

Playbook: Your Guide to Life & Money

Buying a Home: Making Moves



What Is Covered in This Chapter:

- Determining if and when you should buy
- The cost of buying a home and ways to help you prepare financially
- Mortgage basics and the process for securing home financing
- A step-by-step checklist for finding, assessing, and closing on your future home
- Common mistakes for first-time homebuyers and ways to help you avoid them
- Questions to ask before signing on the dotted line

Buying your first home just may be the most important (and intimidating) investment decision of your adult life. More than simply a roof over your head, your home can serve as a place to settle in, entertain friends, raise a family and start building equity in a tangible asset. But before taking the leap, it's important to evaluate all the factors before signing on the dotted line. Understanding the real estate market, total costs of homeownership, and available financing resources are all critical to finding and securing your dream home. Happy house hunting—your DIY Pinterest board awaits.



To Buy or Not to Buy?

Buying your first home comes with significant financial and lifestyle implications. It's a big decision! Although it may seem like the logical next step, just because your friends are making the leap doesn't necessarily mean it is right for you as well. Do your due diligence and weigh your options before putting a stake in the ground.

Questions to help you decide:



1. Do you see yourself moving to another city, state, or country in the next 3–5 years?
2. Have you calculated the estimated costs of homeownership in your desired city or neighborhood? (Don't forget to include maintenance costs and closing fees).
3. Have you reviewed your credit score recently?
4. Are there any other big-ticket expenses you anticipate needing to pay for in the near future?

PRO TIP

Your Financial Advisor is there to be a sounding board for all your major financial decisions—including a home purchase. They can help you test your budget and consider how buying a home will factor into your larger financial picture.

Benefits of Owning vs. Benefits of Renting



BENEFITS OF OWNING

- Financial advantages
 - Potential appreciation
 - Potential equity
 - Potential tax deductions
- Freedom to make certain improvements
- Become part of the neighborhood

If you are planning on staying in the same place and do not foresee any major purchases or expenses in the coming 3–5 years (think: kids, planned medical procedure, travel)...



Your financial situation and near-term goals may make you a good candidate to buy. However, when approaching such a big decision, make sure to educate yourself and seek out good advice. Pay close attention to financing and take into account the many unexpected and underestimated costs involved in buying a home.



BENEFITS OF RENTING

- Usually not responsible for repairs
- Increased flexibility/transferability
- Landlord bears the risk of decline in property value
- May cost less per month; savings can be used for other financial goals

If there's a potential move in your future and/or other big-ticket items you're saving for...

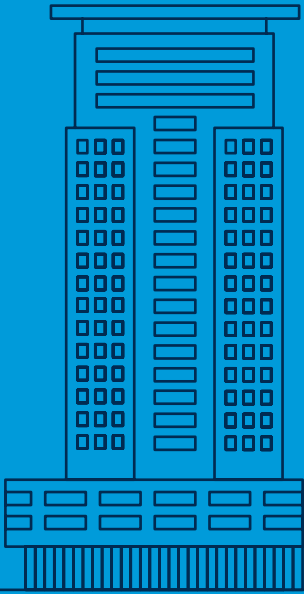
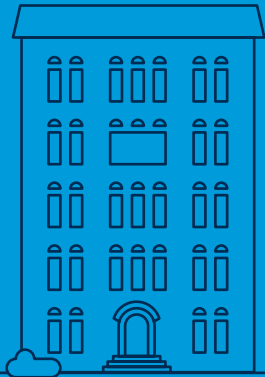


You may want to continue renting until you have a solid understanding of your five-year plan and fewer big-ticket expenses to worry about before making such a big investment. In the meantime, start preparing for when the time is right.



Types of Homes

In the most traditional sense of the word, a “house” refers to a freestanding, single-family home in the 'burbs. However, urbanization and a growing preference for access over ownership have led to a more inclusive definition that offers several alternatives to the white picket fence. Each of these options differs when it comes to what you own, what you can change, and what you need to pay.



