

Considerations Before You Buy a Guitar

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Choosing an instrument is an important decision. If you are buying your first guitar, the decision is even more daunting because you may not know where to start. For beginning guitar players, no matter what age, my personal recommendation is to start on an acoustic guitar (either nylon or steel string). You can purchase an electric guitar later. Along with years of enjoyment, a good acoustic instrument will provide you with a solid foundation on which to build.

The prime question be “what kind of music do you want to play?”. Answering this question will help steer you to either a classical (nylon string) guitar or a steel string guitar.

If you have any guitar player friends that you trust, they can be a great asset. Ask their advice and have them show you things in a ‘hands-on’ fashion. A picture is worth a thousand words. Take the mystery out of it.

Next, spend some time at the local music store. Ask their advice. Or, if you are lucky enough to live close to a few, then spend time at a few local music stores. In the Knoxville area my favorites include Open Chord Music on Kingston Pike, Tennessee Guitar and Sound in Bearden, Lane Music out west, Ciderville Music to the north and east, and Murlin’s Music in Maryville to the south just to name a few. The common quality of these stores is that the salespeople care about you and your return business. They will try to steer you towards what is best for you.

Stay AWAY from the multi-million-dollar mega-stores that stock guitars as one of thousands of products (including groceries). They know nothing about guitars. The guitars they stock are garbage. Likewise STAY AWAY from the music mega-stores that are more interested in moving product than advising you on what best fits your needs.

If you are buying a guitar for a youngster at or under the age of 12, or otherwise of small stature, PLEASE invest in a $\frac{3}{4}$ size ‘student’ guitar. I have taught more than a few 10-year-old and younger students who could not even reach the tuning pegs to tune their guitars. Most of the first music we learn on the guitar takes place on the first three frets. These frets need to be comfortably within reach.

A guitar that is too big for the student will lead to frustration.

My personal recommendation for very young students is a $\frac{3}{4}$ size, nylon string guitar. This will be the easiest on their fingers and the least frustrating to try and play. Good quality models can be found in the \$150 - \$225 range (2025 pricing). If the child is small/very young you should also investigate $\frac{1}{2}$ size guitars. The litmus test is that the child should reach the first three frets easily.

Weekdays before 5 are a great time to go to a music store. The staff will be able to give you more time than in the busier evenings or weekends.

Don't be afraid of secondhand instruments when buying from a reputable, customer-oriented music store. Guitars are wooden instruments. If taken care of properly they improve with age. They can easily last for decades. The value of many well-made guitars increase with age.

Other considerations include purchasing a 'cutaway' model which allows access to the higher frets, and/or buying an acoustic/electric which allows the guitar to be amplified easily.

If you are considering a used instrument and you have any guitar player friends that you trust, ask their opinion. Do internet searches to compare prices to be sure the guitar shops' prices are in line. Most reputable stores will be. Sweetwater.com is my favorite online music store. They are extremely customer oriented and the sales folks are knowledgeable.

Check before you buy

- Check, or have your guitar player friend check, that the fingerboard is straight. AVOID guitars that have twisted or warped necks. You can look down the neck from the end of the guitar body, or the end of the headstock to check this. Seriously warped necks are rare and to be absolutely avoided.
- If the strings seem old or worn, ask for a new set to be put on. Ask for the guitar to be put in tune.
- Check, or have your guitar player friend check that the strings are at the correct height. Question guitars that have extremely high action (the strings are far above the fretboard). Have it fixed BEFORE you buy it.
- Play every note or have your guitar player friend play every note. Each note should sound clear. Also, check the intonation (notes playing in tune up and down the neck). Buzzing notes or bad intonation when the guitar is played need to be fixed BEFORE you purchase it.
- Check, or have your guitar player friend check, the condition of the tuning pegs. They should all work smoothly. Tuning pegs can be fixed but they should be fixed BEFORE you buy the guitar.
- Examine the instrument for cracks and splits. New guitars should not have any. Old guitars may have some. Often they do not affect the sound but may reduce the resale value - you may get a good sounding guitar for a few dollars less.
- On acoustic guitars, examine all glue joints. These are located on the inside bracing and on the bridge. These should be solid with no signs of movement.

Protect your investment by buying a case for your guitar. A well-fitting hard case is the best. Soft cases are second best. If you purchase/use a soft case for your guitar, be sure the padding is thick. Also, if your soft case allows you, or your child, to carry the guitar in a 'backpack' fashion, be very careful when getting in and out of cars, of walking through short doorways. I have had students forget their guitar was on their back and rip the neck off by jumping into a car with the guitar still on their back !

Also plan on buying a tuner and a variety of picks when purchasing the guitar. Snark tuners are an excellent choice in tuners. Picks are a matter of personal preference so try a few different one(s) and see which one you like over time. You will soon want to start using a metronome to keep time during practice. There are several free offerings for use on a smartphone. Likewise, there are several tuning apps available for smart phone but none are as accurate or the ease of use of a Snark or equivalent tuner.