



Living on a Budget

How to make the most of your VISTA
Stipend

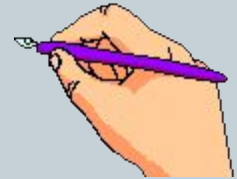
Budgeting



Write it down



- Write down everything that you buy
 - Get a small notepad and keep it with you at all times. Every time you buy ANYTHING write down the purchase in your notebook.
 - This will:
 - Make you more conscious of your purchases
 - Make you more accountable for what you buy
 - Show you where you are spending your money
 - Help you plan your budget
 - Make the flow of your money more real and exact



It shows you simply and clearly just where you are spending your money, on what and why. Once you know that it becomes much easier to control your spending.

Plan a Budget – and Stick to it!



- Budget out rent and other fixed expenses first. Know how much spending money you have each month.
- There are many budget planning sites that can be found online. [VISTA campus](#) has a very comprehensive planner to make sure that you are not overspending.
- <http://www.budgetworksheets.org/> is a savable spreadsheet you can use to track your planned and actual budget expenses.
- Use websites like www.mint.com to help with the planning and keeping of a budget.

Budget cont'd



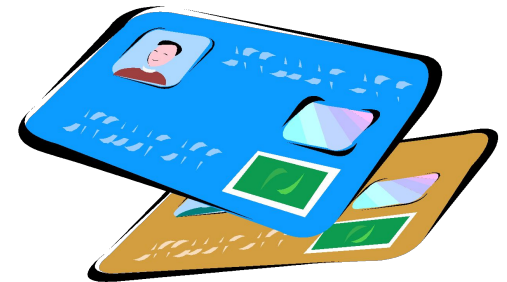
- Take out a fixed amount of money that you can spend each week. When that money is gone, the week's spending is over.
- Make sure that you budget for a savings account as well as for emergencies.
- When planning your budget, try to overestimate your expenses instead of underestimating. For example, when budgeting for gas use a higher gas price so this way you are prepared in case of a price increase.
- It is better to be over prepared than under prepared!

Questions to Ask Before You Buy



- Do I need it?
- Will I use it?
- Is there room for it?
- Can I borrow this?
- How long will it last?
- Can I do without it?
- Can I find a better price?
- Are there negative consequences?

Credit cards



Credit cards



- Be careful with credit cards. Many VISTAs have run up sizeable credit card debt during their service year. If you are carrying a balance, contact the bank or card company and see if you can lower your payments or interest rate. If you have been a good customer, they may make some accommodations.
- If you have a balance, put your payments in your budget and try not to use your card for the rest of the year so as to clear your balance.

Don't Get One!



- If you don't have any credit cards, do not get any during your service year.
 - If you do not have a card then you cannot use one and you have to stick to your budget.
 - These are tempting to use but can lead to debt as interest adds up during the year.
 - Avoid store cards as well, as these may cause unnecessary purchases.
 - If you cannot afford it at that moment, you need to save for it, budget it or decide if you really need it.

Credit Cards cont'd



● Avoid Using Cards

- If you have a card you need to be careful on how you use it. One way to avoid using your card is freezing it. This means that it is still available in case of an emergency but you have to really think about the purchase while it unthaws.
- You can also leave your card with someone you trust so that you don't have it on hand for impulse purchases. In case of an emergency they can help you decide if it is a real emergency or if it is a purchase that can wait and be saved for.

Credit Cards cont'd



- And if you don't have debt yet, consider throwing out your cards for the year! It can be too easy to put extra groceries or dinners out on the card. If you do not pay off your balance each month, the small purchases will add up! And if you miss a payment, this will be reflected on your future credit history.
- You don't want to end your year of service feeling good about the capacity you built in your community and bad about your own financial capacity.

