

How to Find the Right Furniture

By Amanda Knoles

When it's time to shop for furniture many people easily become confused or frustrated. Before you even set foot in a furniture store, analyze your current living situation and make a list of the pieces you intend to keep and those that you need to replace. Refine the list further by prioritizing what you need most. For example, if your sofa has seen better days, don't get sidetracked into buying a new dining table.

It's a good idea to browse through furniture magazines and decorating books first to get a feel for the styles you like. Visit a few furniture stores and department stores with room settings to gather ideas and further refine the type of look you want.

Keep your lifestyle in mind when you are choosing colors and styles. You may love the look of a modern white sectional but how difficult will it be to maintain if you have three children under six and two mischievous pets?

If space is at a premium, consider buying versatile pieces such as sleeper sofas, daybeds with trundles, and coffee tables with storage drawers. Many contemporary ottomans are designed to do triple duty as footstools, extra seating and storage areas. Multifunctional dining tables can also be very practical. Some tables that seat four comfortably on a daily basis can be expanded to seat more people on special occasions by inserting an extra leaf or pulling out hidden panels.

Try to buy the best quality you can afford when shopping for a major piece that you will be using for a long time like a sofa. Take advantage of furniture sales to get great markdowns on pieces that you love, but keep in mind that manufacturers discontinue lines, so if you're hoping to buy a matching loveseat or easy chair a few months later it may not be available. Ask why a particular piece has been marked down. You should be able to get a lower price if it is a floor sample or if it has a slight irregularity like a scratch or stain.

Don't assume that you have to buy matching furniture pieces. Mixing and matching styles can bring warmth and a sense of individuality to a room. For example an Art Deco floorlamp could look great with a contemporary sofa and a French country style writing desk. The key to achieving a harmonious look is choosing compatible furniture finishes, textures, and colors.

Think about using furniture in different ways. For example, a living room end table could also be a bedroom night table. Or a sofa table might work just as well in a home office.

Choose patterns and colors for upholstered furniture carefully. Neutrals generally are easier to decorate around. For example a light tan sofa can be brightened up with lots of colorful and inexpensive pillows. If you are trying to match other things in your home, bring along fabric swatches, carpet and wallpaper samples to avoid color mistakes.

Set a price range that you can afford and look for styles within your budget. Don't allow aggressive salespeople to pressure you into spending more than you can afford, and don't assume that you have to spend a lot to achieve a pleasing interior.

Look for signs that furniture is well made. Signs of quality construction include sturdy frames with no creaks and wobbles, cushions that fit snugly, corners well braced and padded, and seat backs that have no wrinkles or uncomfortable bumps. Look for cushions that are comfortable but durable, fabric patterns that match at the seams, and moving parts that work smoothly. (If you are buying a sleeper sofa, test to make sure the mechanism works properly and that it feels comfortable in both positions.)

If a store offers free services such as interior design consultations, room planning workbooks, or educational product brochures, take advantage of the opportunity to increase your design knowledge.

Furniture can be a big investment. Take your time in making a decision and don't feel that you have to furnish a whole room in one day. Sometimes taking your time to find just the right pieces from more than one store can lead to a more pleasing end result.