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How to Spot Inaccuracies on Your Credit Report

A step-by-step audit you can do this weekend — before applying for a mortgage, refinance, or any major loan.

1 in 3

Credit reports contains an error, according to the FTC and Consumer Reports. Many of those errors are serious enough to affect your score.

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Why this guide matters

Before a lender approves you for a mortgage — or before any major lender approves you for anything — they pull your credit report. What's on that report drives the interest rate you're offered, the loan amount you qualify for, and sometimes whether you get approved at all.

Here's what most people don't know: studies by the Federal Trade Commission and Consumer Reports have found that roughly **1 in 3 credit reports contains an error**, and a meaningful share of those errors are serious enough to affect a credit score.

The difference between the rate you *deserve* and the rate you're *offered* often comes down to whether someone took the time to actually read the report. This guide walks you through exactly what to look for.

Step 1 Pull all three reports (free)

You have three credit bureaus — **Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion** — and each one keeps its own report on you. The three reports usually contain similar information, but rarely identical information. Errors often appear on one report and not the others.

Where to get them, free

Go to **annualcreditreport.com** — the only federally authorized free source. As of 2023, all three bureaus offer **free weekly access**, so you don't have to ration your pulls. Avoid sites that ask for a credit card or push a "free trial" — those are not the official source.

What about your credit score?

Your score is *not* on these free reports. Scores are sold separately. For dispute purposes, the score doesn't matter — what matters is the underlying data. We're hunting for bad data.

> **PRO TIP**
>
> Pull all three reports on the **same day** so you're comparing apples to apples. Differences across bureaus are easier to spot when the snapshots are taken at the same moment.

Step 2 Check your personal information

This is the easiest section to scan, and a surprisingly common source of errors. Errors here can also signal a **"mixed file"** — when your report has been blended with someone else's, often a relative with the same name or someone with a similar Social Security Number.

Verify line by line

- **Name** — including misspellings or variations. Maiden names, nicknames, or names you've never used are red flags.
- **Date of birth** — must match exactly.
- **Social Security Number** — partially masked, but check what's visible.
- **Current and previous addresses** — addresses you've never lived at are a major red flag.
- **Employers, current and past** — employers you've never worked for can indicate a mixed file.
- **Phone numbers** — old or unfamiliar numbers.

> **WATCH FOR**
>
> If you see addresses or employers that aren't yours, flag them. Even when they don't directly affect your score, they can mean the file has been confused with someone else's — and the accounts on the report may not all be yours either.

Step 3 Audit every account, one by one

This is where most of the impactful errors hide. For each account on the report — credit cards, auto loans, student loans, mortgages, personal loans, collections — check the following:

Is this account actually mine?

If you don't recognize an account, that's the biggest red flag of all. It could be:

- An account opened by a relative who used your information (sometimes innocently — common with parents and adult children).
- Identity theft.
- A mixed file with someone else's account.
- A reporting error on the bureau's end.

Account status

Look for these specific errors:

- **Closed accounts showing as open**, or vice versa.
- **Accounts shown as "in collections"** that you actually paid off.
- **Accounts marked late** when you paid on time. Pull bank statements or payment confirmation emails to verify.
- **A balance still showing** on an account you paid off.
- **"Charge-off" status** on an account that was settled or paid in full.

Dates

Dates matter more than people realize, because most negative information has a **7-year reporting limit** (10 years for Chapter 7 bankruptcy). Check:

- **Date opened** — does it match when you actually opened the account?
- **Date of last activity** — has this been updated incorrectly to keep an old debt on your report longer than the law allows? This is called **"re-aging"** and it's illegal.
- **Date of first delinquency** — this is the date that starts the 7-year clock on a negative item. If it's been pushed forward, the negative mark is staying on your report longer than it should.

> **PRO TIP**
>
> If a negative account is older than 7 years from the date of first delinquency, it should not be on your report. This is one of the easiest, highest-impact disputes to file.

Balances and credit limits

- **Incorrect current balance** — especially when it's higher than your actual balance.
- **Missing credit limit** — when a credit card has no limit reported, the bureau can't calculate your utilization correctly, which can hurt your score.
- **Incorrect credit limit** — sometimes lower than the actual limit, which makes your utilization look worse than it is.
- **Incorrect high balance** — the historical high.

Duplicates

It's common to see the same debt listed twice — once with the original creditor and once with a collection agency. Both items hurting your score for the same underlying debt is worth disputing.

Step 4 Review public records

This section will list bankruptcies, and historically included judgments and tax liens (most were removed from credit reports after 2017–2018, but errors still show up).

For anything listed here, ask:

- Is the record actually yours?
- Are the dates correct?
- For a bankruptcy, are the case number, filing date, and discharge date right?
- Is anything listed that should have aged off? (Chapter 7: 10 years from filing. Chapter 13: 7 years from filing.)

Step 5 Review hard inquiries

Hard inquiries appear when you apply for new credit. They stay on your report for **2 years** and can affect your score for about a year.

For each hard inquiry, ask: **Did I authorize this?**

If you see an inquiry from a lender you never applied with, that's a red flag for both an error and potential identity theft. Inquiries you didn't authorize can be disputed.

> **NOTE**
>
> "Soft inquiries" — like when you check your own credit, or a lender pre-screens you for an offer — don't affect your score and aren't a concern.

Step 6 Compare across all three reports

This is the step most people skip, and it's often where the most valuable findings come from. Lay all three reports side by side and look for:

- An account that appears on one report but not the others.
- Different balances, payment histories, or statuses for the same account across bureaus.
- An account marked "paid" on one report but "delinquent" on another.
- A late payment showing on Equifax but not Experian or TransUnion.

Each bureau is its own data warehouse. They don't talk to each other, and lenders don't always report to all three. **An error fixed at one bureau is not automatically fixed at the others** — you'll need to dispute it with each bureau that's reporting it.

Quick

Red flags worth disputing

Use this as a fast scan. If you check any of these, you have a dispute to file.

- [ ] An account you don't recognize
- [ ] A late payment you can prove was on time
- [ ] A balance that's wrong
- [ ] A closed account showing as open
- [ ] A paid account showing a balance
- [ ] A duplicate of the same debt
- [ ] A negative item older than 7 years
- [ ] A credit limit that's missing or wrong
- [ ] An address, employer, or name you don't recognize
- [ ] A hard inquiry you didn't authorize
- [ ] An account opened by someone else using your info
- [ ] The same debt listed under both the original creditor and a collector
- [ ] Any difference between the three bureaus' versions of the same account

What to do next

Once you've identified errors, the next step is filing a formal dispute with each bureau that's reporting the inaccurate information. Under the **Fair Credit Reporting Act (FCRA)**, the bureaus are legally required to investigate your dispute, generally within 30 days, and either correct the information or remove it.

A few things to know going in:

- **Document everything.** Keep copies of bank statements, payment confirmations, letters, and prior versions of your credit reports.
- **Dispute in writing.** Phone disputes don't create a paper trail. Online and mailed disputes do.

- **Be specific.** A vague "this is wrong" gets dismissed. A dispute that names the account, the specific error, and includes supporting documentation gets results.
- **Follow up.** Pull your reports again 30–45 days after disputing to confirm the correction was made — at all three bureaus.

A final word

Cleaning up your credit report isn't glamorous work, but it's some of the highest-return work you can do for your financial life. A handful of corrected errors can mean a meaningfully better mortgage rate, which can mean tens of thousands of dollars over the life of a loan.

Take it one section at a time. You don't have to do all three reports in one sitting. The reports aren't going anywhere, and now that they're free weekly, you can keep coming back.

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