	Townhouse	Condominium (“Condo”)	Cooperative (“Co-op”)
YOU OWN...	Typically, the home and the land. You may also get a yard or a garage as an added bonus.	Everything inside the walls of your unit, but not the building or the land. Any common areas such as stairwells, hallways, entryways, or outdoor spaces are shared and owned by all condo owners collectively.	Shares in the corporation that owns the building. You do not own your specific unit, but your ownership stake (i.e., the value of your shares) is based on the size and desirability of your home.
YOU CAN CHANGE...	In some cases, both the interior and the exterior. Be sure to check with the homeowners association about any restrictions pertaining to exterior changes such as painting or landscaping.	The interior of your unit.	Nothing, unless you have the board's approval. Try to catch them on a good day.
YOU PAY...	Monthly fees to the homeowners association.	Monthly common charge fees and real estate taxes. Monthly fees go toward shared expenses such as renovations, insurance, security, and amenities (e.g., gym, laundry). You are responsible for your own air conditioning, heating, and water bill.	Monthly maintenance fees to the co-op board to cover joint expenses, including maintenance and property taxes.
THINGS TO CONSIDER...	<p>There may be less likelihood of noisy neighbors directly above or below you.</p> <p>Roof leak? Snowed in? This could become your problem.</p>	<p>You may enjoy all the shared amenities of the building without having to worry about nuisances like building maintenance or taking out the trash.</p> <p>You may have less privacy and a higher risk of unpleasant neighbors. Additionally, some buildings do not allow pets or have pet restrictions that would prevent your current pet from being able to move in with you.</p>	Co-ops offer a way to build equity in a home without taking responsibility for all the maintenance costs associated with the upkeep. The board review process can also help weed out undesirable neighbors, which ensures new buyers are financially responsible and a good fit for the building.

The Total Cost of Buying a Home



The burden of buying a home may seem doable when compared to your current rent payments, but home ownership involves a number of costs that may go overlooked. Before you make the financial and emotional commitment of starting the home buying process, consider the collective costs carefully to avoid potentially ending up house-rich and cash-poor.



FACT:

In 2025, first-time home buyers on average paid a down payment of 10% on their home.¹



WINNING PLAY for Buying a Home

Upfront expenses (such as the down payment, closing costs, and earnest money) may require immediate payment, so make sure you have sufficient liquid resources to cover these costs. Talk to your Financial Advisor about your current financials and ask your attorney about the hidden upfront costs you might encounter.

+ Down Payment

While there are several ways to reduce your down payment, be prepared to pay at least 20% of the purchase price upfront.

+ Closing or Escrow Costs

All the costs you might incur throughout the process of finding and closing on the home of your dreams. This can include loan origination fees, title searches and insurance, home inspections or appraisals, legal fees, and credit report inquiries.

+ Earnest Money

A good faith deposit of up to 10% of the purchase price may be requested by the seller and is usually credited toward the overall down payment.

+ Property Taxes

Taxes that homeowners are required to pay to local jurisdictions including your county, city, or school district.

+ Mortgage Taxes

In some cities, the local government may require you to pay a mortgage tax of up to 2% (or potentially more) of your loan amount.

+ Homeowners Insurance

You'll want to protect your home from unforeseen damages such as fires, flooding, theft, and liability if someone is injured on your property. A lender may also require that you get homeowners insurance before determining whether to give you a mortgage or not.

+ Utilities and Maintenance

Bills, bills, bills on everything from snowplowing to electricity. Remember, a home is only as valuable as the shape it's in. Investing in proper home maintenance can help ensure that the property value does not depreciate from lack of upkeep.

+ Unexpected Expenses

Leaks happen...and they can get expensive.

+ Beautification Budget

Expenses associated with renovations, interiors, and DIY projects. If you are upgrading to a larger space, you may need to buy more furniture to fill it. Make sure your budget also accounts for smaller costs such as paint supplies, cleaning services, home decor, and movers.

How to Prepare for a Home Purchase

1. Evaluate your purchase readiness and estimate how much house you can afford.

A good benchmark is paying no more than 25–30% of your monthly gross income on your housing payments (including mortgage costs, homeowners insurance, property taxes, etc.). If you're a first-time buyer, make sure to budget for things that may not be part of your current rental expenses like garbage removal or landscaping.

TIP: Talk to a Financial Advisor about your options. In addition to paying with a mortgage or in cash, you may consider a securities based loan. If you qualify, this type of loan allows you to borrow on the value of the eligible securities in your brokerage account at Morgan Stanley Smith Barney LLC.

