

How to find a real estate agent: A step-by-step guide for buyers



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Buying a home is no small feat, and it's one of the biggest financial decisions of your life. When you're ready to [buy a house](#), finding a real estate agent with experience to guide you through the process is key.

There's no shortage of agents vying for your business via online ads, yard signs and even billboards. And with so many professionals to choose from, finding the right one can feel overwhelming. Follow these seven steps to learn how to find a real estate agent who's right for you, so that you hire the perfect pro for your purchase.

1. Get preapproved for a mortgage

Sometimes, home shoppers hire a real estate agent and dive into their home search before they ever talk to a mortgage lender. But it's smart to talk to a lender first, before you talk to anyone else, to learn [how much you can afford](#).

[Getting preapproved](#) for a mortgage educates you on the maximum amount you can borrow and identifies any issues that may need to be worked on early in the process. This helps you stick to homes in the right price range for you. In addition, it will show agents (and sellers) that you're a serious, qualified buyer. In competitive markets, you'll likely need a preapproval letter for sellers to even consider your offer.

2. Ask friends and family for referrals

Ask people in your network if they can recommend an agent with whom they've had a good experience. Ideally, you want someone who has experience working with clients in circumstances similar to yours. The needs of [first-time homebuyers](#), for example, are different from those of repeat buyers or homeowners who are looking to downsize.

Many consumers look for a real estate agent who is a [Realtor](#) — with a capital R. That means they're a member of the National Association of Realtors (NAR) and have formally agreed to abide by the group's code of ethics, among other things. Some Realtors also have certifications to show that they've completed training in a certain area of expertise. Designations include:

- CRS (Certified Residential Specialist):** Completed additional training in handling residential real estate
- ABR (Accredited Buyer's Representative):** Completed additional training in representing buyers in transactions
- SRES (Seniors Real Estate Specialist):** Completed training aimed at helping buyers and sellers aged 50 and older

Buyer's agents vs. seller's agents

Also, familiarize yourself with the difference between a [buyer's agent](#) and a seller's agent. A buyer's agent represents a homebuyer in a real estate transaction, while a seller's or listing agent is responsible for the seller's side, including pricing and marketing the home. Many agents do both, but some specialize in one or the other. Sometimes, a single agent can represent both parties, a practice known as [dual agency](#). Some states don't allow dual agency, and it can have some inherent risk, so keep that in mind if you're considering agreeing to this arrangement. You might also encounter a referral agent, who provides leads to other agents for a fee.

3. Research potential candidates

Start by examining an agent's online presence. Check their website and social media accounts, noting whether they have closed deals in your specific area.

Take a look at their online reviews, as well. Don't worry about one or two negative reviews, but more than that could be a red flag. And be sure to check with your state's real estate regulator to confirm that an agent you're considering is licensed or find out whether they have any disciplinary actions. You might also vet candidates you're interviewing on your local Better Business Bureau's website to see if they've received any complaints.

4. Interview at least three agents

An interview is your opportunity to get a sense of the agent's work style and experience. Ultimately, you're looking for someone who is familiar with your particular area and understands your budget and needs.

"See how polished and professional their proposal is," says Katherine Hutt, president and founder of Nautilus Communications and former chief communications officer with the Better Business Bureau. "The more effort they put into a presentation for you, the more effort they'll put into presentations when they're working for you. You want someone who is really savvy."

[Questions to ask Realtor candidates](#) include how long they've been a real estate agent, whether they work full-time or part-time, how many clients they currently have and how long they typically work with buyers to close on a home. It's also a good idea to ask the typical price range and neighborhoods of homes they help their buyers find, how they help buyers stay competitive in this market and what their commission fees are.

If you're a first-time buyer, inquire about their experience helping others who fall into this category and the type of guidance you can expect during the process. The same applies to other unique scenarios, like [out of state relocation](#) or foreclosure purchases.

Interviews also give you a chance to find out the agent's preferred method of communication and their availability. For example, if you're most comfortable texting and expect to visit homes after work hours during the week, you'll want an agent who's happy to do the same.

5. Request references — and check them

Ask agents you're considering to provide information on homes they've listed and sold in the past year, with contact information for at least a few recent clients. Reach out to those clients to find out their experiences and what type of support the agent provided throughout the process. Ask whether they'd hire that agent again for their next real estate transaction.

6. Go with your gut

Just as important as the knowledge and experience agents bring is their ability to guide you smoothly through the process. Above all, go with an agent you trust and will feel comfortable with if the road to closing gets a little bumpy. If someone gives you a bad vibe during your interview, that's unlikely to change when you start working together.

"It's just like dating — sometimes it just comes down to chemistry," says Herman Chan, an associate broker and Realtor with Golden Gate Sotheby's International Realty in Berkeley, California. "If everything checks out, but you just don't vibe with that person, don't go with them. There are plenty of other real estate agents out there that will be happy to help you and might be a better personality fit."

7. Take a close look at your contract

Once you select an agent, your contract should spell out all the terms to which you've agreed, including the [real estate commission](#). Traditionally, though, the seller pays this fee, not the buyer — around 6 percent of the sale price of the home, with half going to each agent. The [commission rate is often negotiable](#), however, with the average commission these days being a bit lower than that.

Another factor to look at: the length of the contract itself. Aim for a contract limited to six months or less if possible. [According to NAR data](#), homes that sold in July 2023 typically remained on the market for just 20 days. If you haven't found the home you want within a few months, it's helpful to keep your options open.

Bottom line

In a challenging housing market like today's, where low inventory and high prices can restrict your buying options [find the best real estate agent](#) for you, and together, you can start your journey toward finding the right home at the right price.

FAQs

- What should you look for when choosing a real estate agent?
- What percentage commissions do most Realtors make when you buy a home?
- Is it possible to buy a home without a real estate agent?

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