

Checklist for Choosing a Digital Camera

Supplement to the popular book

**REALLY, REALLY, REALLY EASY
STEP-BY-STEP
DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY**
for absolute beginners of all ages

HOW TO USE THIS DOCUMENT

The document has three checklists which are self-explanatory once you start to work with them:

- **Schedule 1** is a one-page checklist about you and your personal photographic needs. It will help you clarify your own personal requirements in terms of your available budget and what you'll mainly be using your camera for. The checklist then converts these needs into the camera specifications. The schedule includes comments to clarify the options.
Most of the popular, non-SLR cameras available these days have much the same basic features, such as a built-in flash which can be switched between automatic or manual control; various shooting modes, some degree of zoom capability, and so on. This leaves a handful of key variables you'll need to consider, and these are covered in Checklist 1.
Go through each item in Checklist 1 and decide, item by item, which ones apply to *you*. Then tick in one of the last two columns accordingly, opposite the item that applies to *your* needs. This will give you the specifications of the type of camera you should be considering for purchase.
- **Schedule 2** is a list of some additional factors you should consider when deciding what camera to buy. Most of these factors are explained on pages 101 to 107 of the above-mentioned book. Where something seems important for *your* particular needs, add it to Schedule 3.
- **Schedule 3** is a checklist for evaluating the various camera models you'll be considering. You can use this checklist to rate different camera makes and models against your ideal specifications per Schedule 1 as well as any other items in Schedule 2 that you consider important in your own situation.

The last page gives some additional shopping tips to help you find your ideal camera.

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SCHEDULE 1: MY PERSONAL PHOTOGRAPHIC PREFERENCES CHECKLIST

The second-last column, headed **Absolutely**, is where you tick against those items that are absolutely essential for you. If a camera does not meet every item you tick in this column then it is not in the running to even be considered. So, be very careful about what you tick in this column. This is the make-or-break column as far as choosing any camera is concerned.

The last column, headed **Preferred**, is where you tick against those items you would like to have, but which are not absolutely essential to you.

When you've finished working your way through this short checklist and read through Schedule 2 you will have a pretty clear idea of what it is you're looking for. Your next task will be to have fun checking out what's available out there in the market place, seeing which models attract your attention and then evaluating the main contenders against your the criteria shown in Schedule 3. It will also be pretty rewarding to be able to talk to salespeople with the confidence of knowing you have a pretty good idea of what it is you're looking for – and what it actually *means*.

Key Issues	Related Feature/s	Absolutely	Preferred
Price: How much are you prepared to pay for a camera, including any accessories? Decide the absolute maximum you can afford and write that amount in the second-last column. When buying, remember to take into account the cost of any additional accessories you need or want.			
Define your level of personal expertise or your future aspiration (a. or b.): a. Casual, infrequent user: If you're a casual user and just want to capture a variety of scenes and people with a point-and-shoot attitude, you'll probably want a camera that has the option to be fully automatic without having to fuss with settings that need to be adjusted manually.	Fully automatic, with a minimum of manual settings; a basic point-and-shoot camera		
b. Serious amateur: If you're leaning towards being a serious amateur or a professional and perhaps intend to be somewhat creative, you'll want a camera that has more options for setting the controls manually so that you can control the results.	Manual controls for aperture, shutter speed and flash; and some Scene Modes		
How critical is photo quality to you for your particular needs? The higher the camera's pixel rating the better the print quality of the photographs, the higher the price, and the more memory capacity you'll need for storing the images on the camera's memory cards. Use the table below to determine the minimum pixel rating you'll need; then buy what you can afford.			
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Printing as 4 x 6-inch snapshots • Inserting into word-processed or desktop publishing documents • Placing on a Web site or sending by e-mail, or using in a slide presentation 	}		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Printing as 5 x 7 or 8 x 10-inch photos for display, framing, etc. 			
Indoors/flash: Will you be doing a lot of indoor shooting? If so, you'll probably need to be able to override the camera's automatic sensitivity (ISO) settings to adjust for the light conditions.	ISO override feature		
Will you need a powerful optical zoom lens? (Do not confuse <i>optical</i> zoom with <i>digital</i> zoom, which produces poor-quality images. Will you be taking lots of photos of wildlife or other scenes where you need to zoom in to make the subject look much closer and bigger? If so, you'll need a camera with an optical zoom greater the 3x. They come in a range up to around 12x in the medium priced cameras. Cameras with optical zoom usually also have an anti-blur or anti-shake feature included, which helps achieve a sharper image when the zoom is used. Remember to ask about this.	Powerful optical zoom, more that 3 x		
	Anti-blur/anti-shake		

SCHEDULE 2: ADDITIONAL FACTORS TO CONSIDER

Read through this schedule and use the column **Important for ME** to tick or specify any items you consider to be important in your own situation.

