

Unwrapping gift cards

Here's how to know the terms and avoid surprises when you give or receive a gift card.

When you give a gift card

When you give the card, give the terms and conditions and the receipt too. The terms and conditions are sometimes included in the original packaging.

When you get a gift card

- Protect the card like cash.
- Know what happens if the card is lost or stolen.
- You might not get your money back if your card is lost or stolen. So, write down the card number, security code, and customer service phone number when you first get the card, and register the card if you can.
- Keep the card until you're sure you won't return anything you bought with it. Some stores give refunds only on the card used to purchase an item.

Types of cards

Store gift cards

Store gift cards carry the brand of a single store, online merchant, or group of stores. They can be used only at those locations.



Network-branded gift cards

These cards have a logo such as American Express, Discover, Mastercard, or Visa. They can be widely used. They are often reloadable, which means more money can be added to them.

Reloadable prepaid cards

You can use these cards the same way you'd use reloadable gift cards, but the rules that cover these cards are not the same. Federal rules on gift cards apply only to cards that are marketed or labeled as gift cards or gift certificates, not to other types of cards. This means that, for example, the issuer of a reloadable prepaid card might charge fees, such as monthly service fees.

Avoid surprises

When you get, or give, a gift card, understanding the way the card works can help you avoid surprises.

No fees for one year

Federal rules say that gift cards cannot charge inactivity or service charges for 12 months. After that first year, these fees could start to eat away at your card's value.

Expiration dates may not mean the end

Under federal law, a gift card cannot be sold that will expire in less than five years. If you have a gift card that has an expiration date, call the phone number on the card to see if the funds are still available. If the card has expired but the funds are still available, the card issuer must send you a new card at your request, at no cost to you. Your state may provide additional gift card protections and rights.

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