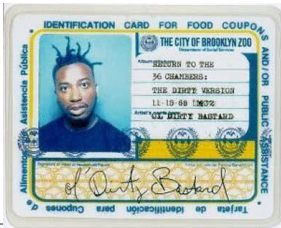
Public Assistance



Assistance Programs



- Find local agencies that support low income families and take advantage of the opportunities there.
 - Not only will you get assistance but you see firsthand the services offered and the process to get these services, for the community that you are serving. For example, how accessible services are, is there a stigma attached to it, how long is the waiting period etc.
- 2-1-1 is a database of service providers. Call 2-1-1 for assistance or visit the website www.211.org to search for services in your area
- You can also use www.benefits.gov as great resource for finding all sorts of assistance programs in your state or territory



Food Stamps

- There is a negative stigma for people receiving food stamps but as a VISTA food stamps (SNAP) are one of the best ways to supplement your income.
- Without this assistance it is almost impossible to eat healthy as healthier food options are usually more expensive.
- Recently farmer's markets have been using SNAP benefits so you can get fresh produce.
- For VISTAs serving in Nebraska go to <http://accessnebraska.ne.gov/> to apply for assistance.

Protection of Public Assistance



- If you received public assistance before becoming a VISTA, VISTA living allowance cannot be used to determine governmental assistance while you are serving. This is called income exclusion and is designed so your benefits are not reduced or lost as a result of serving as a VISTA. Read more about Protection of Public Assistance at [VISTA TCB](#).

Housing



Housing Options



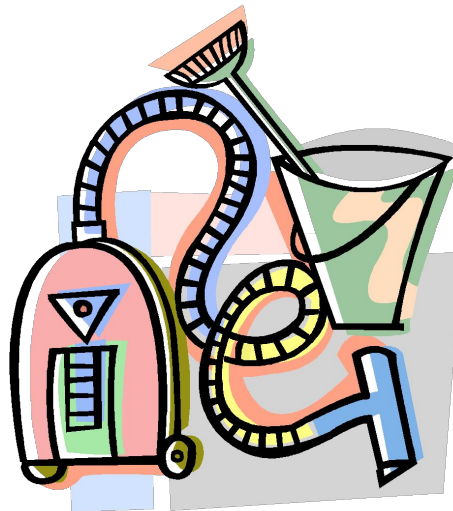
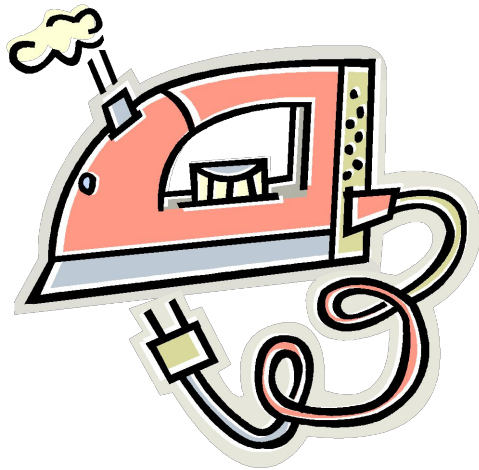
- If you own a home and have the space, consider taking on a boarder (a fellow VISTA, perhaps) to help with the mortgage payment.
- If you're renting, take on a roommate or two.
- Consider renting in a lower cost part of town that is accessible by public transit.
- If you are relocating to a different part of the country to serve, talk with your future supervisor and coworkers (especially other VISTAs). They may have ideas and leads for affordable housing.
- But remember, your project cannot give you money for your rent.

Types of acceptable housing assistance



- A community resident offers unused free housing space to you because he or she is proud to have an AmeriCorps VISTA member in the community.
- A local business wants to offer a vacant apartment over the shop area.
- A national housing company offers reduced-rate housing for volunteers who are serving in a given community and you meet the eligibility requirements.
- A local, state, or federal government agency provides free or low-cost housing in areas with limited housing opportunities.
- A sponsoring organization rents housing space on your behalf.
- A sponsoring organization allows you to occupy a portion of existing space the sponsor already owns or rents.

Home Products



Home products



- Re-use things, and learn to make your own. For example, you can make cleaning products. [Consumer Reports](#) has some ideas.
- Check out Web sites like www.coolsavings.com, www.craigslist.org, www.retailmenot.com and www.spoofee.com for free stuff, discounts, and coupons.
- Also check out www.FreeCycle.com which is an email listserv in certain areas where people exchange items for free instead of tossing them into a landfill or Goodwill.

