

CLIENT PROCESS PLAYBOOK

The Commercial Tenant Playbook

Your Step-by-Step Guide to Leasing
Commercial Space in the GTA

Aidan Holt

REALTOR® · TIRU POPAL GROUP · RE/MAX METROPOLIS REALTY

P (647) 557-5358 E aidan@tirupopalgroupp.com W aidanholt.ca

Prepared by Aidan Holt, REALTOR®

Tiru Popal Group | RE/MAX Metropolis Realty

(647) 557-5358 | aidan@tirupopalgrou.com | aidanholt.ca

Hey — read this first

If you're about to lease commercial space, you're about to navigate one of the most expensive, complicated, and high-stakes transactions you'll do as a business owner. A bad lease can cost you tens of thousands. A great one can be the foundation that lets your business thrive.

This guide exists for one reason: **so you know exactly what to expect at every single step.** No surprises. No "wait, what does that mean?" moments. No feeling like you're being rushed into something you don't understand.

I'd rather you ask 100 questions before signing than have one regret after.

Let's go.

— Aidan

The 8 Stages of a Commercial Lease — At a Glance

Stage	What Happens	Typical Timeline
1. Discovery Call	We talk about your business, needs, budget	Day 1 (30-45 min)
2. Property Search	I source listings + off-market options	3-7 days
3. Showings	We tour 3-8 properties together	1-2 weeks
4. Letter of Intent (LOI)	We submit a written offer to lease	1-3 days to draft, 3-7 days to negotiate
5. Long-Form Lease	Landlord drafts the full lease	5-14 days
6. Lawyer Review	Your lawyer redlines the lease	5-10 days
7. Lease Execution	Both parties sign, you pay deposits	1-3 days
8. Possession & Move-In	Keys handed over, you take occupancy	Per agreed date

Total timeline: Typically 30-90 days from first showing to move-in. Faster if you're decisive, longer if you need build-out.

Stage 1 — Discovery Call (Day 1)

What happens

We hop on a call (or meet in person) for 30-45 minutes. I ask you a lot of questions. You ask me anything you want.

What I'm trying to learn

- **Your business** — what do you do, how does the space need to support it?
- **Operations** — square footage needed, ceiling height, drive-in doors, power, ventilation, parking, customer foot traffic vs. behind-the-scenes

- **Geography** — where do you need to be? Where are your customers, suppliers, employees coming from?
- **Budget** — total monthly all-in (base rent + TMI + utilities), build-out budget if any
- **Timeline** — when do you need to be operational?
- **Lease term** — 3 years? 5? 10? With renewal options?
- **Use** — what zoning do you need? Any special permits (cannabis, food service, daycare, automotive)?

Your job

Answer honestly, even when you don't know. Vague is okay — we'll narrow it down together. The better I understand your business, the better the space I find.

Cost

\$0. I'm paid by the landlord when we close. You owe me nothing.

My role

Listen. Ask the right questions. Tell you upfront if your budget doesn't match your needs (and what it WOULD take). Save you from wasting time on the wrong properties.

Your role

Be honest about your business plan, financials, and timeline. The more I know, the better I negotiate.

Stage 2 — Property Search (3-7 Days)

What happens

After our discovery call, I go hunting. I pull from:

- **REALM / MLS** — every commercial listing in the GTA
- **Off-market** — landlords I know with vacancy they haven't listed yet
- **Spacelist, LoopNet, ICX** — alternate commercial databases
- **Direct landlord outreach** — for properties that match perfectly but aren't listed
- **Facebook groups + industry contacts** — niche listings

I send you a curated shortlist (usually 5-10 properties) with photos, key details, rent, TMI, available date, and a quick note on why each one might fit.

Your job

Review the list. Tell me which ones to book showings for, which to kill, which to ask more questions about.

Cost

\$0.

What you should know

Not every space is on MLS. A good agent finds you stuff other agents miss. If I send you 8 properties, 2-3 of them are usually off-market.

