TIME TO OWN MY HOME

10 First-Time Buyer Mistakes to Avoid

(and Exactly How to Fix Each One)

The costly errors that derail most buyers — and the simple moves that keep your dream of homeownership on track.

Buying your first home is one of the biggest financial decisions of your life. Most buyers go in excited — and walk out overwhelmed, overpaying, or worse, losing the deal entirely. After years of helping first-time buyers across Central Florida, I've seen the same mistakes happen over and over again.

The good news: every single mistake in this guide is completely avoidable. Read this before you do anything else.

By **Phyllis Allen**, Licensed REALTOR® & Host of the *Time to Own My Home* Podcast
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The 10 Mistakes — and How to Avoid Every One

1 Mistake #1: Not checking your credit score before starting

Who this affects: This hits: first-time buyers just starting out

✕ THE MISTAKE

Most buyers assume their credit is fine — until a lender pulls it and finds old collections, errors, or a score too low to qualify. At that point you've already fallen in love with a house you can't get a loan for.

■ ***What it costs you: Delays your purchase by 6–18 months and could cost you the home you wanted.***

✓ THE FIX

Pull all three of your credit reports RIGHT NOW at AnnualCreditReport.com — it's free. Dispute any errors immediately. Know your score before you talk to a single lender.

- Equifax, Experian, and TransUnion can all have different information
- Errors on credit reports are more common than most people realize
- You need at least a 580–620 score for most loan programs
- Give yourself 3–6 months to repair before applying if your score is low

Phyllis's tip: Get my free guide 'Hack Your Credit — 101 Ways' at timetoownmyhome.com

2 Mistake #2: Shopping for a home before getting pre-approved

Who this affects: This hits: renters who think they can't afford to buy

✕ THE MISTAKE

You fall in love with a $320,000 home, make an offer — and then find out you only qualify for $240,000. Or worse, the seller won't even look at your offer without a pre-approval letter attached.

■ ***What it costs you: Wasted time, heartbreak, and missed opportunities on homes that sell fast.***

✓ THE FIX

Get pre-approved FIRST — before you visit a single open house. A pre-approval letter tells you exactly what you can afford and makes sellers take you seriously.

- Pre-approval is not the same as pre-qualification — get the real thing
- Shop at least 3 lenders to compare rates and fees
- Pre-approval is usually free and takes 1–3 business days
- Your pre-approval letter is valid for 60–90 days

Phyllis's tip: I can refer you to trusted local lenders who specialize in first-time buyers and down payment assistance. Ask me.

3 Mistake #3: Ignoring down payment assistance programs

Who this affects: This hits: renters who think they can't afford to buy

✕ THE MISTAKE

Thousands of buyers believe they need 20% down and simply give up before they start. In reality, Florida has programs that can give you $10,000–$35,000 in assistance — money that in many cases never needs to be repaid.

■ ***What it costs you: Leaving thousands of dollars of free money on the table.***

✓ THE FIX

Ask about Florida Hometown Heroes, FL Assist, SHIP, and Volusia County local programs before you assume you can't afford to buy. Many buyers are shocked at how much help is available.

- Florida Hometown Heroes: up to $35,000 in down payment help
- FL Assist: up to $10,000 — deferred, zero interest, no monthly payment
- SHIP Program: local county assistance for income-qualified buyers
- Some programs require as little as 3% or even 0% down

Phyllis's tip: I help buyers access these programs every day. Let's find out what you qualify for — book a free call at timetoownmyhome.com.

4 Mistake #4: Making big financial moves before closing

Who this affects: This hits: all of the above

✕ THE MISTAKE

You get pre-approved and then buy a new car, open a credit card, or make a large deposit into your bank account. Your lender re-checks your finances right before closing — and suddenly your loan is in jeopardy.

■ ***What it costs you: Your loan gets denied days before you're supposed to close. You lose your earnest money deposit.***

✓ THE FIX

From the moment you apply for a mortgage until the day you close, make NO major financial changes. No new debt. No large purchases. No switching jobs if you can avoid it.

