Roman Empire blended traditions like Samhain with events like All Souls' Day, which still occurs annually on November 2nd. All Souls' Day carried many of the same traditions as Samhain, such as dressing up in costume and parading around bonfires. Eventually, these varying holidays morphed into what we now refer to as Halloween.

In America, observance of this hybrid holiday remained relatively limited until a wave of immigrants from Ireland and



Tricks and Treats: Halloween History

Scotland arrived in the middle of the 19th century. Bringing with them the traditions of their homelands, they helped popularize the concept of Halloween. By the early 20th century, All Hallow's Eve was widely celebrated in all corners of the country.

Various symbols came to be associated with Halloween over time, the most famous being the jack-o'-lantern. Traditionally carved out of a turnip in both Ireland and Scotland, Americans turned to a familiar, widespread alternative native to their new land: the pumpkin. Representative of souls trapped between heaven and hell in folk tales dating back centuries, jack-o'-lanterns are now a familiar sight on porches and lawns each autumn season.

Halloween has a rich history full of individual customs that have merged to form the holiday we know and love. Whatever your particular trick or treat may be, we wish you a safe and happy All Hallow's Eve.