Questions to Consider	Important for Me
NB: Access to the camera's settings: The more settings and adjustments controls you can get to on the outside of the camera the easier and quicker it is to change a setting and take the next shot. With some cameras only a few adjustments can be made on the dial and the others must all be done by accessing a laborious system of menus. This can be a real inconvenience when time is important, and it's often difficult to read the menus on the LCD monitor in daylight. So try to get a camera with as many setting controls as possible on the dial.	
Megapixel size and Image storage: How do you plan to store your images? If you have a computer with very little storage capacity and no CD or DVD burner or no external hard drive, rather not buy a high megapixel camera, even if your budget allows it. The images will be too large to store without eventually slowing down your computer. But if you do have a way to save images to CDs/DVDs, or you have a huge hard drive, then get the highest megapixel camera you've set your heart on. (See also the guidelines table on page 104 of the book <i>REALLY, REALLY, REALLY EASY DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY</i> .)	
Memory cards: Do you already have devices that use a particular type of memory card? If your digital camcorder and PDA all use the Secure Digital memory card, this may be a major deciding factor when purchasing a digital camera. Why spend so much money on multiple styles of memory card when you can just use the same card with all those gadgets? It's something to consider when you talk to the sale person.	
LCD monitor: An LCD monitor, in addition to the optical viewfinder, is very useful, and is essential if you want to view your shots on the camera and delete any unwanted images. A movable (swivel) screen can be even more useful. Be sure to select a model with a good LCD screen. At the store, examine the screen in the light and be sure you can see the images well. Almost every camera has an LCD screen, so you shouldn't pay more to get it. But it's a good idea to be sure it's large, easy to see and shows good detail. Most of today's cameras do have much-improved LCD screens over earlier models.	
Batteries: If you are a frequent shooter AAA batteries will go flat pretty quickly. Rechargeable batteries would be a better choice. Can rechargeable batteries be used? What types of batteries are used in the camera? Are they standard or proprietary? If proprietary, what is the cost to purchase an extra battery and where can you purchase it? Can the camera also use standard alkaline or lithium batteries?	
Warranty: The warranty should be eligible for authorized repair in your own country, with camera drivers, video and electrical components being compatible in your country too. Do you want to be able to purchase an extended warranty? Does the warranty cover both parts and labor? Does it cover anything beyond mechanical and electrical failures and defects in workmanship and/or materials? Can it be renewed or transferred to a new owner? Does it have a "no lemon" policy? Can it be cancelled and, if so, will you receive a pro-rated refund? (Remember to save your receipt, the camera's box and all related warranty papers. Register your purchase with the manufacturer. This will all make it easier to submit a warranty claim as many camera-makers require documentation before they'll honour a warranty.)	
Service and repairs: If the camera ever needs repair, can you have it done locally or must you mail it? Will service be done by an authorized repair service centre? What is the typical turn-around time? Does the manufacturer offer phone or online technical support for the camera? Ask these questions.	
Accessories: What cables are included with the camera? What other accessories are included in the price?	
Software: What software comes with the camera? Does it include an image editing program?	
Video/sound: Do you need a camera that shoots video with sound?	
Ease of use: The camera should be comfortable to hold with the controls easy to reach. Is left-handedness an issue for you?	
Red-eye reduction: If you'll be taking indoor shots with a flash, the red-eye reduction option is not perfect but is very useful.	
Self-portraits: Do you need a camera with a self-timer that enables you to take a snapshot after a pre-set period of time so that you can be in the photo too?	
Remote shutter release: Do you need a camera with a remote shutter release that enables you to set it on a tripod then step away from the camera using only the remote control to take the shot without camera shake?	
Continuous shooting: Do you need a camera with the continuous shooting option? If so, ask how many frames per second the camera is capable of taking before it has to stop to write to the memory card.	
Buffer delay: What is the buffer delay, if any, between regular shooting? (How quickly after taking a shot can you take the next one?)	
Computer compatibility: Does your computer meet the camera's requirements?	
Download directly to a printer: Will you want a camera that can send images directly to your printer for printing?	
Tripod mount: Do you need a camera with a tripod mount fitting (essential if photographing low-light shots)?	

SCHEDULE 3: CAMERA EVALUATION CHECKLIST

Use this checklist to evaluate various cameras against the criteria that you've decided are important to you, per schedules 1 and 2.

