

Buying a used or new camera

The first thing you need to do is determine what you want a camera to do. Remember, a camera is a tool and while there is no point in buying more tools than you need, you also don't want to hamstring yourself. Figure out what you want to do with a camera. Also, this document is about buying a *Film* camera. Digital cameras are changing so fast you should stick to a new one, unless you can find a good buy on a used SLR digital.

Do you want to take basic pictures or something more advanced? What is the situation(s) in which you usually take pictures? What is the subject matter? Is there a lot of motion involved (active scenes)? Does the subject hold still most of the time(as in Bound)? Do you want to focus the camera or have the camera do it for you (hint, most of the top professionals in the world use auto focus)? What do you want to accomplish with your photography? Is it for the world or for yourself, and do you care either way?

A point and shoot camera might be a good choice. Most can do a credible job on full automatic. More advanced models have manual features that give you more versatility. Remember though, most Point and Shoot's are designed around the assumption that you will be taking pictures in bright sunlight or with flash (something you can't always count on in scene photography and many other situations) If you choose a P&S you should probably buy a new one.

You should stick to a reputable camera dealer, whether you buy a P&S or an SLR. Buying a camera at the same place you buy under wear will come back to bite you if you have questions or need service. Also, even though the prices may appear better at your local everything store, the cameras aren't always the same. Large companies like K-Mart or Wall Mart can have special stripped down versions of a camera made for them.

We are going to assume that you will go to a camera dealer for your NEW camera. There is another way though, the used camera (at this point, we are talking about SLRs). Since many used cameras come without warranty, the places to buy them can be more varied. Pawn shops, second hand, even yard sales can be a source, as well as, camera stores. There are also companies that deal only in used equipment. While they can be more expensive, they frequently offer warranties and service.

You should learn basic camera 101 before you attempt to buy used. Otherwise stick to a dealer and stick to new. In what follows, I am going to tell you what to look for but NOT how to do it. Cameras are different and controls are different. Plus if you don't know the brand name you should stay away (and yes I DO know there are some classic finds out there, more advanced camera person, so I'll let YOU explain to the new photographer why their Topcon doesn't work) Names like Canon, Nikon, Minolta (puke, but I'm not biased) or Pentax are good names to look for. And if you find a good deal on names like Leica, Contax or Rollie can I be your friend?

So, what do you look for in a used SLR? The basic rule is try it out in the store. If the dealer bulks at that, walk away. At pawn shops they take the batteries out of cameras, a concern since batteries can leak, but if they won't put batteries in them or won't let you put a battery in them, walk away. If the battery compartment shows signs of battery leakage, walk away.

Ok, the batteries are in, FIRST, take the lens off the body. Next open up the back of the camera and hold it up to the light. What you are looking for is any pinholes of light coming through the shutter (the cloth or metal thing in the middle). If you see any light, the camera has become an expensive paper weight. Now put the lens back on. Set the shutter speed to bulb, cock the camera and fire the shutter. You shouldn't be able to see the shutter open OR close. Next set the lens aperture to it's smallest setting (probably F22). Now fire the shutter again on bulb and look through it and through the lens. See the tiny hole in the middle? It should be an octagon or hexagon and pretty uniformly shaped. Fire the camera again. The shape should form instantly. If you can see it happen the lens is in need of a pretty expensive repair. Open up the lens (wide aperture, probably F2). Look through the lens again. You should see a nice round hole with nothing sticking into it. If you are the anal type, you can now run through all the apertures.

You should now run through all the shutter speeds. Obviously you can't verify they are correct but you can make sure they work. Now close the back and look through the viewfinder. Does the metering work? Check it by setting the camera to F16 at 125th of a second and looking at a light (preferably sunlight). You should see a more or less correct exposure at that setting.

Finally look at the overall condition of the camera. Any big dings? Anything feel loose? Does the back open and close easily? Shake the camera, anything rattle?

If you buy a used auto focus camera you can't check the auto focus beyond seeing if it will focus in the viewfinder. To test it right you need to run a twelve exposure roll of film through the camera, have the film developed and look at the prints through a magnifying glass (pictures of brick walls or narley trees are good test's of sharpness). Which brings up the point that you probably shouldn't buy any camera AS/IS, but should have an option to return it in case something is wrong.

If you buy a used lens, check the iris as stated above, but also look for cracks of significant marks on the front and rear element. I am going to say you should NEVER buy lens without a return policy. Take the lens home and put it on your loaded (a roll of twelve exposures is good) camera. Also, make sure the lens is clean. Put the camera on a tripod or level surface and point it at a brick wall, take photos at with the lens wide open (smallest number on the lens) and fully closed (biggest number on the lens). If this is a zoom lens also take pictures fully zoomed in, out and in the middle of the range. When you get the pictures back, or look copy them to your computer, in the case of digital, check for foreign objects in the picture or bending and/or bowing of the straight lines of the wall. If you see this and if the lens isn't something exotic you been looking for, take it back. It is in need of a very expensive repair.

If all the tests are passed and the price is good (defined by, can you afford it) enjoy your new camera and/or lens. Now all you need is a flash, tripod, film, bag, remote release,..... :)