- Do not buy a car, furniture, or appliances on credit before closing
- Do not open any new credit cards — even store cards
- Do not make large cash deposits without documentation
- Do not co-sign on anyone else's loan

Phyllis's tip: Your lender will re-pull your credit just before closing. Stay boring with your finances until you have the keys.

5 Mistake #5: Skipping the home inspection

Who this affects: This hits: all of the above

✕ THE MISTAKE

In a competitive market, some buyers waive the home inspection to make their offer more attractive. This is one of the most dangerous decisions a buyer can make — especially in Florida where humidity, storms, and aging infrastructure create unique hidden problems.

■ ***What it costs you: You could buy a home with a failing roof, mold, foundation issues, or faulty wiring — and have no legal recourse.***

✓ THE FIX

Never waive the home inspection. A qualified inspector typically costs $300–$500 and can save you from a $30,000 surprise after move-in.

- Florida-specific concerns: mold, termites, roof age, HVAC condition, and flood risk
- Attend the inspection yourself — walk through with the inspector
- Use inspection results to negotiate repairs or a price reduction
- Consider additional inspections: wind mitigation, 4-point, pool, and sewer

Phyllis's tip: I always recommend my buyers attend the inspection in person. You learn more about your future home in 2 hours than any listing can tell you.

6 Mistake #6: Not budgeting for closing costs

Who this affects: This hits: first-time buyers just starting out

✕ THE MISTAKE

You've saved up your down payment and think you're ready. Then your lender tells you closing costs are another $6,000–$12,000 on top of your down payment. Many buyers are blindsided and can't close.

■ ***What it costs you: Your closing gets delayed or falls apart because you don't have enough cash.***

✓ THE FIX

Plan for closing costs of 2–5% of your loan amount from the very beginning. Ask about seller concessions (the seller pays some of your closing costs) and lender credits to reduce out-of-pocket expenses.

- Closing costs include: lender fees, title insurance, appraisal, prepaid taxes and insurance
- Ask your lender for a Loan Estimate early — it itemizes every cost
- Negotiate seller concessions in your offer to cover some closing costs
- Some down payment assistance programs also cover closing costs

Phyllis's tip: I help my buyers negotiate seller concessions whenever possible. Sometimes we can get the seller to cover thousands of your closing costs.

7 Mistake #7: Choosing the wrong real estate agent — or using none at all

Who this affects: This hits: all of the above

✕ THE MISTAKE

Some buyers work with the first agent they meet, use the seller's agent ('dual agency'), or try to navigate the process alone to save money. As a buyer, you pay zero commission — your agent is free to you. Not using one is leaving professional representation on the table.

■ ***What it costs you: You pay more, miss negotiating opportunities, and navigate complex contracts alone.***

✓ THE FIX

Work with a buyer's agent who specializes in first-time buyers and knows your local market. Interview them. Make sure they understand down payment assistance programs and buyer education.

- As a buyer, you pay NO commission — the seller pays your agent's fee
- A good buyer's agent negotiates on your behalf and catches contract issues
- Never use the seller's agent — they legally represent the seller, not you
- Look for an agent who educates you, not just shows you houses

Phyllis's tip: I built my entire business around buyer education. My goal is for you to feel confident and informed at every step — not rushed or confused.

8 Mistake #8: Falling in love with a home before checking the numbers

Who this affects: This hits: renters who think they can't afford to buy

✕ THE MISTAKE

You tour a beautiful home, picture your family in it, and make an emotional offer over asking price — without running the actual numbers. Then you're house-poor, struggling to cover the mortgage plus taxes, insurance, HOA, and maintenance every month.

■ ***What it costs you: Financial stress, missed payments, and possibly losing the home you stretched too far to buy.***

✓ THE FIX

Before making any offer, calculate the TOTAL monthly cost: mortgage principal and interest + property taxes + homeowner's insurance + HOA (if any) + PMI (if less than 20% down). Make sure this number works comfortably in your budget.