Please note: Borrowing against securities may not be appropriate for everyone. You should be aware that there are risks associated with a securities based loan, including possible maintenance calls on short notice, and that market conditions can magnify any potential for loss. For details please see the important disclosures at the end of this chapter.

2. Select a mortgage lender and apply for a conditional pre-approval letter.

Asking friends and family members for referrals can be a good way to source candidates.

Documents to prepare for pre-approval:

- i. Credit report
- ii. Last year's W2 or 1099 statement
- iii. 30 days of pay stubs
- iv. Recent bank statements and federal tax returns (or business returns if self-employed)
- v. Recurring debt obligations
- vi. Employment history

PRO TIP

Keep in mind that a bank may refuse to give you a loan if they find problems with the building or unit you want to buy, even if you are financially qualified.

3. You may choose to find a real estate agent who is familiar with your desired neighborhood(s) and can help you navigate the buying process.

A professional can help provide in-depth knowledge about price trends in your area, highlight potential building concerns, and/or determine what differentiates two seemingly identical properties. An agent can occasionally help you get access to homes that may not be available on the market yet and set up viewing appointments on your behalf.

PRO TIP

To help your home search, look for agents who specialize in the neighborhood you're interested in. Open houses can be a great way to meet agents in person.

4. You may find it helpful to create a list of "must-haves" and "nice-to-haves"—what you're willing to compromise on and what are your non-negotiables.

5. Go house hunting.

Consider the type of home you are looking for and evaluate the pros and cons of each. Single-family homes, condominiums, townhouses, and co-ops may have different lifestyle and ownership propositions.

WINNING PLAYS for House Hunting²:

- Open every window and door, including closets, cupboards, and storage space.
- Bring a tape measure to make sure your furniture will fit.
- Check the shower and other faucets to test water pressure.
- Take notes so that you can compare with your must-have vs. nice-to-have list.
- Bring a friend—getting a second opinion always helps.
- Clarify inclusions and exclusions—love that built-in media cabinet or custom light fixture? Make sure to confirm what is included in the sale to avoid misguided expectations.
- Educate yourself on the limitations and requirements of any Owner Associations that the home may be subjected to.
- Will you need a home office for work-from-home necessities?

6. Find an attorney who can review and/or prepare any required documents.

Have a lawyer review the contract to make sure it reflects the terms and conditions you've discussed and any necessary protections.

7. Do your due diligence.

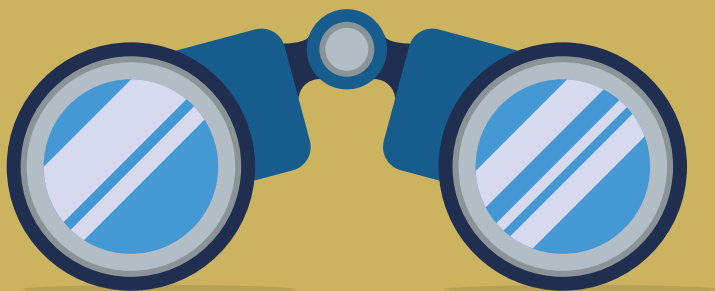
Before you close on the property of your dreams, there are a few housekeeping items you may need to take care of:

- *Conduct a home inspection.* The inspector (often an engineer) will assess the building and any major infrastructural systems. An inspection is typically only conducted when buying a house, since co-op and condo buildings are inspected annually and will undergo a thorough evaluation during the attorney's due diligence. Be sure to note whether the contract includes a "Buy As-Is" clause.
- *Appraise the value of your home.* This protects the lender and the buyer by identifying any repairs that may need to happen and helps ensure you're paying a fair price.

PRO TIP

If you want to make an offer on a house that will need immediate renovations, first reach out to a contractor for an estimate so you know the cost up front.

- *Request a survey to verify legal property lines.* This serves as a permanent record of property lines, easements, right of ways, joint driveways, and utilities in the event of a greedy neighbor or encroaching local official.
- *Shop around for homeowners insurance and title insurance.* Without homeowners insurance, most lenders won't give you a loan. Title insurance isn't always required, but it can help protect you in the event of a property dispute (for example, if previous ownership records are inaccurate and you are suddenly faced with unexpected claims to the land).
- *Set up your utilities in advance.* Call your utility company a couple days before closing to transfer all services in your name. You don't want to get stuck without water or electricity on your first night in the new digs.