Home products cont'd



- Shop at dollar stores. You can find brand name home products like cleaning supplies and home décor for a fraction of the price.
- Buy things at thrift stores, consignment shops, and yard sales. In most cases no one will ever know you didn't pay retail!

Utilities



Utilities



- Weather strip your windows and crevices in winter. However, make sure you install a carbon monoxide detector.
- Look for energy assistance programs offered by your utility provider, local governments, and nonprofits. For example, Citizens Energy offers winter home heating assistance in several states (Nebraska is not included).
- Set your thermostat to 78°F in the Summer and 68°F in the winter.
- Compact Fluorescent light bulbs last 10 times longer and use 75% less energy.
- Use a fan in the summer and space heater in the winter.

Utilities cont'd



- If you have multiple rooms in your home, close vents in rooms not being used.
- Clean your air conditioner and heating filters once a month, you could save up to 5% on heating costs.
- Open drapes/blinds in winter for natural heat and light. Close in the summer to avoid extra heating.
- Get rid of cable or premium TV stations.
- Turn your computer off when not in use or put on sleep mode.
- Don't leave lights on or electronics plugged in when not in use

Utilities cont'd



- Don't leave tap on when brushing your teeth or washing your face.
- Shorten your showers.
- Avoid flushing the toilet unnecessarily. Put trash and bugs in the trash cans.
- Use a clothes line to dry clothes.
- Thaw frozen foods before using them instead of running hot water over them.
- If you can, set your water heater to the normal setting.

Telephones



- Look into cheap wireless calling plans, or switch to a cheaper plan offered by your current provider. If you have a cell phone, consider giving up your land line (or vice versa).
- Make long-distance phone calls through your computer via [Skype](#), Google chat or other low-cost, over-the-Internet phone programs.
- Buy calling cards or emails friends/family that live far away.
- Ask your family to call you to save on long distance.

Do it Yourself



Do it yourself



- Barter services – If someone knows how to change oil, cook a meal for them.
- Use sites like www.instructables.com to learn to do some basic projects like “[How to change your oil](#)” or “[How to fix your flip flops](#).”
- Other examples of DIY sites:
 - <http://www.motherearthnews.com/Do-It-Yourself.aspx>
 - <http://www.dmoz.org/Home/Do-It-Yourself/>
 - <http://www.doityourself.com/>
 - http://www.pcworld.com/article/151423/8_great_howto_web_sites.html (list of 8 How to sites)

Gifts



- Use sites like <http://www.do-it-yourself-gifts.com/> and [www.giftypedia.com/Do It Yourself Gifts](http://www.giftypedia.com/Do-It-Yourself-Gifts) to create your own gifts for when the holidays/special events roll around.
- Use this time to host a party so that you can share resources and have a good time as well. You might have a skill that you can share with others and others maybe able to teach you something new.
Pool your resources and talents



Food





Shopping

- Clip coupons and look for stores that match prices.
- Comparison shop.
- Buy in bulk. For example, rice, beans, nuts, raisins, and granola can all be bought at a discount in bulk.
- Choose bargain foods such as pasta, potatoes, and sale items.
- Always look for a generic version of an item.
- Look for in-season and local vegetables at farmers' markets and produce stands.
- Don't go food shopping on an empty stomach. You're more likely to buy more than you need or splurge on snacks.

Shopping cont'd



- Make weekly menus before you go to the store and stick to them.
- Buy frozen foods. Vegetables can be bought in bulk at a cheaper rate and be used for a longer period.
- Buy fruits and veggies when in season and freeze any extra produce.
- Look in your fridge periodically for items that may go bad soon and use them up.
- Try to make one meatless meal a week. Eggs, cheese and soy are good sources of protein.
- Water is free. Replace sodas/juices with water.

Coupon sites



- www.coupons.com
- www.couponmom.com
- www.shortcuts.com
- www.smartsource.com
- www.cellfire.com (loads directly to you grocery's shopper card)
- www.coolsavings.com
- Look at your circulars before recycling them. There are lots of coupons and you can see the deals that your local stores have that week.

