



| A calm first step toward buying well

Smart Start Guide

A simple, no-pressure workbook to help you get clear on the home, payment and timeline that actually fits your life.



Smart moves start here.

You do not need to be “perfect” to make a plan.

You just need an honest snapshot of where you are now - and one useful next move.

This is not a test. Check what feels true today. A “not yet” answer is information, not failure.

Your timing

- ☐ I hope to move within 3-6 months.
- ☐ I am thinking 6-12 months.
- ☐ I am exploring, with no date yet.

WHAT IS DRIVING THE MOVE?

Your monthly comfort

- ☐ I know what I pay for housing now.
- ☐ I know the payment range that would still let me live my life.
- ☐ I need help building that number.

COMFORTABLE MONTHLY RANGE

Your cash cushion

- ☐ I have money set aside for the purchase.
- ☐ I can keep an emergency cushion after closing.
- ☐ I need a savings plan before I shop.

CURRENT AMOUNT SET ASIDE

Your financial picture

- ☐ My income is documented and reasonably stable.
- ☐ I know my major monthly debts.
- ☐ I have reviewed my credit reports.

QUESTION I WANT ANSWERED FIRST

Readiness is clarity - not a race to a pre-approval.

Your one move this week: _____

Figure out what you actually want first.

Most buyers change their minds mid-search. That's normal - but every changed mind costs weekends. Answer these honestly now and you will tour fewer wrong houses.

Space & layout

- ☐ One level (ranch) - no stairs, ever
- ☐ Two stories - more house on a smaller lot
- ☐ Split-level or raised ranch

BEDROOMS I TRULY NEED (COUNT GUESTS, OFFICE, FUTURE KIDS)

BATHROOMS - FULL + HALF (IS AN ENSUITE A MUST?)

Style

Ranch **Colonial** **Cape Cod** **Contemporary**

Craftsman **Farmhouse**

Circle two. Don't know yet? Circle whatever catches your eye while browsing - patterns emerge fast.

STYLE NOTES

Outside

- ☐ Patio or deck
- ☐ Pool (price in real upkeep: maintenance, insurance, utilities)
- ☐ Big yard
- ☐ Small, low-maintenance yard
- ☐ Fenced (kids? dogs?)

Parking & extras

- ☐ 2-car garage
- ☐ 1-car garage
- ☐ Carport or driveway is fine
- ☐ Finished basement
- ☐ Dedicated home office

In New England, a garage is a winter lifestyle. Be honest about the ice scraping.

The trade - the most important box on this page. Go back and circle your **3 non-negotiables** above: the ones that would kill the deal if missing. Everything else is negotiable.

ONE THING I WOULD GIVE UP FOR THE RIGHT HOME AT THE RIGHT PRICE

Separate the must-haves from the nice-to-haves.

A useful search starts with your real life, not the prettiest listing online. Choose no more than five needs. Everything else can compete as a want.

1

Needs

The home does not work without these.

2

Wants

These add value, but you could trade them for the right home.

3

Deal-breakers

Conditions that would make you walk away.

My top five needs

1

2

3

4

5

My top five wants

1

2

3

4

5

Think beyond the front door

Commute

School needs

Parking

Accessibility

Pets

Outdoor space

Future family

Maintenance tolerance

MY THREE DEAL-BREAKERS

Reality check: If location, size, condition and price all matter, which one could bend first?

Choose a comfortable payment before a target price.

A lender may tell you the maximum amount you qualify to borrow. That is not automatically the amount you should spend. Your comfortable payment should leave room for regular life, repairs and surprises.

Think in a full monthly number: principal + interest + property taxes + homeowners insurance + mortgage insurance, if required + condo or homeowners association fees, if applicable.

Money question	Your working number	What to confirm
Comfortable total housing payment	\$ _____ / month	Not simply the lender's maximum
Cash available now	\$ _____	Keep reserves separate
Monthly amount you can keep saving	\$ _____	Use a repeatable, realistic number
Emergency cushion after closing	\$ _____	Protect against repairs and income changes

Purchase cash may include

- Down payment
- Closing costs and prepaid items
- Inspections and other due-diligence costs
- Moving, immediate repairs and setup

Do not forget ownership costs

- Utilities and routine maintenance
- Condo or association fees
- Future repairs and replacements
- Possible changes in taxes or insurance

The strongest budget is the one you can live with after the keys are yours.

Down payment and loan options vary. A licensed lender can show you realistic scenarios without committing you to buy today. Ask Alison for her trusted lenders.

