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Photo Equipment Buying Guide

Cameras

Contents

What to Look for in a new DSLR	1
What to Look for in a Used DSLR.....	5
What to Look for in a Carry-Around Camera.....	8
What to Look for in a Camera for Kids	11

What to Look for in a new DSLR

The most expensive part of any SLR or DSLR camera system is the lenses. Good lenses do not come cheap. That being the case, **if you already have lenses** (even if they're from an old film system) or if you have access to share lenses with someone else (i.e. your brother in law has a DSLR), you should generally favor a brand that will let you take advantage of that fact. Most modern DSLR camera systems allow the use of so-called "legacy" film system lenses. In some cases an adapter is required and you may lose some functionality (i.e. the lens may be manual focus only) but image quality will not suffer.

If the above does not apply to you and you are starting out from scratch, try not to have any preconceived ideas. At the SLR level, there really is no such thing as a "bad" camera. Some salesmen or well-meaning friends might try to tell you that "*this brand* is best". That's doubtful. It may be the most popular or the brand that person favors but **what is actually "best" is the system that feels good in your hands** and that you feel comfortable using.

Some people may have small hands and not feel comfortable holding a large camera. Others may feel uncomfortable holding a camera that's too small. Weight is a factor too. You can hold any camera for a few minutes in the store. Try to imagine holding it or having it strung around your neck for several hours. To get a sense, try holding a giant (family sized) can of soup for an hour and not putting it down.

You should be able to figure out the most basic shooting modes on your own with no one, not even the salesman, guiding you. If you can't do that, try another brand. (Still, all SLR systems have dozens, even hundreds, of features and intuitiveness only goes so far. Without prior experience, you will not be able to just pick one up and understand how all of those features work. That's why MoreSatisfyingPhotos.com offers resources to help teach you those things.)

Don't discount less popular brands such as [Sony](#), [Panasonic](#), [Pentax](#), [Olympus](#) and [Fuji](#). They make great cameras. Because they are less popular you may be able to find very attractive pricing or better packages when compared to comparable equipment from [Canon](#) or [Nikon](#).

Find out what kind of memory card the camera uses. There have been many different kinds of memory cards over the years and new ones are always being developed. Right now the only cards which are not obsolete or on their way to becoming so are [compact flash \(CF\)](#) and the various incarnations of [secure digital \(SD\)](#) cards. SD cards come in standard and micro sizes. Avoid any cameras which do not support at least one of these two formats.

Find out what kind of battery the camera uses. Also try to find out **how long the battery will last**. Not the salesman's guess but an actual number based on scientific measurement. Test results are available online for most popular batteries. Not all batteries are created equal and the last thing you want is for your camera to die while you are using it.

Only a very tiny handful of DSLRs do not come with a **built-in flash**. These are generally the very high-end professional level cameras. (Pros will use their own lighting gear and have no use for on-camera flash.) We do not currently know of any cameras at the DSLR level which do not offer **TTL flash capability**. Many now even offer the ability for wireless off-camera TTL flash control, with dedicated flash units. (See the ebook on what features to look for when buying a flash.)

It seems counter-intuitive that an interchangeable lens camera system can be **weatherproof**, but some are. If where you live or the type of pictures you take makes it important that your camera be able to survive getting splashed (or even soaked) it definitely pays to look into such systems. [Olympus](#) currently offers the only full line of weather sealed lenses (they also have made at least three weather-sealed bodies.) Several other brands have a hodge podge of weathersealed offerings.

Not every camera has it but, even at the low end, many cameras offer the capability of using a **wireless infrared remote** to control the camera.

Image stabilization helps to offset camera shake and get sharper pictures. Most brands offer it but realize that there are two main kinds:

1. In-lens stabilization (most notably offered on [Canon](#), [Nikon](#) and [Panasonic](#)) is available only when you purchase special image stabilized lenses. These lenses are more expensive than regular lenses.
2. In-body stabilization (most notably offered on [Olympus](#), [Pentax](#) and [Sony](#)) offers the ability to use image stabilization on EVERY lens.

