BERNARD JACKSON • REALTOR® (ABR®) • LPT REALTY

ROAD MAP

TO HOMEOWNERSHIP

From renting, to owning, to investing — one step at a time.
Educated today. Prepared tomorrow. Homeowner forever.

This guide is available in English and Spanish.
Esta guía está disponible en inglés y español.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Everyone reads this guide from a different starting point. That's why every chapter has three boxed panels — one for renters, one for first-time buyers, and one for investors. Find your panel. Read that one first. Come back to the rest whenever you're ready.

You don't have to read this cover to cover in one sitting. Keep it. Come back to it. Homeownership is a process, not a single decision.

THE THREE TRACKS

IF YOU'RE RENTING

You're not buying yet, but you're getting ready. Every chapter ends with one small step you can take this week — no pressure, no timeline.

IF IT'S YOUR FIRST HOME

You're pre-approved or close to it. Every chapter gives you a checklist so you always know what's next and what's negotiable.

IF YOU'RE INVESTING

You're acquiring property, maybe your first, maybe your fifth. Every chapter speaks to your numbers — cash flow, financing, and risk.

CHAPTER 01

01

BEFORE YOU START

Three steps before you ever look at a listing.

CHAPTER 01

BEFORE YOU START

Before you start house hunting, take three simple steps.

First, check your credit score. You can get a free copy every year. A higher score can help you get a better interest rate on your loan.

Second, make a simple budget. Write down what you earn each month and what you spend each month. This shows you what you can really afford — not a guess, a number.

Third, let go of an old myth. Many people believe they need to save 20% of a home's price before they can buy. That is not true for most buyers. Loan programs like FHA have allowed down payments as low as 3.5% for years. Some programs allow even less. Talk to a lender early. They can give you your real number, based on your situation.

SECTION 8 & HOUSING CHOICE VOUCHER HOMEOWNERSHIP

A PATH YOU MAY NOT KNOW ABOUT

If you receive a Housing Choice Voucher (Section 8), you may be able to use it toward a mortgage payment instead of rent, through your local housing authority's homeownership program. I work with HCV homeownership pathways directly, and I also offer rental placement services if buying isn't your next step yet. Ask me — this option gets overlooked constantly.

YOUR SITUATION

IF YOU'RE RENTING

You may already qualify for more than you think. This week: pull your free credit report and write down one number — your total monthly bills. That's your starting point.

IF IT'S YOUR FIRST HOME

Know your two numbers — your credit score and your debt-to-income ratio. Both drive your loan options. Ask your lender for both in writing.

IF YOU'RE INVESTING

Lenders look at portfolio debt differently than a primary home loan. Bring two years of tax returns, and a rent roll if you already own property — it speeds up your pre-approval.

CHAPTER 02

02

GETTING PRE-APPROVED

Pre-qualified and pre-approved are not the same thing.

CHAPTER 02

GETTING PRE-APPROVED

Pre-qualified and pre-approved sound alike. They are not the same.

Pre-qualified means a lender takes your word for your income and debts. It's a quick guess, not a guarantee.

Pre-approved means the lender actually checks your pay stubs, tax returns, and bank statements, and pulls your credit. A pre-approval letter tells a seller you are serious and ready to buy — it carries real weight.

To get pre-approved, you'll typically need: two recent pay stubs, your last two years of tax returns, two months of bank statements, and a photo ID.

LOAN TYPES, IN PLAIN ENGLISH

FHA loans help buyers with lower credit scores or smaller down payments. VA loans serve veterans and active-duty military, often with no down payment required. Conventional loans work well for buyers with strong credit and steadier income history. Florida Hometown Heroes and other down payment assistance programs can help cover your down payment and closing costs.

> *NEEDS A CURRENT NUMBER — Hometown Heroes and DPA eligibility, income caps, and award amounts — source: Florida Housing / floridahousing.org*

Physician loans serve doctors and some medical professionals, often with flexible terms around student loan debt. Investors often use DSCR loans, which qualify based on a property's rental income instead of your personal income — useful if your tax returns show heavy write-offs.

YOUR SITUATION

IF YOU'RE RENTING

Not sure where you stand? A 15-minute call with a lender costs nothing, and tells you exactly what to fix first — credit, savings, or paperwork.

IF IT'S YOUR FIRST HOME

Get your pre-approval letter in hand before you tour homes. It's your ticket in the door, and your leverage at the negotiating table.

IF YOU'RE INVESTING

> Ask about DSCR loans if your rental income is strong but your personal tax returns show heavy deductions. It's often the faster path to approval.