Eating out



- Find coupon books for restaurants that have discounts and specials like two-for-one meals.
- Don't eat out! Or limit eating out to one day a week or month.
- Save half of your meals for later.
- Bring your lunch to work. Peanut butter-and-jelly and tuna sandwiches are good, as are soups, salads, and leftovers.
- Attend workshops and trainings and take advantage of free snacks and lunches.

Eating out cont'd



- Check out sites like www.groupon.com and www.livingsocial.com for deals on local restaurants. You can get deals of 50% and more.
- Take advantage of special deals. Most places have specials on different nights of the week so find out what the specials are.
- Potluck or picnic it. Get a group of friends and potluck/picnic it.



Cooking



- Buy spices to improve the taste of cheap food.
- Learn how to stretch your food. For example, make stews and soups that can last for several meals.
- Avoid purchasing expensive meats.
- Become a vegetarian and get protein by eating beans and tofu.
- Cook with others. Each person can bring one ingredient to contribute.
- Attend potluck dinners.

Cheap Recipes Sites



- <http://bettesaidso.com/cookbook.pdf>
- <http://recipefinder.nal.usda.gov/>
- http://frugalliving.about.com/od/foodsavings/Food_Saving.htm
- <http://allrecipes.com/Info/living/budget-friendly-meals/main.aspx>
- <http://www.delish.com/recipes/cooking-recipes/quick-cheap-healthy-meals-recipes>
- www.hillbillyhousewife.com



Food Assistance Programs



- Apply for food stamps.
- Go to the local food bank. Search for one in your area at [Feeding America](#).
- Find a food-distribution program offered by nonprofits, faith-based communities, and others. For example, members living on reservations may be eligible for the [U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Distribution Program](#) on Indian Reservations program.
- Many churches, synagogues, mosques, and other faith-based communities sponsor meals that are open to all comers.

Clothing



Clothing



- Buy high quality clothing off-season. They are more likely to last longer than cheaper brands.
- Shop for clothing at thrift and consignment stores. They often have name-brand clothing available at huge discounts.
- Avoid dry cleaning only clothes.
- Hold a clothing swap with friends.
- Make sure you are washing your clothes properly. If you take care of you clothes they will last longer. [“How to do Laundry”](#) is something everyone should learn.

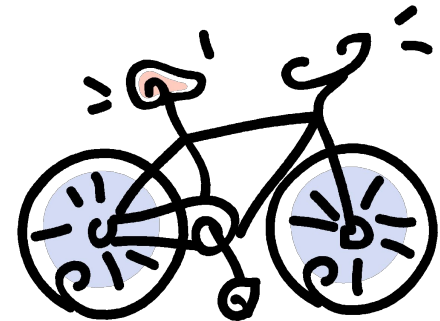
Clothing cont'd



- Learn to sew. Check out sewing sites like <http://www.sewing.org/html/learntosew.html> for tips and advice.
- Learn to revamp your current wardrobe. Check out sites like www.squidoo.com/how-to-recycle-clothes to get some ideas on how to recycle your clothes.
- Learn another skill like knitting or crocheting. Not only can you make some clothing articles but you can form a group and make it a social activity as well.



Transportation



Limit use of you car!



- Bike or walk as often as possible. Not only will you save on wear and tear, and gas but you will get more exercise.
- Car pool or use public transport. Local agencies provide bus passes for free or low cost to low income people.
- Group your errands so as to save gas money or go with a group. Grocery shopping can be a fun group event.

Save on gas!

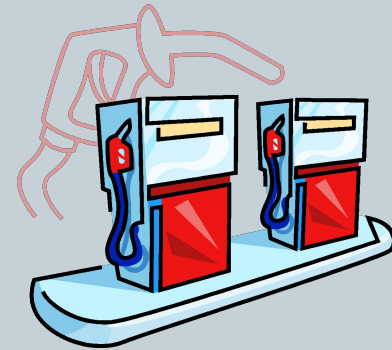


- Research the cheapest gas station at www.gasbuddy.com
- Make sure your tires are properly inflated, install clean air filters and change your oil filters
- In the city, avoid using your a/c. However, on the highway it's more efficient to wind your windows up.
- The faster you drive the more gas you use. For each 5mph you drive over 60mph is like paying an additional \$0.21 per gallon for gas.