Salesmen may try to tell you that [*brand x*] has so many hundreds of lenses available for it. Consider two things:

1. Many of those lenses may be of low or mediocre quality.
2. Just because one system may have five 300mm lenses, does that make it a "better" system? How many of those lenses are you actually going to buy? Without exception, every single digital camera system has lenses that cover every focal length from 16mm through 1200mm. A couple of systems go even farther than that at one or both ends of the range! The absolute **last** thing to worry about is **lens availability**.

What to Look for in a Used DSLR

The most important question to ask here is whether this will be a primary, secondary or replacement camera. If it's to be a secondary or replacement camera, the choice of manufacturer and lens mount has largely been made already. So let's focus on first cameras.

You should certainly review the section on new DSLRs. This section will focus on the things that are specific to buying a used camera.

Unless you are dealing with a [trusted source](#), have some sort of return ability or warranty and know what to look for, used cameras are best avoided. The reason is that SLRs have so many functions it can be difficult and time consuming to adequately test them all before buying. Most important -- listed vaguely, but not absolutely, in order of likelihood of malfunction -- are:

- light meter
- exposure compensation
- autofocus (both S-AF and C-AF)
- lcd screen
- burst mode
- all of the control wheels/buttons used to adjust camera settings
- built-in flash
- full range of shutter speeds
- white balance settings
- metering modes

Note that the order of importance above does not reflect the importance as far as picture taking ability but rather the importance of evaluating proper functioning of a used camera. These are the items which may commonly be malfunctioning on a used camera but which are most commonly overlooked during a cursory examination.

Even if you already have a source where you want to buy your used camera, it is recommended that you search online sites such as eBay to **determine the prevailing prices** for the same model of camera in similar condition.

If the camera does not come with a lens, bring your own. Also bring your own memory card and ensure that the battery will be fully charged when you come to evaluate the camera. You should **test the camera by actually taking pictures** with it. Lots of pictures.

Shoot at different shutter speeds and listen to the sound of the shutter. You should notice an audible difference in the various speeds. There should be no grinding or clanking sounds. Shoot subjects at different distances and in different light. Try all the shooting modes. Shoot both with and without the flash.

Shake the camera gently and listen for anything rattling inside. Hold it on end and shake it. Hold it upside down and shake it.

Minor cosmetic scratches and wear should not be a concern but substantial signs of wear may lead you to question how the camera was treated by its previous owner.

Ask why the camera is being sold. It may be for money but more often it's because the owner has bought an upgraded camera. Why is this one not being passed on to children or other relatives? You don't need to get too personal but the seller's story should have some credibility to it. Be careful about taking possession of stolen merchandise.

Some cameras have ways of checking the **number of shutter actuations** (how many pictures have been taken). These are officially undocumented features but an online search should reveal a method if it exists for the camera you are considering. Note that most shutters have a life expectancy of around 100,000 actuations. (Though I have heard of some getting many more than that.) If you find such a method, print out or write down the steps (it usually involves pressing a long series of buttons in a specific sequence) so you can check the camera.

What to Look for in a Carry-Around Camera

To a great extent, what to look for in any camera depends primarily on what kind of subjects you plan to photograph with it. With a carry-around camera, many people can't answer that question with any certainty. They just want a camera they can have with them at all times so that, when they see a scene that would make a good photo, they have a camera to capture it with.

So considering the broadest possible application, here are a few features that are indispensable in an all purpose carry-around camera:

1. **Durability.** This is a camera that may get shoved in pockets, purses, lunch boxes, suitcases, briefcases or just tossed on the seat of the car. It must endure the rigors of everyday life. That means it should be:
 - a. **Waterproof** - to withstand splashes and the weather.
 - b. **Shock resistant** - some cameras are actually tested by dropping them from heights as high as 6 feet onto concrete.
2. **Will not turn on accidentally.** The last thing you want is to pull your camera from the depths of your purse only to find that something in there pressed the button, which turned on the power and drained the battery. The so-called "poor man's solution" to this is to keep the camera inside a protective case where other items can't come in direct contact with the camera (and thus can't turn it on.)