- In Florida, property taxes and homeowner's insurance are significant — don't underestimate them
- HOA fees in some communities add $200–$600+ per month
- Budget 1–2% of the home's value per year for maintenance and repairs
- Your mortgage payment should ideally be no more than 28–30% of gross monthly income

Phyllis's tip: I run total cost scenarios for every home my buyers consider. Numbers don't lie — emotions do. Let's look at both together.

9 Mistake #9: Not understanding what a REALTOR® actually does for you

Who this affects: This hits: people rebuilding their credit

✕ THE MISTAKE

Many first-time buyers — especially those who've faced financial hardship — assume working with a REALTOR® costs money they don't have, so they try to go it alone. They end up missing assistance programs, signing bad contracts, and losing money they didn't have to lose.

■ ***What it costs you: Overpaying, missing assistance programs, signing unfavorable contracts, and having no advocate in your corner.***

✓ THE FIX

A REALTOR® is your legal representative in the transaction. We handle negotiations, contracts, deadlines, inspections, and paperwork. And as a buyer, you pay nothing for this service. The seller pays the commission.

- Your REALTOR® has legal fiduciary duty to act in YOUR best interest
- We have access to MLS listings — including homes not yet public
- We negotiate price, repairs, closing costs, and contract terms on your behalf
- We coordinate with lenders, title companies, and inspectors so you don't have to

Phyllis's tip: My mission goes beyond just selling homes. I educate buyers — especially those who've been told homeownership isn't for them. It is for you.

10 Mistake #10: Giving up too soon

Who this affects: This hits: all of the above

✕ THE MISTAKE

You get denied once, or the first home you loved falls through, or you look at your credit score and decide it's impossible. You stop trying. And you keep renting — paying someone else's mortgage month after month, building zero wealth for yourself.

■ ***What it costs you: Years of lost equity, lost tax benefits, and no generational wealth to pass on.***

✓ THE FIX

Every obstacle in homeownership has a solution — if you have the right guide. Credit too low? There's a plan. No down payment? There's assistance. Got denied? There's a path forward. The question is whether you're willing to take the next step.

- Most credit issues can be resolved in 6–12 months with the right plan
- A denial from one lender does not mean all lenders will say no
- Down payment assistance exists specifically for people who think they can't afford it
- Every month you rent, you build zero equity — every month you own, you do

Phyllis's tip: I have helped buyers who were told 'no' by banks, who had past foreclosures, who had no savings — and they are homeowners today. Don't give up. Call me.

Your Action Checklist — Start Today

Print this page, stick it on your fridge, and check off each item as you complete it. Every box you check is a step closer to homeownership.

This week

■ Pull your 3 free credit reports at AnnualCreditReport.com

■ Write down your credit score from each bureau

■ List all your monthly debt payments and calculate your DTI

■ Open a dedicated savings account for your down payment

This month	■ Dispute any errors you find on your credit reports ■ Set up autopay on all accounts so you never miss a payment ■ Research Florida down payment assistance programs ■ Contact at least 3 lenders and ask about first-time buyer programs
Before you tour a single home	■ Get your official pre-approval letter in hand ■ Know your true comfortable monthly payment (not just max approved) ■ Build your must-have vs. nice-to-have home list ■ Book a free buyer consultation with Phyllis at timetoownmyhome.com
Before you close	■ Make ZERO new major purchases or credit applications ■ Schedule and attend the home inspection in person ■ Review your Closing Disclosure 3 days before closing ■ File for Florida Homestead Exemption after closing (deadline: March 1)

Don't do this alone.

Every mistake in this guide is avoidable — with the right guide by your side. I have helped buyers with bad credit, no savings, and past financial hardship become homeowners. I can help you too.

Book your FREE Buyer Consultation today

timetoownmyhome.com

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