Stage 3 — Showings (1-2 Weeks)

What happens

We tour properties together. I drive you, walk you through, answer questions in real time. Each showing is 20-45 minutes.

What to bring

- Notepad or phone for notes
- Tape measure (if you want to measure for equipment / fixtures)
- Questions about the space, the building, the neighbours
- Your business partner / spouse / decision-maker (so you don't have to recap)

What I'm doing during the showing

- Pointing out things you might miss (electrical capacity, drainage, exhaust, loading)
- Asking the listing agent the awkward questions you might not want to ask
- Reading the room (is the landlord motivated? hungry to lease? holding firm?)
- Mentally building your negotiation strategy

Red flags I'll flag if I see them

- Hidden water damage
- Recently failed businesses in the same unit (high turnover = bad sign)
- Restrictions that don't show up on MLS (no signage, weird hours, restrictive use clauses)
- Landlord that gives me bad vibes during the walkthrough

Cost

\$0. Showings are part of the service.

Stage 4 — Letter of Intent / Offer to Lease (LOI)

This is where it gets real. You found the space. Now we make a written offer.

What an LOI is

A document (in Ontario, often **OREA Form 510** for commercial deals) that lays out the **business terms** of the lease. It's the deal in plain English, before the 60-page legal document gets drafted.

What we negotiate in the LOI

Term	What it means	My typical strategy
Base Rent	Per sqft per year	Anchor 10-15% below ask, leave room to settle
Term Length	3, 5, 10 years?	Shorter term + renewal options = flexibility
Renewal Options	Right to renew at end of term	Always push for 1-2 renewal options
Free Rent / Fixturing	Rent-free period to build out	Push for 1-3 months of free rent
Tenant Improvement (TI) Allowance	Landlord pays \$X/sqft for build-out	Critical if you need significant build-out
Deposit	Usually first + last month + security	Try to keep this minimal
Personal Guarantee	YOU guarantee the lease personally	Push for "burn-off" — full PG for 24 months, then drops
Use Clause	What business is allowed	Push for BROAD language — protects future flexibility
Assignment Rights	Can you sell your business + transfer the lease?	Critical — never accept "no assignment"
Relocation Clause	Can the landlord move you mid-lease?	Push to remove or cap landlord-paid moving costs
HVAC Responsibility	Who pays when the rooftop unit dies?	Tenant maintains, landlord replaces above \$5K
Demolition Clause	Landlord can terminate to redevelop	Push for 12-18 months notice + relocation \$\$

Cost at this stage

- **Deposit submitted with LOI:** Often \$5,000-\$25,000 (refundable if deal doesn't close, or applied to first/last when it does)

My role

Draft the LOI. Negotiate every line. Push back on landlord-favourable boilerplate. Coach you through the back-and-forth. Get you the best deal the market will give.

Your role

Trust the process. Ask questions. Tell me what's a hard "no" and what's negotiable. Stay decisive.

What you should know

The LOI is where the deal is won or lost. Most agents under-negotiate at this stage and leave thousands on the table. I push hard here. Expect 2-5 rounds of back-and-forth before we settle.

Stage 5 — Long-Form Lease (5-14 Days)

What happens

Once both sides sign the LOI, the landlord (or their lawyer) drafts the **long-form lease** — the actual 30-80 page legal document that you'll sign.

What's in it

Everything from the LOI, written in legal language, plus:

- Indemnification clauses
- Insurance requirements
- Default + cure period mechanics
- Rules and regulations
- Assignment / sublet detailed mechanics
- Estoppel certificates (a one-page form you sign for landlord financing)
- Subordination & non-disturbance language

My role

Review it line-by-line against the LOI. Flag anything that doesn't match what we agreed to. Push back on additions or sneaky changes.

Your role

Read it (yes, even the 60 pages). Ask me about anything that confuses you. Hire a lawyer.

Stage 6 — Lawyer Review (5-10 Days)

Why you need a lawyer

A commercial lease is a 5-10 year financial commitment. The lawyer is your insurance policy. They redline, push back on legal language, and make sure the lease reflects what we negotiated.