8. Make an offer.

Making an offer on a property can be stressful, and while you hope the odds are in your favor, there's no guarantee. One of the ways to help boost your chances of getting accepted is to make the process as easy as possible for the seller. Try to get your paperwork and finances in order at the outset, and consider the seller's expectations and preferences throughout the process.

TIP: It helps to have a "walk away" number (the maximum price you're willing to consider before walking away) in mind before you start the negotiations.

Here are some other factors to consider when making an offer:

- Other home sales in the neighborhood
- The length of time the property has been on the market
- The local real estate market
- What's included in the total price and what's not (e.g., refurbishments, light fixtures, etc.)

9. Sign the contract and close.

Remember, if it is not in writing, it doesn't count regardless of how many handshakes you've exchanged. If you need a loan in order to purchase the property, include a financing contingency in the contract. This can help you get out of a contract and get your deposit back in the event you cannot secure the loan.



Mortgages 101

If you have enough money saved up to purchase a new home outright without compromising your long-term financial goals, go ahead and skip this section (and skip on down the street). For the rest of you, a mortgage may be the most likely path to becoming a homeowner.

What is a mortgage?

A mortgage is a loan that is secured by real property. In other words, it's a loan that allows you to buy a home while only paying for a percentage of the total value upfront. This upfront payment is called a down payment. If you're a first-time buyer, your city or state government may be willing to give you a leg up through a homebuyer's assistance program, so be sure to research all your options.

What does a mortgage cost?

When you take out a mortgage, you agree on the length of time (the "term") for paying off the loan amount (the "principal") and the amount paid in interest each month. Typically, the shorter the term, the lower the interest rate. Other factors that impact your interest rate include your credit, the amount you are borrowing vs. paying upfront, and the type of mortgage you choose.

How do I get a mortgage?

You can get a mortgage from a variety of sources, including a bank or mortgage lender. To help ensure that you can pay them back for the loan, lenders may check your credit score and source of income, among other factors.

How are these mortgage payments applied to my ownership stake in the home?

Typically, a portion of your monthly mortgage payment goes toward paying off your principal. In other words, over time you can build equity in your home. The amount of your monthly payment that goes toward the principal increases over time until you own the home "debt-free". And of course, any appreciation on the value of the home is money in the bank.

If you want to get a sense of your total costs, it's important to look at the "Annual Percentage Rate" (or APR). In addition to your interest rate, the APR accounts for other mortgage-related costs like points and lender fees.

Points allow you to pay more upfront in exchange for a lower interest rate. Typically, each point equates to about 1% of the loan. You may want to ask your lender about your options.

What should I look at when choosing a lender?

Go with a lender who has a good reputation and a solid track record. Do your research and ask around for references. Pay attention to the representative's responsiveness throughout the search process as well as his or her ability to translate complex topics. There's a lot of jargon in this process so it helps to have a native speaker.

At the end of the day, the most important element is trust. Don't be lured by low rates—choose a lender you believe understands your wishes and go with your gut.



What types of mortgages are there?



FIXED-RATE MORTGAGE

You pay fixed monthly principal and interest payments for the duration of the term, which can range from 10 to 30 years.

You may consider if:

- You plan to live in your home for a long time.
- You expect interest rates to increase.



ADJUSTABLE-RATE MORTGAGE (ARM)

You pay a set interest rate for a pre-defined number of years, after which the interest rate is adjusted based on market conditions. The initial rate period can typically be anywhere between 3 and 10 years.

You may consider if:

- You plan to sell the home before the end of the initial fixed-rate period (e.g., if you plan to move as your family grows or if you think of this as a "starter house").
- You plan to refinance the loan before the end of the initial fixed-rate period, so that you can benefit from lower interest rates.

TIP: Uncle Sam wants you to buy a home, which is why first-time homebuyers may qualify for particular benefits such as lower interest rate loans or down payment options from banks or government organizations. Research what options may be available to you.