Save on gas cont'd



- Avoid keeping unnecessary items in your car. An extra 100lbs in your vehicle can reduce your MPG by 2%
- Avoid letting your car just idle.
- Car maintenance is essential to avoid certain costs. Check your manual for specifics.



Insurance



- Temporarily raise the deductible on your insurance policy, you can always go back and lower it when you have more money.
- Make sure you are getting all your deserved discounts. Shop around and compare.
- If you are driving less, tell your insurer to get a cheaper rate.

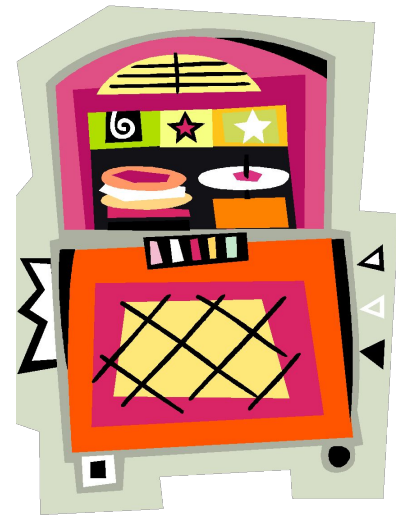
Travel



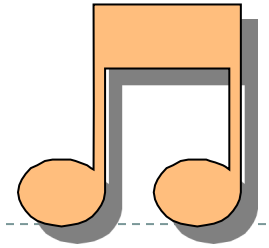
- Plan group trips. You can share the cost of the trip as well as spend time with friends.
- If you have to fly, fly cheap. Check out sites for lower fares at:
 - www.priceline.com
 - www.mobissimo.com
 - www.travelzoo.com
 - www.travelocity.com



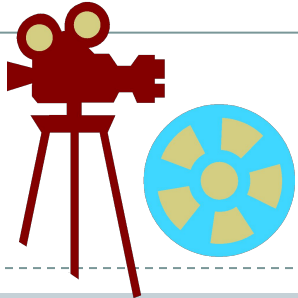
Entertainment



Books and Music



- Take old books and CD's to a resale store (e.g. CD Warehouse) for some extra cash.
- Have music swaps. Everyone can pitch in to purchase CD-RW to burn new CD's.
- Hold a magazine and book swap before recycling them.
- You can find cheap books at www.Amazon.com or www.half.com. You can also buy books at garage sales or thrift stores.



Movies



- Try Netflix or other online video rental places. It is cheaper, there are no late fees and you save on gas.
- Go to movie matinees or use your student id for cheaper prices.
- Look for movie clubs. [Marcus theaters](#) has a Spotlight movie club where featured weekly movies at \$5.
- Volunteer at local non-profit theaters. You may be able to see the films in exchange for your service.

Things to do



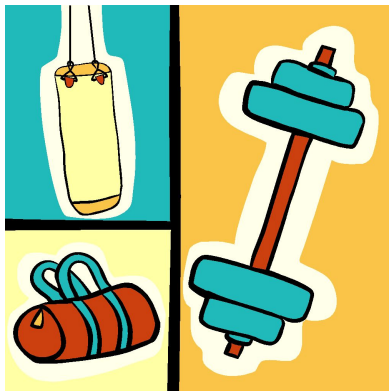
- Get a schedule of weekly events in your community from libraries, colleges, community centers, and local daily and weekly newspapers. Many events (especially those at libraries, colleges, and community centers) are free.
- Attend street fairs and free festivals.
- Volunteer to be an usher or work at an event or performance in exchange for free or reduced-price tickets.
- Volunteer with faith-based and civic organizations. You might be able to attend events or potlucks.
- Get together with friends for a board game night.

