

Guitar Buyers Guide

By Jason Wilford

Over the years I have received the question *'what kind of guitar should I buy?'* more times than I can remember. It's sort of like shopping for a new car; there are so many options out there, so how do you decide which brand to stick with? How do you know which model to choose? How much should you spend, and what deciding factors are important when buying a new (or used) guitar? Since I have answered these questions so many times, I thought I would put together a little **buyers guide** to help you choose which guitar is right for you when the time comes to purchase a new (or used) instrument. As a bonus, once you read this article there will also be a checklist that you can use to help you make sure the instrument you are thinking about is right for you.

To preface this article, I want you to be aware that I have written it for the guitarist who already has some experience and knows a little bit about guitars. If you are a complete beginner and know nothing at all, then there are only three simple rules I want you to go by:

- 1) **Buy from a guitar (or music) store** – not big box stores, pawn shops, or craigslist/kijiji. Trust me – you'll thank me later if something goes wrong with the instrument.
- 2) **Set a reasonable budget** – don't expect anything to be easy to learn on if you spend less than \$200. Price doesn't always mean it's going to be a better quality guitar that is easier to play and learn on, but it's a good indicator.
- 3) **Buy for comfort** – make sure that the guitar feels comfortable and is right for your body shape, otherwise you simply won't be inclined to pick it up.

Now that that's out of the way, let's get into the fully-loaded version of the buyers guide to help you choose which guitar is right for you. I can't tackle every single thing you could possibly think about when buying a guitar, but this should get you going in the right direction. I have divided this guide into a number of sub-sections to help you get a better grasp of what to look for.

Appearance

As a starting point, you want to make sure that you like the look of the guitar you are buying. Do you like the overall image of the guitar? The shape of the body? Shape of the headstock? Is the guitar in perfect condition, or does it have some blemishes? If you are buying used, make sure to look the guitar over for anything that may detract from its value, and if it will affect how much you will like the guitar. Remember that you will most likely dent/scratch/bump your guitar at some point, so sometimes it can be worth saving some money for an instrument that isn't in perfect condition if you can.

Comfort, Fit & Feel

For me, the next most important aspect of buying a guitar is how good the guitar feels when you are holding it. Does the guitar body feel comfortable while you are playing it? Does it feel good both sitting down and standing up with a strap? Does the guitar neck feel good in your hands? Is the guitar neck balanced (does the neck stay level without holding it up)? Is the weight of the guitar comfortable for you? There is a lot to think about in this area, so take your time and make sure that everything about the guitar feels comfortable to you.

Sound

Once you have established that you like the look and feel of the guitar, it's time to focus on how the guitar sounds. When you play the guitar unplugged (with no amplifier), how does it sound to you? Do the notes ring out a long time, or does the guitar feel dull and lifeless? A well built guitar will have notes that sustain a really long time, but this can depend on the type of wood used to build the guitar, the construction, and many other factors. Price can play a big factor in this, as a \$2000 guitar might use a 1-piece body construction and better materials, whereas a \$300 will glue together different pieces of wood to construct the body. The 1-piece body will probably sound better because the wood will have better resonance, but the question to ask yourself is whether the price difference is worth it to you. If you have a specific budget when buying a guitar, only do your comparison within that price bracket (e.g. don't compare the sound of a \$300 guitar to a \$2000 guitar as you will probably be disappointed).

Playability

Most guitar or music shops will offer to set up your instrument for you free of charge when you purchase it. This is important because a good guitar setup will make your instrument much easier to play. Just remember that if you are buying used from a private buyer, you really need to know your stuff and be able to properly examine the instrument before making a decision. At a music shop they should have a trusted guitar tech that can do all of this stuff for you, which is a huge bonus.

I am going to list some things here that will affect how your instrument plays. The first two things I am going to mention here are (usually) easy to fix.

How high do the strings feel when you are playing the guitar? This is referred to as 'action'; higher action means the strings are higher from the fretboard, whereas lower action means the strings are closer and will require less pressure to push down on a fret. Make sure that you find the right balance for yourself.

Do the notes sound in tune as you are playing along the neck? If they don't, you likely have an intonation issue. If you know how to do this yourself, see if the guitar will intonate properly

before purchasing. If you don't know how to do this and you are buying from a music store, ask them to do this for you.

There other things aren't so easy to fix, and can quickly add cost onto your purchase:

Are the frets in good condition? This is important if buying a used instrument, as sometimes you may notice there are 'pits' or worn down spots on the frets where the strings touches them. You may also notes on certain frets that strings can be hard to bend because of this. Beware of this because it means you either have to pay for a fret dressing, or a re-fret, which can quickly bring the cost of the instrument up. This shouldn't be as much of an issue for a brand new guitar.