7 Common Mistakes First-Time Buyers Make

according to industry experts Robert J. Smith and Kelly Cole

1 Overestimating what you can afford

Make sure to review the total cost of buying a home, along with your budget to avoid ending up house-rich and cash-poor. Don't forget about expenses related to home maintenance, taxes, and insurance and consider looking into first-time homebuyer programs or special benefits you might be able to take advantage of.

2 Failing to communicate what's important to you

Make your life easier and communicate anything and everything that is important to you with your agent from the get go.

3 Over-extending credit too early in the process

Just because someone is willing to loan you more than you need does not mean you should take it. Interest is not your friend—make sure to think long term about how much that extra credit may cost you later on.

4 Assuming your first offer will be accepted

You may be competing with other bidders, or the seller may come back with a counteroffer. Use your agent as a guide throughout the process.

5 Skipping the home inspection

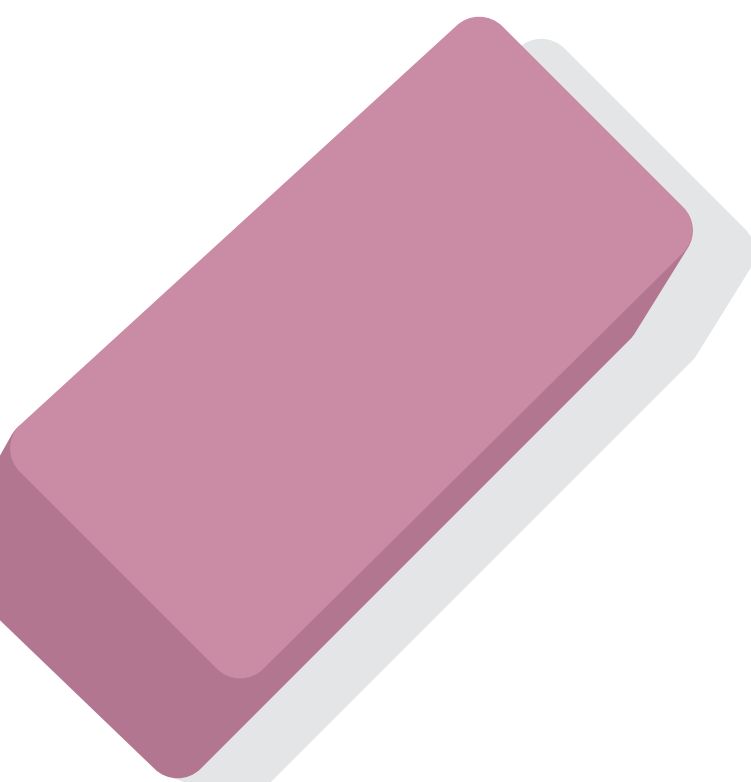
It is important to be aware of the risks. Waiving an inspection allows the seller to only share problems that are visible and of immediate risk. You may end up buying a home “as is” that has significant electrical or plumbing issues which now become your (expensive) problem.

6 Not including a financing contingency in the contract

Getting feedback that you have been pre-approved or pre-qualified for a loan does not mean that you are guaranteed the money. If your ability to purchase a home relies on securing financing, make sure your contract is contingent on loan approval. In other words, if your funding source falls through, make sure you have the option to make a clean exit.

7 Locking in your rate too soon

If you lock in your loan rate early in the process or get a rate lock for a particular amount of time, it may expire before both parties are ready to close and extending it can be expensive.



From renovations to redecorating,
your Financial Advisor can help you
factor homeownership expenses
into your financial plan.

Questions to Ask Your Financial Advisor

- How much can I contribute toward upfront and ongoing costs based on my current lifestyle and cash flow?
- What financial adjustments (if any) should I consider making in my portfolio to make sure I have enough cash readily available to cover upfront homebuyer costs?

Must Reads

NOLO's Essential Guide to Buying Your First Home

AUTHORS: ILONA BRAY, J.D.; ALAYNA SCHROEDER, J.D.; MARCIA STEWART

A comprehensive guide for first-time homebuyers on the purchasing process, and the mistakes to avoid along the way.

Keep Calm... It's Just Real Estate: Your No-Stress Guide to Buying a Home

AUTHOR: EGYPT SHERROD

A "no stress" approach to buying a home from the host of Property Virgins, HGTV's top-rated show.

