

Thinking of buying a digital camera? Put some thought first into how you'll use the camera and what features you'll need. Then, use these tips and grid to compare the features of different cameras. Finally, try to read on-line user reviews of the camera(s) you have in mind before purchasing one. Remember that no camera has a 100% user satisfaction rate, but the reviews often expose red flags that may affect you more than others. Choose a retailer that will allow you to return the camera if you find it's not right, after all.

1. Set your budget ahead of time.

Decent cameras can be found for as little as \$150, but you'll generally get more features as the price increases. Remember to budget for accessories that may not be included, such as batteries and charger, strap, camera case, memory cards, etc. You may be able to negotiate with the retailer to include some of the accessories.

Total budget: _____

2. Consider the regular uses for your camera. It it for:

<input type="checkbox"/> casual home use?	You may not need many fancy features.
<input type="checkbox"/> business?	Consider resolution and frame rate more seriously.
<input type="checkbox"/> action, such as children's sports?	Look for a good frames-per-second rate or a continuous-shooting mode.
<input type="checkbox"/> extreme close-ups, like wildflowers?	Look for a macro mode.
<input type="checkbox"/> outdoors and nature shots?	A viewfinder (rather than just an LCD screen) is nice for shooting in bright sun. Go with the best optical zoom you can afford. Some cameras allow you to stitch together shots for panoramics.
<input type="checkbox"/> learning to shoot like a pro?	Look for the ability to adjust the camera manually. Some cameras allow you to interchange lenses.

3. Resolution. What is the largest print size you think you'll make?

<input type="checkbox"/> High-quality 8x10	Look for a camera with a minimum of 7 megapixels*
<input type="checkbox"/> 4x6 (standard photo album prints)	2 megapixels would be adequate
<input type="checkbox"/> Electronic only (display on computer)	Less than 2 megapixels is fine

*Most cameras these days come with 5 megapixels

See other side for a comparison chart of camera features >

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Comparison shopping chart:

	Considerations	Camera A	Camera B	Camera C
Price for camera	Look on-line or in stores for ballpark costs			
Additional accessories (You may be able to negotiate with the retailer for some of these; if not, budget for what you'll need)	<input type="checkbox"/> card reader or cable for direct connection to computer <input type="checkbox"/> software for organizing and processing images <input type="checkbox"/> memory card(s); 512MB and up is great <input type="checkbox"/> batteries, including a spare set. Charger? <input type="checkbox"/> carrying case and strap			
Resolution	What size prints do you need? (see p. 1)			
Zoom: Optical x Digital = Total	Buy the best optical zoom you can afford (min. 3x). Digital zoom is not a true zoom.			
Flash	It's nice to have a manual override so you can turn it off if you want.			
Optional features (These depend on what you shoot)	<input type="checkbox"/> Red eye reduction <input type="checkbox"/> Image stabilization <input type="checkbox"/> Macro (extreme close-up mode)			
LCD screen size	A bigger screen is nice if you'll be deleting photos on-site or sharing with others.			
Viewfinder	Nice if you're shooting in bright sunshine.			
Size and weight of camera	Do you want to slip it in a pocket or do you prefer a heftier feel for larger hands and better finger dexterity?			
Video	Takes up lots of memory but can be handy.			
Memory card	Do you have compatible memory cards from other devices? Most high-end cameras have a Compact Flash card, which has the fastest transfer rate. More compact cameras use the Secure Digital or multimedia cards. SD cards can come with a write protect feature to protect the data from accidental deletion. Budget for an extra card or two.			
Batteries	Does the camera take rechargeable as well as store-bought batteries? Do you have other electronic devices that take the same batteries? Some cameras use a proprietary battery that is specific to the manufacturer.			
Battery life	The claims for battery life can vary widely depending on how the camera is used.			
Warranty, Support, Return Policy	Is the dealer reputable? Is there a free return/exchange policy (particularly for online orders)? To whom do you return it? How good is the warranty – are there shipping, handling, stocking fees?			