CHAPTER 03

03

HOUSE HUNTING

What I do for you before you ever see a home.

CHAPTER 03

HOUSE HUNTING

Once you're pre-approved, the search begins.

I build a custom home search matched to your budget, your must-haves, and your deal-breakers. You get new listings the moment they hit the market — not a day late. I schedule showings around your work day, not mine.

Before we tour homes together, Florida requires buyers and agents to sign a written buyer representation agreement. This spells out what I do for you and how I'm paid, so there are no surprises later.

At every showing, I'll point out what a home inspector will likely flag, what's cosmetic versus structural, and how the price compares to similar homes nearby.

DON'T SKIP THE HOA DOCUMENTS

A STEP BOTH FIRST-TIMERS AND INVESTORS SKIP

If the home has a homeowners association, request the HOA documents — rules, fees, reserve fund status, and any pending litigation — before you're too far into the deal to walk away easily. A poorly run HOA can raise fees fast, restrict rentals, or signal deeper problems with the property. I request these for every client automatically, but read them yourself too.

YOUR SITUATION

IF YOU'RE RENTING

Start a simple list now: three neighborhoods you like, and three things you can't live without. It makes the search faster once you're ready.

IF IT'S YOUR FIRST HOME

Bring a checklist to every showing — roof age, HVAC age, water heater age. I'll help you build one specific to Florida homes.

IF YOU'RE INVESTING

Tell me your target numbers up front — cap rate, minimum cash flow, rehab budget ceiling. It narrows the search to properties worth your time.

CHAPTER 04

04

MAKING AN OFFER

Earnest money, contingencies, and what protects you.

CHAPTER 04

MAKING AN OFFER

When you find the right home, we write an offer together.

Earnest money is a deposit — usually a small percentage of the price — that shows the seller you're serious. It gets credited toward your purchase at closing, not spent separately.

Contingencies are conditions that protect you. A financing contingency lets you walk away if your loan falls through. An inspection contingency, often called the inspection period, gives you a set number of days to have the home professionally checked.

If the inspection turns up problems, you have options: ask the seller to fix them, ask for a price reduction, or in some cases cancel the deal and get your earnest money back. I'll walk you through exactly what each contingency protects before you sign anything.

YOUR SITUATION

IF YOU'RE RENTING

This step is further down the road for you, but knowing it exists now removes the fear factor once you get here.

IF IT'S YOUR FIRST HOME

Never waive the inspection contingency to win a bidding war unless I've walked you through exactly what you're giving up.

IF YOU'RE INVESTING

Build your repair estimate into your offer price, not just your inspection ask — it protects your margin from day one.

CHAPTER 05

05

UNDER CONTRACT TO CLOSING

Appraisal, inspection, insurance, and title — at the same time.

CHAPTER 05

UNDER CONTRACT TO CLOSING

Between contract and closing, several things happen at once.

An appraiser values the home for your lender, to confirm it's worth what you're paying. Your inspection results come back, and if repairs are needed, I negotiate them directly with the seller's agent.

A title company checks the home's ownership history for liens or legal issues, and issues title insurance to protect you going forward. A few days before closing, we do a final walkthrough together to confirm the home is in the agreed condition, and that any repairs were actually completed.

FLORIDA INSURANCE — START EARLY, NOT LAST

THIS DESERVES ITS OWN STEP, NOT A FOOTNOTE

Florida's insurance market has shifted in recent years, and premiums vary widely by company, roof age, and location. Get at least three quotes as soon as your offer is accepted — not the week of closing. A surprise premium late in the process can change your monthly payment and, in some cases, your loan approval. I can point you toward agents who specialize in your area.

YOUR SITUATION

IF YOU'RE RENTING

Florida insurance shopping is a real skill worth learning early. Start noticing which companies are writing new policies in your target area, before you need one.

IF IT'S YOUR FIRST HOME

Get your insurance quotes the same week your offer is accepted, not the week before closing. It can change your monthly payment math.

IF YOU'RE INVESTING

Ask your insurance agent about landlord or rental-specific policies. A standard homeowner policy will not correctly cover a tenant-occupied property.

CHAPTER 06

06

CLOSING DAY

What to bring, what you're signing, and what to watch for.

CHAPTER 06

CLOSING DAY

Closing day is the finish line.

Bring a valid photo ID and be ready to sign a stack of documents — don't let that intimidate you, I'll be there to walk through what matters most. The two big ones are your mortgage note, which is your promise to repay the loan, and the deed, which transfers ownership to you.