What the lawyer does

- Reviews every clause for enforceability
- Redlines aggressive language
- Confirms assignment, sublet, and renewal rights are protected
- Reviews the legal description of the premises
- Coordinates with the landlord's lawyer on changes

What the lawyer does NOT do

- Negotiate base rent or business terms (that's me, in the LOI)
- Find you the space
- Manage the relationship with the landlord

Cost

\$1,500 - \$3,500 for a typical commercial lease review. Higher for complex deals.

My role

Refer you to 2-3 commercial lease lawyers I trust. Coordinate the timeline. Make sure your lawyer and the landlord's lawyer don't get stuck in a stalemate.

Your role

Hire the lawyer EARLY (before you receive the long-form lease, ideally). Pay their retainer. Read their feedback carefully.

Stage 7 — Lease Execution (1-3 Days)

What happens

- Both parties sign the final lease
- You pay the remaining deposit (typically first month + last month + security deposit)
- Lease is officially binding

Cost at this stage

- **First month rent:** Base rent + estimated TMI + HST
- **Last month rent:** Same as above
- **Security deposit:** Often equal to one or two month's rent
- **HST on rent:** 13% on top of base rent + TMI
- **Lawyer's final fee** (if not paid yet)

Total move-in capital

For a typical \$5,000/month all-in commercial space in the GTA, expect to write cheques for **\$20,000-\$30,000** at signing.

Stage 8 — Possession & Move-In

What happens

- Keys are handed over on the agreed possession date
- Your fixturing / build-out period begins (if applicable)
- You take occupancy

What I do after closing

- Stay in touch — I'm not disappearing the moment we sign
- Check in 30 / 60 / 90 days after move-in
- Help you with vendor recommendations (movers, signage, contractors, IT, security, insurance)
- Be your go-to for any landlord issues that come up over your tenancy
- Track your lease end date so we plan renewal or relocation strategy 12-18 months ahead



Glossary — Commercial Lease Terms Decoded

Term	What it actually means
Base Rent	The "headline" rent per square foot per year. E.g., \$20/sqft/yr on 2,000 sqft = \$40,000/yr or \$3,333/mo before extras.
TMI / Additional Rent	Taxes, Maintenance, Insurance — the building's operating costs passed to tenants. Usually \$5-\$15/sqft/yr on top of base rent.
NNN / Triple Net	Same as TMI — tenant pays base rent + property tax + insurance + maintenance.
Gross Lease	One inclusive monthly rent — landlord pays the operating costs. Rare in commercial.
Escalator	Annual rent increase. Typical: 2-4% per year, or fixed step-ups every 1-2 years.
TI Allowance	"Tenant Improvement" — money the landlord gives you to build out the space. E.g., \$20/sqft TI on 2,000 sqft = \$40,000 toward your build-out.
Personal Guarantee (PG)	You personally guarantee the lease. If the business defaults, the landlord can come after YOU personally.
Burn-off	A PG that drops away after a set period (e.g., 24 months) of good payment history. Always ask for this.
CAM	Common Area Maintenance — the maintenance portion of TMI.
Use Clause	The legal description of what business you're allowed to operate in the space.
Assignment	Selling your business + transferring the lease to the new owner.
Sublet	Renting out part or all of your space to another business while staying on the lease yourself.
Holdover	Staying in the space after the lease expires. Usually 150-200% rent during holdover.
Estoppel Certificate	A form you sign confirming the lease is in good standing — landlords need this to refinance or sell the building.

Term	What it actually means
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SNDA	Subordination, Non-Disturbance, Attornment — protects your tenancy if the landlord defaults on their mortgage.
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Red Flag Clauses — Watch For These ⚠️

These are the clauses that newer agents (and rushed tenants) miss. I push back on every single one:

▶ Relocation Clause at Tenant Expense

What it says: Landlord can move you to a different unit and you pay the moving costs.

Why it's bad: You spend \$50K building out a space, then get moved at YOUR cost.

