

# Money Matters

## Maintaining And Improving Your Credit Score

(NAPSA)—Now may be the time to take charge of your credit and improve your credit score. In this economy, a dip in the average credit score can affect whether consumers get a loan, a good interest rate or even a job.

For most people, credit scores can be improved over time. The key is to understand how credit works and how scores are viewed. For instance, credit scores—also referred to as FICO scores—range from 300 to 850, with 850 being the highest score possible. Generally, the higher the credit score, the less costly credit becomes. In fact, boosting a score just a few points could save you thousands.

Loretta Abrams, from HSBC North America's Consumer Affairs Department, offers these tips to ensure that your credit score is the best that it can be.

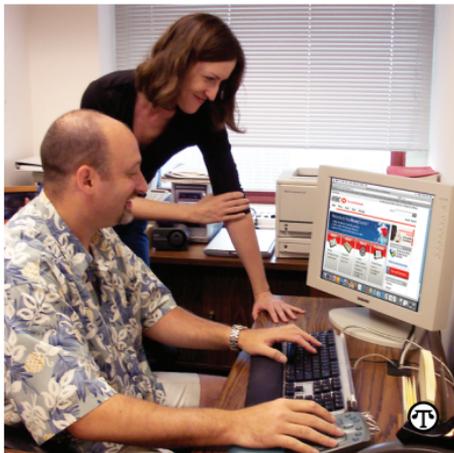
### Scoring 101

The first step is to understand what affects a credit score. These factors include late payments, high balances, a short credit history, and a lot of requests, or "inquiries," on your credit report.

### Know Where You Stand

Next, review your credit report at least twice a year—free at [www.annualcreditreport.com](http://www.annualcreditreport.com). It's worth paying the extra \$7-15 to get your actual credit score. Review your credit report and credit score at least six months before larger purchases (home, auto)—giving time to correct inaccuracies and improve your score if necessary.

Despite the importance of credit reports (and scores) and that the FACT Act allows all U.S. citizens access to their credit reports once from each of the three



**Credit scores range from 300 to 850, with the average score in the 650s.**

credit-reporting agencies every 12 months, 48 percent, or nearly half of consumers who responded to a survey by [yourmoneycounts.com](http://yourmoneycounts.com), had either never seen their credit report or had not seen it within the last year.

### Take Control

Your credit score is a "snapshot in time" and can change and be improved, so take good care of it. Always make at least the minimum payment on all bills, and be sure to pay on time. Keep credit card balances below 30 percent of available credit limits, and don't apply for cards you don't need.

Finally, Abrams says not to rely on a credit repair "expert" and to always protect your personal information from identity thieves. Contact your lender with any questions or concerns regarding your account.

For more information on credit and other topics in English and Spanish, visit [www.yourmoneycounts.com](http://www.yourmoneycounts.com).