Things to do cont'd



- Go to the park. Many local parks have walking/bike trails, tennis courts and other equipment free of charge.
- Head to your local museum. Museums usually have a “free” day (Saturday mornings at the Jocelyn in Omaha and the Sheldon is free in Lincoln) and they usually host free events.
- Visit your local library. Instead of buying books, CD’s or movies, rent them from your library. Libraries also host free events throughout the year.

Exercise



Gym



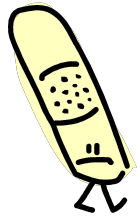
- Check for discounts at gyms, or if there is a reduced priced plan available.
- YMCA has financial assistance that VISTAs qualify for. Check your local YMCA for an application
- Gold's gym has memberships for \$10/month
- Check your local community centers. There maybe free or low cost classes available that you can take or facilities that you can use.

Join a team



- Joining a local sport team would be a great way to get some exercise as well as meet people in your community.
- You can use sites like <http://nebraska.sportsvite.com/cities/omaha-ne> and www.meetup.com to search for opportunities to join or start a team.

Health Services



Medical



- Go to a free medical clinic. You can find ones in your area using the Web site <http://findahealthcenter.hrsa.gov>
- In Omaha there is Charles Drew Health <http://www.charlesdrewhcomaha.org/>
- In Lincoln you can visit People's Health Clinic <http://phclincoln.org/>
- Take care of yourself. Neglecting your teeth and body could lead to outrageous hospital bills in the future.

Dental



- Dental schools often offer free or sliding-scale dental care to help train their students.
- You can use <http://www.freedentalcare.us/> or www.freemeidcamps.com/ to find local agencies that provide free or low cost dental care.
- Remember to take care of you teeth now to prevent possible incidents in the future. Here is some [tips for some good dental hygiene](#).

Vision



- For a list of agencies that may be able to assist with eye care needs check out <http://www.nei.nih.gov/health/financialaid.asp> which lists sites like [EyeCare America](#) and [New Eyes for the Needy](#).



Taxes



Tax Time



- Make sure that use the correct filing status on your W4. You don't want to have too little taxes taken out during the year and possibly owe taxes at the end of the year.
- State taxes are not taken out of your living stipend. You should budget in the possibility of owing state taxes.
- Your living stipend, education award and interest paid (by CNCS) on student loans are all taxable.

Tax Time (continued)



- There are several free options for tax preparation
 - The IRS has the VITA (Volunteer Income Tax Assistance) Program where volunteers can prepare your taxes for free <http://www.irs.gov/individuals/article/0,,id=107626,00.html>
 - You can also qualify for free or low cost options with some sites. See <http://www.irs.gov/efile/article/0,,id=118986,00.html> for a list of sites. However, most sites allow you to file your Federal Return for free but there is a fee associated with filing the State Return.

Volunteer



Volunteer Sites



- www.volunteersolutions.com/omaha
- www.volunteerpartners.org
- www.volunteermatch.org
- www.serve.gov
- www.allforgood.org
- www.idealists.org
- <http://www.dosomething.org/volunteer> (for teens)
- <http://liveunited.org/> (United Way)

Miscellaneous



Miscellaneous links



- Shop using www.Bizrate.com. You can enter what you are looking for and it will find the cheapest price for it in the country.
- Use www.Froggle.com (the low-rate finder on Google). It will tell you the best price of anything on the internet
- www.tradepub.com lists free publications across a range of subjects.
- If you shop online frequently, check sites out like www.mypoints.com and www.ebates.com where you get rewarded for purchases.

Miscellaneous cont'd



- Give up a bad habit or vice. Giving up unhealthy habits like smoking, drinking soda or coffee house coffees, or junk food not only helps you save money but will be better for you in the long run.
- Hair design schools give discounts for services.
- Recycle! <http://www.curbsiderewards.com/> rewards you for recycling.
- Look for sites that offer samples e.g.,
 - www.freestufftimes.com
 - www.shop4freebies.com
 - www.totallyfreestuff.com



Questions?



Any Questions or Comments?

**What are some tips that you
have learned from your year
so far?**