

# The how-to-get-anything-fixed guide

Need a repair? These steps will save you money and headaches



quirements and verify that the repairer has met them. Some repairers may have professional certifications indicating that they have met industry standards. For example, car mechanics are certified by the National Institute for Automotive Service Excellence ([ase.com](http://ase.com)) and appliance technicians may be recognized by the Professional Service Association ([psaworld.com](http://psaworld.com)).

Ask a repair shop about the credentials of the technician who will be assigned to your repair, advises Don Pierson, who heads the Certified Service Center program ([c-csc.org](http://c-csc.org)), which certifies electronics and appliance repair shops.

→ **Manufacturer connections.** Using a dealer or other factory-authorized repairer is probably essential if the product is still covered by the manufacturer's warranty or a safety recall. Either one also may negotiate with the manufacturer for a free out-of-warranty repair on your behalf. But they may charge a premium.

**Step 3. Get a diagnosis.** Provide as much detail about the problem as you can and describe any recent repairs (but never offer your own diagnosis). Ask how much it is likely to cost. We recommend that you replace a broken item if the repair will cost more than half the price of a new product.

After obtaining a diagnosis, ask the technician whether he's guaranteeing that the repair will correct the issue. If he is, ask him to put it in writing. That may help later if the repair doesn't work.

If he's unsure, be careful. You may be dealing with a so-called parts replacer, who just replaces parts in hopes of stumbling on the problem, says John Nielsen, AAA's managing director of engineering and repair.

**Step 4. Verify the price.** Find out whether the price is fair by checking with competitors, using an online search, or asking on online forums. If parts are involved, check with a parts store to verify that the shop isn't marking up the price unreasonably.

**Step 5. Get a written estimate.** The estimate should specify the type of parts: new, used, genuine manufacturer replacement, or

**I**t's not every day that your refrigerator stops working. So when that happens, figuring out how to get it fixed may not be obvious. For Eileen Globus of Melville, N.Y., it was an eye-opening experience. After her daughter called in a technician to look at her built-in KitchenAid refrigerator, the technician said it needed a new circuit board that would cost \$200, including installation. He also said it would take two weeks for the part to arrive.

After Globus did some research online, she found that the problem could be fixed by replacing a capacitor on the circuit board, available from Radio Shack for \$1.49. Her husband said it took just 30 minutes to install it and get the refrigerator running again.

Whether it's a refrigerator, a television, or another product, you don't need to be at the mercy of a repair person, who may overcharge you, misdiagnose the cause, or simply not know about a less costly solution. And when repairs do go wrong, you have recourse. Here's what to do:

## BEFORE THE REPAIR

**Step 1. Start with research.** Contact the product manufacturer. The problem may

be a common one for which the company has a fix, perhaps free. Also try an online search that includes the type of product and a short description of the problem. For example, you might type "freezer stays cold but refrigerator is warm." That alone might produce results that suggest what the problem is and how to diagnose it, as we found on [RepairClinic.com](http://RepairClinic.com).

Try narrowing things down further by using your brand and model. You also can try posting the problem on a message board for your product. If you're mechanically inclined, you may find that you can do the repair yourself using the many videos and other tutorials experts have posted online.

**Step 2. Find a pro.** If you haven't already established a relationship with a trustworthy repairer, ask people you trust to recommend someone. Even then, check out the company. Here are some factors to consider:

→ **Reputation.** Look for a company report at the Better Business Bureau ([bbb.org](http://bbb.org)), and use an online search with the company name and such terms as "reviews" and "complaints" to see what others say.

→ **Licensing and certification.** Some states require the licensing or registration of some technicians. Check your state's re-

aftermarket. Ask how much the estimated price can change. Be sure the work order requires the shop to get your approval before exceeding the estimate.

**Step 6. Tell the shop that you want to retain the old parts, if practical.**

You may be able to reduce the likelihood of fraud or provide an extra incentive for the technician to make sure the part really is defective before he replaces it.

**Step 7. Use a credit card.** Make any deposit or payment with a credit card. That way, if the shop tries to pull a fast one, such as overcharging you or charging you for a part it didn't replace, you can contest the charge with the credit-card issuer.