You'll also sign a closing disclosure that lists every cost in the transaction. Closing costs are separate from your down payment — they cover things like lender fees, title insurance, and prepaid property taxes and insurance.

WHAT IS ESCROW, REALLY?

Your monthly mortgage payment often includes more than principal and interest. It also includes an escrow amount — a fund your lender uses to pay your property taxes and insurance on your behalf. If your tax bill or insurance premium changes, your escrow payment changes too. That's normal. It's not a sign something went wrong.

> *NEEDS A CURRENT NUMBER — typical closing cost range in today's market — source: your lender or title company*

Ask me about adding a home warranty. It's inexpensive relative to the peace of mind it buys in your first year, covering repairs to things like your HVAC, water heater, and major appliances if they fail.

PROTECT YOURSELF FROM WIRE FRAUD

READ THIS BEFORE YOU SEND ANY MONEY

Confirm wiring instructions by phone, using a number you already have on file — never a number or link from an email. Wire fraud specifically targets buyers at this exact stage of the process. When in doubt, call the title company directly.

HEAR FROM PAST CLIENTS

CLIENT REVIEWS

Read what past clients say: https://www.trustbuff.com/r/qlwYZCxn4ueeJrM

YOUR SITUATION

IF YOU'RE RENTING

This is the day all the earlier steps lead to. Save this page — you'll want to reread it when you're closer.

IF IT'S YOUR FIRST HOME

Call the title company directly to confirm wiring instructions before you send any money. Scammers target buyers at this exact step.

IF YOU'RE INVESTING

If you're closing in an LLC or other entity, confirm your entity documents are ready with the title company at least a week out — it's a common last-minute delay.

CHAPTER 07

07

YOUR FIRST YEAR – AND BEYOND

Homestead exemption, maintenance, and what comes next.

CHAPTER 07

YOUR FIRST YEAR — AND BEYOND

Congratulations — you're a homeowner. A few things matter most in your first year.

FOR INVESTORS: BEYOND THE FIRST CLOSING

Decide whether you'll self-manage or hire a property manager, and build that cost into your cash flow model from day one — not after your first vacancy or a 2 a.m. maintenance call.

A 1031 exchange lets you sell an investment property and reinvest the proceeds into another one while deferring capital gains tax. It has strict timelines and requires a qualified intermediary — talk to a tax professional before you sell, not after.

Florida landlord-tenant law sets rules for security deposits, notice periods, and eviction procedures. Screen every tenant the same way, every time. Consistency protects you legally and protects your investment.

> *NEEDS A CURRENT NUMBER — current-year homestead exemption filing deadline — source: your county property appraiser's office*

Set aside roughly 1-2% of your home's value each year for maintenance — a rule of thumb, not a guarantee. Expect your insurance premium to change at your first renewal; shop it again rather than letting it auto-renew. Ask your lender or me about refinancing once rates drop or your equity grows, but only if the math clearly beats your current payment.

FILE YOUR HOMESTEAD EXEMPTION

THE MOST MISSED STEP BY FIRST-TIME BUYERS

If this is your primary residence, file for the Florida homestead exemption with your county property appraiser. It lowers your taxable home value and caps how much your property taxes can rise each year. Most first-time buyers miss it simply because no one told them in time.

> *NEEDS A CURRENT NUMBER — current-year homestead exemption filing deadline — source: your county property appraiser's office*

YOUR SITUATION

IF YOU'RE RENTING

File this page away. When you close, the homestead exemption deadline is the single most missed step by first-time buyers — including many who read guides like this one.

IF IT'S YOUR FIRST HOME

Mark the homestead exemption deadline on your calendar the day you close. Don't wait for a reminder that may not come.

IF YOU'RE INVESTING

Line up your property manager or self-management system before closing, not after your first vacancy.

READY FOR YOUR NEXT STEP?

Wherever you are in this guide, here's the right next move for you.

RENTING

Not ready yet? Let's build your plan. No pressure, no timeline — just a clear picture of what it takes to get there.

FIRST-TIME BUYER

Ready to get pre-approved? Call or text 863.223.2294.

INVESTOR

Want the numbers on a specific property? Email bernardjacksonrealtor@gmail.com.

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DISCLOSURES

Equal Housing Opportunity. Bernard Jackson and LPT Realty are committed to fair housing. We provide services without regard to race, color, religion, sex, disability, familial status, or national origin.

This is general education, not legal or tax advice. Consult a qualified attorney, accountant, or licensed lender for advice specific to your situation. Loan program terms, eligibility, and figures referenced in this guide are subject to change — always confirm current details with a licensed lender or the relevant program administrator.

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