Are the frets even? Do you notice any notes on the guitar that don't actually make a sound, or tend to have a bad buzz? If you do, you probably need to get the frets dressed (or levelled), which will add to the cost (unless the shop is willing to do it for you).

Is the neck in good condition? When buying a used instrument, it's important to make sure that the neck isn't warped or twisted. You can sight this out by looking from the headstock to the end of the guitar body to see if one side of the neck twists at all. If buying privately, I would avoid any and all instruments with this issue unless you are familiar with what it takes to fix this.

Does the truss rod work? The truss rod adjusts the amount of relief a guitar neck has. This is usually adjusted with an allen wrench at either the heel or end of the neck. If you are buying privately, absolutely make sure that this works. If it doesn't, it can be very hard to fix.

If you don't understand what some of those things I mentioned above are, then it's a good idea not to buy privately but from a guitar or music store who will provide you with assurance and some sort of warranty.

Budget

If you have a specific budget when buying a guitar, make sure that the guitar first falls into your budget, but then also that you are happy with everything it comes with. Does it come with a case? If not, you need to tack this onto the cost of the instrument. Will you need to upgrade any hardware or pickups? In the past I have purchased cheaper versions of instruments trying to save some money, only to end up spending more with upgrades than if I had just purchased the more expensive model in the first place. There are guitars that fall into pretty much any budget range you can imagine.

Warranty

Is there a warranty included with the guitar? What does it cover? Does the store you bought it from cover initial guitar setup costs? Also, are you able to return or exchange the guitar within a certain period of time if you are unhappy? These are questions for you to ask yourself and decide how important they are to you.

Extras

One last thing to think about is whether the guitar comes with anything extra. Does it come with a case? Does it come with all the tools to adjust it (allen keys / wrenches etc)?. Do you get any certificates of authenticity (for more expensive guitars)? Is there any special hardware included that you may not be aware of, such as strap locks, a strap, strings etc? It doesn't hurt to ask the sales associate or private seller about these things.

What I have written above should give you a good start with helping you decide which guitar to buy, or if your purchase you're about to make is a good deal. You may have thought of additional questions that I didn't even bring up here – and that's a good thing. Everyone has their own preferences, and this article is just meant to help you choose what's best for you. On the next page is an included checklist to help you make sure that you are confident with your decision – because in the end, that's what will make you feel good. In the past I have made a few mistaken purchases, and usually it's because I made them on a whim and didn't analyze the instrument properly before buying. Hopefully this helps you avoid the mistakes I have made, and gives you some good criteria to go by. More checkmarks in the YES column is a good thing – but sometimes certain areas won't matter to you that much, so keep that in mind when looking at items where you checked off a NO; how important was that question to you?

Happy purchasing! :)

GUITAR BUYING CHECKLIST

Yes	No	
		Comfort, Fit & Feel
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the guitar body feel comfortable while sitting down?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the guitar body feel comfortable while standing with a strap?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the guitar neck feel good in your hand?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is the guitar neck balanced? (e.g. the neck doesn't fall towards the floor).
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is the weight of the guitar comfortable for you?
Yes	No	Look
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do you like the look of the guitar?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is the guitar in perfect (or almost perfect) condition?
Yes	No	Sound
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the guitar sound good unplugged?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the guitar sound good plugged in? (only applicable to electrics and acoustics with electronics)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Do notes have good sustain? (e.g. the notes ring out for a good amount of time)
Yes	No	Setup
		<i>(the first four CANNOT be fixed cheaply or easily, but the last two might be minor things a tech can take care of)</i>
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the truss rod work? (very important if buying used)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is the neck in good condition, or is it warped?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Are the frets even? (notes don't 'fret out')
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Are the frets in good condition? (if buying used, you may notice 'pits' or worn down frets)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is the action (string height) comfortable for you?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the guitar sound in tune wherever you play notes along the neck? (intonation)
Yes	No	Budget
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is the guitar within your budget?
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Are you happy with the guitar as is? (if you need to swap parts out, this increases the price)
Yes	No	Warranty
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is there a warranty on the guitar? (if yes, make sure you know how long the warranty is)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Can you return the guitar to the store if it's not for you? (extra question: do you get a refund or credit?)
Yes	No	Extras
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the guitar come with a case? (if it doesn't you need to factor this into cost)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Does the guitar come with the necessary tools to adjust it? (allen keys, wrenches etc)
<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	Is there anything else included with the guitar? (it doesn't hurt to ask!)