## AFTER THE REPAIR

If the repair still goes wrong, here's what to do. If the technician took reasonable steps to diagnose and fix the problem, you may not be legally entitled to anything. "Service providers don't guarantee that everything will go perfectly," says Richard Alderman, who heads the Center for Consumer Law at the University of Houston. "They guarantee that they'll do as a reasonably competent person would do in that profession."

It's another matter if the technician was negligent or engaged in fraud, says Daniel Blinn, managing attorney of the Consumer Law Group ([consumerlawgroup.com](http://consumerlawgroup.com)), based in Rocky Hill, Conn. In October the Maryland attorney general's consumer protection division ordered an appliance repair company in that state to return \$100,000 to customers for repairs that it didn't complete or that were unnecessary.

**Step 1. Research the problem.** Of course, it often can be difficult to tell whether the technician acted reasonably. Perhaps a knowledgeable friend or relative can help. Consider posting the details on product message boards and see what others say.

**Step 2. Complain to the repairer.** Start by being nice, even if you think the technician was negligent. Otherwise, you may discourage the company from helping you. Here's what you should expect:

→ **If you believe the technician was**



**When you have a product that needs fixing, you don't have to be at the mercy of the repairer.**

**negligent or dishonest.** You shouldn't have to pay for a technician's error. You may even be entitled to so-called expectation damages, an amount necessary to put things the way they would have been had the job been done correctly, Blinn says. The same goes if you have a written guarantee that the repair will fix the problem.

You also may have a right to so-called consequential or incidental damages if the technician's negligence caused you to suffer a loss beyond the cost of the repair. Maybe your food spoiled in your refrigerator after the first fix. And if there was fraud, you may be able to collect double or even triple damages—as well as legal fees—under state laws banning unfair trade practices.

The hope is that it won't get to the point where you'll need to enforce your rights. Start the negotiation by making a reasonable argument. If the technician works for a company with higher-ups, ask to speak to a supervisor. "You've got to get to the key person in the business relatively quickly and nicely pitch your complaint," Pierson says.

If the job needs to be redone, ask to have someone else do the work. And don't agree to pay for another part unless the company makes good on the unsuccessful repair.

→ **If you think the technician acted reasonably.** A company should be open to negotiation if it didn't fix the problem,

says Randy Carney, executive director of the Professional Service Association, which certifies repairers (primarily those who service appliances). For instance, it might agree to charge you its wholesale cost for any additional parts and/or forgo labor or diagnostic fees.

**Step 3. Call in another repairer.** If you have to call in another repairer, get a detailed work order and keep your receipt. That can help you show that the initial repair wasn't done correctly and can prove your damages.

**Step 4. Complain to a third party.** If you're unable to get satisfaction, seek help from third parties, such as the Better Business Bureau. Also contact any organization that certified or recommended the repairer, or a trade group to which it belongs. Finally, file a complaint with your state or local consumer protection agency ([usa.gov/directory/stateconsumer](http://usa.gov/directory/stateconsumer)) or the entity that licenses or registers the repairer, such as an occupational licensing board.

**Step 5. Dispute the charge.** If you paid by credit card, try disputing the charge, especially if the shop did work you didn't authorize or charged more than you agreed to.

**Step 6. Consider legal action.** Nolo.com has free information about small claims court ([nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/small-claims-court](http://nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/small-claims-court)), including state-by-state charts that show the rules and dollar limits for filing. You may also want to consider consulting a consumer attorney ([consumeradvocates.org](http://consumeradvocates.org)) if the dispute involves a significant amount of money. \$

## Find a repairer before you need one

**When your car, an appliance, or any other product has broken down, there's a good chance that you're desperate to get it fixed and don't have a lot of time to research and compare repairers.**

**So start checking out potential repairers beforehand, perhaps when a product requires maintenance or inspection. Then evaluate how it went. Did the shop act professionally? Was the work done on time? Did the shop try to sell you unnecessary products or services? "You can evaluate if that shop is treating you well while you have choices," says AAA's John Nielsen.**

**Once you've established a relationship, the people working there will probably go**

**out of their way to please you. And you can use the same approach for many other types of products that need service. Also start a list of shops that others have used successfully. If friends were satisfied with repairs they've had done, ask for the name of the shop and jot it down. That information could come in useful in the future.**