100 Things Every Homeowner Must Know: How to Save Money, Solve Problems and Improve Your Home

AUTHOR: FAMILY HANDYMAN

The one-stop reference guide for maintaining, repairing, and understanding your new house.

The Things That Matter

AUTHOR: NATE BERKUS

An exploration of how the objects, interiors, and design within a home reflect the stories of the people who live there.

Disclosures

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CITATIONS:

[1] NAR 2025 Profile of Home Buyers, Sellers Reveals Market Extremes. (2025).

[2] Excerpt from interview with industry expert, Kelly Cole, from Compass Real Estate. (2016).

Kelly Cole began her Real Estate career in 2003 at the Corcoran Group. In 2007 she partnered with her husband Paul Cole and founded the Cole Team. While at Corcoran, the Cole Team was a top Sales Team Company-wide for Sales Volume year over year and the #1 Team in Corcoran's West Side office for the last 6 years prior to moving to Compass in 2019. Kelly and her Team are thrilled to be aligned with the Compass brand where their success continues. Prior to selling Real Estate, Kelly was an accomplished dancer, singer, actress for over a decade where she did Regional Theater, Film, TV and Broadway.

Robert J. Smith received his B.A. in Political Science from the University of Pennsylvania in 1980 and a J.D. from New York Law School in 1983. After almost ten years in practice, Robert opened his own practice in Manhattan in June 1993. Robert is a member of the New York State Bar Association (NYSBA) Committee on Condominiums and Cooperatives. In addition, Robert served as a member of the NY City Bar Association Committee on Cooperative and Condominium Law, where he chaired a subcommittee that revised the standard form coop and condo contracts. He is also a member of the National Association of Divorce Professionals and a member and Past President of BNI Manhattan Chapter 7. For more information visit www.robertsmithlaw.com.

Interest-only loans enable borrowers to make monthly payments of only the accrued monthly interest on the loan during the introductory interest-only period. Once that period ends, borrowers must make monthly payments of principal and interest for the remaining loan term, and payments will be substantially higher than the interest-only payments. During the interest-only period, the total interest that the borrower will be obligated to pay will vary based on the amount of principal paid down, if any. If a borrower makes just an interest-only payment, and no payment of principal, the total interest payable by the borrower during the interest-only period will be greater than the total interest that a borrower would be obligated to pay on a traditional loan of the same interest rate having principal-and-interest payments. In making comparisons between an interest-only loan and a traditional loan, borrowers should carefully review the terms and conditions of the various loan products available and weigh the relative merits of each type of loan product appropriately.

A preapproval letter, which is subject to conditions, is not a commitment to lend.

Securities based loans are provided by Morgan Stanley Smith Barney LLC, Morgan Stanley Private Bank, National Association or Morgan Stanley Bank, N.A., as applicable.

Important Risk Information for Securities Based Lending: You need to understand that: (1) Sufficient collateral must be maintained to support your loan(s) and to take future advances; (2) You may have to deposit additional cash or eligible securities on short notice; (3) Some or all of your securities may be sold without prior notice in order to maintain account equity at required maintenance levels. You will not be entitled to choose the securities that will be sold. These actions may interrupt your long-term investment strategy and may result in adverse tax consequences or in additional fees being assessed; (4) Morgan Stanley Bank, N.A., Morgan Stanley Private Bank, National Association or Morgan Stanley Smith Barney LLC (collectively referred to as "Morgan Stanley") reserves the right not to fund any advance request due to insufficient collateral or for any other reason except for any portion of a securities based loan that is identified as a committed facility; (5) Morgan Stanley reserves the right to increase your collateral maintenance requirements at any time without notice; and (6) Morgan Stanley reserves the right to call securities based loans at any time and for any reason.

With the exception of a margin loan, the proceeds from securities based loan products may not be used to purchase, trade, or carry margin stock (or securities, with respect to Express CreditLine); repay margin debt that was used to purchase, trade or carry margin stock (or securities, with respect to Express CreditLine); and cannot be deposited into a Morgan Stanley Smith Barney LLC or other brokerage account.

To be eligible for a securities based loan, a client must have a brokerage account at Morgan Stanley Smith Barney LLC that contains eligible securities, which shall serve as collateral for the securities based loan.

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