My counter: Either remove it, or cap landlord-paid moving + TI rebuild + signage at \$X with 180+ days notice and comparable space.

▶ HVAC Capital Expenditure on Tenant

What it says: You pay to REPLACE the rooftop unit when it dies (a \$20K-\$50K expense).

Why it's bad: That's a landlord cost. You should only pay maintenance, not capital.

My counter: Tenant maintains HVAC, landlord replaces. Cap tenant exposure at \$X per incident.

▶ Demolition Clause with <6 Months Notice

What it says: Landlord can terminate the lease to redevelop the building with short notice.

Why it's bad: You can lose your location with no time to find a new one.

My counter: Minimum 12-18 months notice + landlord pays moving costs + first right to lease space in the new building.

▶ No Assignment Without Consent (Period)

What it says: Landlord can refuse any assignment for any reason.

Why it's bad: You can't sell your business with the lease attached.

My counter: "Consent not to be unreasonably withheld, conditioned, or delayed."

► Personal Guarantee for Full Term

What it says: You're personally on the hook for 5-10 years.

Why it's bad: Personal financial exposure for a decade.

My counter: PG burn-off after 24 months of on-time payments, or cap PG to a max dollar amount.

FAQ — The Top 10 Questions Tenants Ask Me

Q: How much should I budget all-in?

A: Total monthly = base rent + TMI + HST + utilities. For a \$20/sqft base rent + \$8/sqft TMI on 2,000 sqft, you're looking at roughly \$4,667/mo + utilities + HST. Always model your TOTAL monthly cost, not just headline rent.

Q: Do I need a lawyer? Can't I just read the lease myself?

A: You need a lawyer. A 60-page commercial lease has language designed by landlord lawyers to favor landlords. \$2K spent on a lawyer can save you \$50K over the term.

Q: How long does this whole process take?

A: Typical: 30-90 days from first showing to move-in. Faster if you're decisive and don't need build-out. Longer if you need significant fixturing or municipal permits.

Q: What if I find a place on my own?

A: Tell me. We can still do the deal — I represent YOU as your tenant rep, not the landlord. I get paid by the landlord regardless. You lose nothing by having me involved.

Q: Can I negotiate after I sign the LOI?

A: Limited — the LOI is the framework. You can refine in the long-form lease, but major business terms are locked in. That's why we get the LOI right.

Q: What if my business fails?

A: Best case: assignment to a new tenant. Mid case: sublet. Worst case: landlord pursues the personal guarantee. This is why we negotiate PG burn-off and assignment rights aggressively.

Q: What's the difference between net and gross leases?

A: Gross = one all-in rent. Net = base rent + you pay extras (taxes, maintenance, insurance — TMI). Triple net (NNN) is most common in commercial.

Q: When do I pay the deposit?

A: Initial deposit (\$5K-\$25K) goes with the LOI. Final deposits (first/last/security) at lease execution. All applied to your account if the deal closes.

Q: What if the landlord won't budge on a clause?

A: We negotiate hard, then make a call: accept it, find a creative workaround, or walk. You're never trapped — your deposit is refundable until the lease is fully executed.

Q: Will you still be available after I sign?

A: Yes. I check in at 30/60/90 days, recommend vendors, help with landlord issues, and start planning your renewal or relocation 12-18 months before lease end.


What Makes Me Different

- **I read every lease line-by-line.** Not just the LOI — the long form too.
- **I have a lawyer on call.** Two of them. Both commercial specialists. I'll connect you.
- **I tell you when to walk.** If a deal isn't right, I'd rather lose the commission than push you into a bad lease.
- **I stay involved after signing.** Most agents disappear. I track your lease end date and quarterback your renewal years in advance.
- **I push the landlord HARD.** I'm your advocate, not the landlord's friend. My job is to get you the best deal the market will give.

What's Next?

If you've read this far, you're already ahead of 95% of commercial tenants. That's how I want every client to start.

Ready to find your space?

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 aidan@tirupopalgroupp.com

 aidanholt.ca

Let's go find you a home for your business.

— Aidan