Give your credit time to work.

Your credit report and credit score are different. The report contains account and payment information; scores are calculated from that information. Mortgage programs and lenders use different requirements, so an app score is not a final lending decision.

Good moves now

- Review reports from all three nationwide credit reporting companies.
- Check names, balances, payment history and accounts for errors.
- Pay every bill on time.
- Work on lowering revolving credit balances.
- Ask a legitimate professional for a plan if you need one.

Pause before doing this

- Opening a new card, auto loan or financed purchase.
- Closing an older account without asking how it could affect your plan.
- Moving money around in ways you cannot document.
- Paying a company that promises a fast score jump or guaranteed approval.

Start with the report, not a guess. Checking your own credit does not hurt your scores. If you find an error, use the credit bureau's dispute process and keep records.

Your credit action list

- ☐ Pull my official reports and review each one.
- ☐ List any errors or unfamiliar accounts.
- ☐ Write down card balances, limits and minimum payments.
- ☐ Choose one balance-reduction target.
- ☐ Set every payment to arrive on time.

MY FIRST CREDIT ACTION

Official starting point: [AnnualCreditReport.com](https://annualcreditreport.com) is the federally authorized source named by the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau for free credit reports.

Organized beats rushed.

A lender may request different documents based on your income, assets and loan program. Gathering the basics early helps you spot missing information before you are under pressure.

Common starting documents

- ☐ Government-issued identification
- ☐ Recent pay stubs or other income documentation
- ☐ Recent bank and asset statements
- ☐ W-2 forms and/or tax returns, as requested
- ☐ Employment history and contact information
- ☐ Debt and housing-payment information

Tell the lender early about

- ☐ Self-employment, commission or variable income
- ☐ Gift funds or money from another person
- ☐ Recent large deposits or transfers
- ☐ Job changes, leave or expected income changes
- ☐ Past credit problems or unresolved debts
- ☐ Another property you own or plan to sell

Before a major money move: ask your lender first. A new loan, job change, large transfer or big purchase can change the file they reviewed.

Lifestyle fit matters too

Work Could my location, schedule or income change?	Household Who needs to agree on budget and priorities?
Timeline Is there a lease, sale, school year or other deadline?	Ownership Do I have time and cash for maintenance?

THE ONE ISSUE I SHOULD EXPLAIN BEFORE APPLYING

A “not yet” can become a next step.

If this is stopping you...	Your next useful move
I don't know what I can afford.	Choose a comfortable monthly number, list your debts and savings, then ask a lender for scenarios.
My credit needs work.	Review all three reports, correct errors and get a written action plan. Avoid quick-fix promises.
I do not have enough saved.	Separate purchase cash from reserves. Ask which assistance or lower-down-payment programs may fit; eligibility varies.
My income is complicated.	Speak with a lender early and ask exactly how your income will be documented.
I have too much debt.	Ask which payoff would improve your options most before sending extra money everywhere.
I feel overwhelmed.	Do not start with listings. Start with one conversation and one number: your comfortable payment.
I am unsure whether I will stay put.	Think honestly about work, family and location for the next few years before taking on transaction costs and ownership duties.

Need neutral guidance? HUD-participating housing counselors offer pre-purchase, budget and credit counseling. Fees, if any, must be disclosed; agencies may offer phone or online appointments.

My roadblock

The person or resource that can help

My next action and date

Three moves are enough to begin.

1

Choose your anchor number.

Write the total monthly housing payment that feels sustainable - not merely possible.

2

Complete one money action.

Review your credit reports, automate savings, organize documents or reduce one revolving balance.

3

Have one no-pressure conversation.

Talk with Alison about your timing and home priorities, and with a licensed lender about realistic financing scenarios.

My plan

THIS WEEK

BY THE END OF THIS MONTH

QUESTION I WANT ANSWERED

You do not have to start with a house. Start with a plan that makes the house possible.



REALTOR® | Massachusetts & Rhode Island
Keller Williams South Watuppa | The J Pavao Team
(774) 214-2319

Trusted resources

Consumer Financial Protection Bureau: [Preparing to shop for your mortgage](#)

Credit guidance: [How credit affects mortgage options](#)

HUD: [About housing counseling](#) | 800-569-4287

This guide is for general educational purposes and is not financial, legal, tax or lending advice. Loan programs, eligibility, costs and timelines vary. Consult appropriately licensed professionals about your situation. Equal Housing Opportunity.