

How to Buy a Home: A Step-by-Step Guide

Buying a home is an exciting milestone—and a major financial decision. This guide walks you through the process from financial preparation to closing day, helping you feel confident, informed, and ready at every stage.

1. Start With Financial Preparation

Before touring homes or comparing mortgage rates, it's essential to make sure you're financially ready for homeownership.

Save for Your Upfront Costs

Down Payment

A down payment is a one-time payment made toward the purchase price of your home. While many buyers believe 20% is required, that's not always the case.

- Conventional loans: as low as 3% down (confirm with your lender)
- FHA loans: 3.5% down
- VA & USDA loans: 0% down for eligible buyers

Putting more money down can lower your monthly payment, improve interest rates, and eliminate private mortgage insurance (PMI) on conventional loans.

Closing Costs

Closing costs typically range from **3%–6% of the purchase price** and may include:

- Appraisal
- Title insurance
- Lender fees
- Government-backed loan insurance or funding fees (if applicable)

Your lender will provide a **Closing Disclosure** before closing that outlines every cost. Review it carefully.

Understand Ongoing Costs of Homeownership

Unlike renting, owning a home includes additional monthly and annual expenses:

- Property taxes
- Homeowners insurance
- Maintenance and repairs

Factor these into your monthly budget to determine what you can comfortably afford.

Key Financial Metrics to Review

Debt-to-Income Ratio (DTI)

DTI measures how much of your monthly income goes toward debt payments.

Formula:

Monthly Debt ÷ Gross Monthly Income = DTI

Most lenders prefer a DTI of **50% or less**, though requirements vary by loan type and lender.

Credit Health

Your credit score significantly affects loan options and interest rates.

Credit scores are based on:

- Payment history
- Amounts owed
- Length of credit history
- Credit mix
- New credit inquiries
- Minimum score for most loans: **620**
- Best rates typically begin at **720+**

Avoid opening new credit accounts or making large purchases during the buying process.

Income & Employment

Lenders typically require:

- Approximately **2 years of work history**
- Pay stubs and W-2s (salaried employees)
- Tax returns and additional documentation (self-employed buyers)

2. Get to Know Your Market

Begin exploring homes online and attending open houses to understand pricing, neighborhoods, and features.

This is also the ideal time to:

- Define must-haves vs. nice-to-haves
- Research neighborhoods and school districts
- Interview and hire a trusted real estate agent

4–5 Months Before Buying:

- Start browsing homes online
- Define wants and needs
- Hire a real estate agent
- Monitor spending and protect your credit

3. Get Pre-Approved & Start Searching

Choose a lender or mortgage broker and obtain a **pre-approval letter**, which shows sellers you're a serious buyer.

Pre-approvals typically last **60–90 days** and require:

- Bank statements
- Pay stubs
- Tax returns

Common Loan Types

Conventional Loans

Popular and flexible, backed by Fannie Mae or Freddie Mac.

FHA Loans

Government-insured with more flexible credit requirements.

VA Loans

For eligible military members and spouses—no down payment required.

USDA Loans

Designed for rural and suburban areas with income limits—0% down.

Set up saved searches through your agent or MLS to receive alerts for new listings.

2–3 Months Before Buying:

- Secure pre-approval
- Save online searches
- Schedule showings

4. Make an Offer

Once you find the right home, your agent will submit a written offer that includes:

- Purchase price
- Buyer information
- Offer deadline
- Earnest money deposit (typically **1%–2%**)

Seller Responses

- Accept the offer
- Reject the offer
- Counteroffer

Your agent will guide negotiations and help you decide whether to proceed, counter, or walk away.

1–2 Months Before Buying:

- Find the right home
- Negotiate and sign the contract

5. Complete Escrow & Finalize Plans

During the **30–45 day escrow period**, several steps take place:

Home Inspection

A licensed inspector evaluates the property's condition. Review the report carefully and discuss any major issues with your agent.

Buyers often include an inspection contingency, allowing renegotiation or withdrawal without losing earnest money if major problems arise.

Appraisal

An appraisal confirms the home's market value. If it comes in low, you may need to renegotiate or contest the valuation.

Repairs or Credits

You may request:

- A price reduction
- Seller-paid closing cost credits
- Repairs prior to closing

Prepare for the Move

- Schedule movers
- Change your address
- Set up utilities
- Notify your landlord if renting

Under One Month Before Closing:

- Complete inspection
- Secure homeowners insurance

6. Close on Your New Home 🎉

Before closing, complete a **final walkthrough** to ensure:

- Repairs were completed
- The home is vacant and clean
- Systems are functioning properly

On closing day, you'll sign final documents at the title company and officially become a homeowner.

Closing Week Checklist:

- Final walkthrough
 - Sign paperwork
 - Receive your keys
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Congratulations!

Homeownership is a big step—having the right guidance makes all the difference. With preparation, the right team, and a clear plan, you can move forward with confidence and peace of mind.