1. From Schedules 1 and 2 indicate your requirements in the **My Reqd Specs** column below – e.g. \$300 / Yes / No / Spec (5 megapx; 3x zoom), etc.
2. Then, with your checklist in hand, begin your search for the ideal camera for your needs, and mark off how each one stacks up against your required specs. Have fun!

Criteria	My Reqd Specs	Camera One	Camera Two	Camera Three
		Make:	Make:	Make:
<i>From Schedule 1:</i>		Model:	Model:	Model:
Maximum camera price		Price:	Price:	Price:
Megapixels needed (2, 3, 5, 8 etc)				
LCD monitor				
Fully automatic (Yes/No)				
Manual adjustments I want to make:				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program AE: Shutter speed & aperture paired 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Av: Aperture (f-stop) separately 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tv: Shutter speed (Tv) alone 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ISO override for light adjustment 				
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manual: Full Manual Mode 				
Optical zoom (2x, 3x, etc)				
Anti-blur/anti-shake				

My Required Specs	Reqd	Camera One	Camera Two	Camera Three
<i>From Schedule 2:</i>				
Many controls on dials versus menus				
Tripod mount				
Memory cards				
Video/sound feature				
Self-timer				
Buffer delay				
Remote shutter release				
Accessories included in price:				
•				
•				
•				
Other personal preferences or notes:				
Warranty				
Service & repairs situation				
Additional cost of any accessories				
TOTAL PRICE				

ADDITIONAL SHOPPING TIPS

In-camera storage of images:

The amount of storage capacity needed in the camera, including the removable storage medium, depends on how many photos you are likely to take before you are next able to download your images to a computer. And the number you can store is affected by what resolution you'll be using. For example, if you are going to be away from your computer for some time, perhaps taking wild life shots in a game reserve, then you'll need a *lot* of storage capacity or you'll need to have more than one memory card. Similarly, if you'll be taking a lot of photos in a short space of time, for example, at a wedding, here again you'll need a fair amount of storage capacity. But if you don't take many photos, or are taking the photos at low resolution, or you can download your photos frequently, then storage capacity may not be so critical to you. (Bear in mind, the memory card that comes with most cameras is usually pretty small, like 32MB.)

In the first three columns on the right:

1. From the heading row, decide your preferred camera's megapixel rating.
2. From the lower rows decide how many images you're likely to want to store between downloads (the number of images per card in this chart is based on low resolution images).

The last column indicates the size of memory card you'll likely need for that number of images in that particular megapixel camera.

3 Megapixel camera	4 Megapixel camera	5 Megapixel camera	
Up to 25 images	Up to 15 images	Up to 10 images	32MB memory card/s
25 to 50 images	15 to 30 images	10 to 25 images	64MB memory card/s
50 to 100 images	30 to 65 images	25 to 50 images	128MB memory card/s
100 to 200 images	65 to 130 images	50 to 100 images	256MB memory card/s
200 to 400 images	130 to 250 images	100 to 200 images	512MD memory card/s
400 to 850+ images	250 to 850 images	200 to 400 images	1GB memory card/s

Do some research on the Internet to compare the handful of models you have narrowed the field down to. Many sites offer digital camera searches by features, and also side-by-side comparisons of the models you select. Know all the specs and details before you even hit the stores (where, with pressure from salespeople, you may be tempted to buy prematurely).

Once you are down to the two or three models you like, visit the stores and handle the cameras (even if you plan to buy online). Be sure to go to a store with working models so that you can play with the features and see the quality of the LCD screen. Pay attention to how the camera feels in your hands. Odds are, there won't be a memory card inside the camera so feel free to ask the sales person to insert a card and batteries into the camera so that you may experiment. All reputable camera stores have cards and batteries on hand for just such purposes.

Once you are down to one model as your final choice, shop around for the best price and best after-sales service terms. Visit Web sites selling digital cameras, check your local newspaper ads and visit stores that specialize in digital cameras. You could save lots of money by shopping around for the best price. Of course, especially when it comes to the Web, cheapest is not always best. So do some homework on the supplier as well. Before you buy, decide if you want to purchase an optional warranty on the camera. Look at the vendor's Web site because the factory warranty may well be sufficient without the need for an extended warranty. Visit digital photography forums to get feedback from others on the particular models that interest you. Get opinions and feedback from family and friends about the cameras they have, and what features they like and which ones they don't like. Good luck!

For more information on digital cameras, taking photographs, as well as editing and managing your digital photo collection, refer to the book

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NOTES

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, occupying most of the page. It is intended for the user to write their notes.