3. Has an **auto-off** feature. If the camera does get turned on accidentally, it should turn itself off after some set period (3 minutes is typical) of non-use.
4. **Powerful built-in flash.** You may use this camera in any number of lighting situations and will not likely have an extra flash with you (so a hotshoe isn't really necessary) so the built-in flash should be powerful enough for most everyday jobs.
5. **A battery that won't die** in ten minutes. You may use this camera every day or you may carry it around for weeks without ever laying a finger on it. Either way, when you pull it out you want to know that the battery will still have a charge.
6. **Wide zoom range.** This will be a do-everything camera. One day you may be trying to photograph inside a great cathedral, the next you might be trying to get your kids at soccer practice from across the field.
7. **Intuitive.** This one is subjective; what's intuitive for one person might be confusing to another. Whatever is intuitive for you, what you don't want is to be fiddling with the controls and trying to figure out how to make it do something while your picture gets away from you.
8. **Lightweight.** If you're going to carry it all the time, you don't want it to be a strain on your back. It should be small and compact too.
9. **Has a lens cover.** When not in use, the lens should be physically covered up in some way. Otherwise, it could get scratched or dirty bouncing around in your toolbox, glove box or shoe box.

10. **Not too expensive.** The last thing you want is to get mugged or have someone break into your car to get their hands on a \$500 camera. Ideally, it should cost no more than \$150 and there are plenty of very decent cameras available for around \$100.

Naming specific camera models could cause this list to get out of date very quickly but I will try to point out a few general lines of cameras that fit the bill as near as possible to what is described above. Listed alphabetically:

- [Canon Powershot](#)
- [Casio Exilim](#)
- [Fujifilm FinePix](#)
- [Kodak Easyshare](#)
- [Nikon Coolpix](#)
- [Panasonic Lumix](#)
- [Pentax Optio](#)
- [Samsung SL series](#)
- [Vivitar Vivicam](#)

What to Look for in a Camera for Kids

It's relatively common for kids to want to use a camera and take pictures. Nervous parents may have some reservations about letting kids use something so expensive but there are plenty of kid-friendly cameras on the market today.

At risk of letting this guide devolve into specific camera recommendations (and thus become out of date quickly) here are a few lines of cameras that are especially kid-friendly. We'll also go over some of the features that make them so. Take note that sometimes **not every camera in a maker's line qualifies as kid-friendly**. It pays to look for the specific features listed in the table on the next page.

Camera Line	Modes	IS	Face	Video	Shock	Water	Freeze	Dust	Crush
Canon Powershot	18	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Fujifilm FinePix WP series	6		✓	✓		✓		✓	
Olympus Stylus WP series	24		✓	✓		✓		✓	
Olympus Stylus Tough	21	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pentax Optio W series	5+	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Samsung W series	6	✓		✓					
Vivitar Vivicam	None			✓		✓			

Explanation of Categories

Body Type - All of these are point-and-shoot type cameras with fixed lenses. If kids can't remove the lens, they can't lose it, drop it, break it or get anything inside the camera.

Shooting Modes - By having preset shooting modes (such as Portrait, Landscape, Sunset, etc.) kids can easily match the shooting mode to the situation. (In the case of the Vivitar, having no modes means one less thing kids will have to worry about.)

Image Stabilization (IS) - Having IS means getting sharper pictures, even from unsteady hands.

Automatic Face Detection - The most popular type of subject is people. Automatic face detection means the camera will be more likely to lock focus on the right subject.

Video - Our kids are growing up in the YouTube generation, where everyone can make and post their own videos so having this capability built-in is a plus.

Shock Resistant - Face it, kids drop things. They aren't nearly as careful with things as we might like them to be. Cameras rated as being shock resistant have been drop tested by dropping the camera from a predetermined height (usually 6 feet) onto a hard surface (such as concrete).

Waterproof - Cameras rated as being waterproof can be submerged (usually 10 feet or more) and can even take pictures under water. Definitely no need to worry about the weather or the occasional splash.

Freezeproof - Cameras listed as being freezeproof have been tested and found to operate normally at temperatures below 32 degrees F (0 degrees C), sometimes far below.

Dustproof - As a rule, if a camera is waterproof it will also be dustproof. There may be some models of camera that list themselves as being dustproof but not waterproof. (Such cameras may also claim to be splashproof or water resistant, but are not rated for submersion.)

Crushproof - Being rated as crushproof means that kids could step on, or even ride their bikes over, the camera with minimal risk of damaging it. It does not mean that the camera is 100% indestructible.

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