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## How to Buy a Sofa - Buying a Sofa That's Right for You

From [Fred Albert](#),  
Your Guide to [Furniture](#).  
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**Guide Rating - ★★★★★**

Sofas are one of the largest furniture investments you'll make—and one of the most permanent. “You’ve got to love your sofa,” says Seattle interior designer [Amely Wurmbrand](#), “because you’re going to have a very long relationship with it.”

Wurmbrand maintains there’s no such thing as a “temporary” sofa. “Expect to have it for at least 10 years,” she says, “even if you plan on having it for just two.” What happens is that the sofa gets demoted, moving from the living room to the family room to the basement to the dorm. Before you know it, a decade has passed. And that impulse buy has become a part of your life.

To make sure that sofa will appeal to you over the long haul, consider some of the questions that follow:

### Style



If you're buying a sofa for a traditional room, consider one with traditional lines.

Photo © Ethan Allen

Choose a sofa that complements the style of your décor. If your interior is traditional, look for a sofa with rolled arms, a contoured back, skirting or tufted cushions.

Contemporary sofas tend to have cleaner lines, fewer flourishes and understated upholstery.

### Scale

Consider the proportions of the room and determine what height, length and depth of sofa would look best in the space. If you're uncertain, mock up a footprint on the floor using masking tape or blue painter's tape. (If that's not enough, consider "building" a sofa out of empty boxes, then living with it for a day to see if the size feels right.) Allow at least three feet of circulation space on each side that traffic must pass.

If you plan on spending a lot of time laying on the sofa, figure out the length you need to do that comfortably, and look for a sofa that has at least that much space *between the arms*. (Don't choose a sofa based on length alone, because a sofa with wide or rolled arms may have less space between the arms than a shorter piece with straight arms.)

A common [furniture shopping mistake](#) is buying a piece of furniture and discovering that it won't fit through the door or into the elevator. Make sure you measure all the openings the sofa has to fit through, and check to see whether the legs are removable.

### **A Farewell to Arms?**



Armless sofas, like this Kiel Futon from Dania, are good choices for small spaces.

Photo © Dania

If you're short on space, consider an armless sofa—it'll make your room look larger.

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### ***No One Sits in the Crack, and Other Tips for Buying a Sofa***

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#### **Number of Cushions**

How many people do you want to seat? It's a fact of life: Nobody likes sitting on the crack. Therefore, if you get a sofa with two cushions, it will probably only get used by two people, unless each cushion is very long. A three-cushion sofa is more likely to seat three people, while a sofa with a single cushion will fit as many people as can squeeze onto it.

## **Tight Back vs. Pillow Back**

Sofas generally come with two types of backs: a tight back, in which the upholstery is tailored to the contours of the sofa's back, and a pillow back, which features removable cushions or pillows along the rear. Pillow-back sofas are generally considered more comfortable and inviting, but there's a downside: Unless you're extraordinarily diligent with your fluffing, the cushions will usually look slightly askew. If you're the kind of person who is driven to distraction by something like that, you might want to consider the alternative.

## **Comfort**

When it comes to sofas, one size does not fit all. The depth of the seat and the angle of the back will influence how comfortable you feel. How do you know what depth is right for you? Let experience be your guide. If there's a sofa or chair that you find particularly comfortable, measure the distance from the inside of your knee to the spot where your lower back hits the back of the sofa, then look for a sofa that has similar dimensions.

## **Fabric**

If you've got kids or pets, remember that patterned fabrics will usually hide stains better than solids. Some commercial fabrics even deter bacteria! [Leather](#) is highly durable and easy to [care for](#), but make sure you like the piece, because it'll last a looong time.

Before you buy the sofa, ask for a fabric sample or a cutting that you can take home on approval, so you can see the material under the light in your room and with other pieces. If you're scared of color, consider buying a neutral sofa and embellishing it with colorful pillows.

Avoid letting a fabulous fabric tempt you into buying a sofa that's otherwise not right for you. "Try to imagine the sofa naked," says Wurmbrand. That way, you won't end up with a frame you don't like once the fabric wears out.

## **Get Help**

Don't be afraid to ask for help, says Los Angeles interior designer [Jaime Laurella Rummerfield](#). Tell the furniture salespeople the size of your room, what you're looking for and how much you want to spend. It's their job to make sure you end up with something that makes you happy, so take advantage of it.

## **Quality**

Buy the best quality sofa you can afford. Your purchase will be amortized across many years. Plus, it's usually cheaper to reupholster a good-quality sofa than to buy a new one of comparable quality.