

# BUYING A DIGITAL CAMERA

Beginners' Kaffee Klatch  
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To a large degree, selecting the right digital camera depends on how serious you are about photography. If you just like to point and shoot to take pictures, then a camera that focuses and makes other settings automatically should suit your needs. If you are more serious, you will want to purchase a digital camera with manual controls.

Here are some things to consider when buying a digital camera:

**Megapixels**--This means millions of pixels. This is the first thing you will notice about advertising. The clear implication is that more megapixels is better. That's true, but only up to a point.

The more megapixels you have, the closer the dots and the more saturated your pictures. If you want to print 8x10 pictures, you need a minimum three-megapixel camera. For 5x7s, you can get by with two megapixels.

But those are minimum numbers. During computer processing, people often crop their pictures and blow them up. That spreads the pixels. So the optimum recommendation should be: four megapixels for 8x10s, and three for 5x7s.

There are many cameras with five or more megapixels. Those might well be appreciated by demanding consumers. But the extra power would be wasted on most people.

**Optical Zoom**--Most digital cameras have optical zoom. This allows you to bring distant objects closer by making them larger. The issue of optical zoom is easy, for in this case more is always better.

Optical zoom does not distort pictures or cause them to be grainy. Cheap cameras sometimes have no optical zoom. More expensive cameras may have up to 12X.

**Digital Zoom**--Do not confuse optical zoom with digital zoom. Digital zoom can be used to crop a picture on the camera's screen. The camera then spreads the pixels to fill the picture. It fills in the spread through interpolation, where it looks at surrounding pixels and guesses what is needed.

The guesswork usually is not impressive. Pictures made with digital zoom are often grainy. So don't give much weight to digital zoom.

Makers sometimes multiply optical zoom by digital zoom, giving you total zoom. That's a meaningless number with regard to picture quality. Concentrate on optical.

**Those X's**--You'll see numbers such as 3X in relation to optical and digital zoom. The ads never explain this. But it is really simple.

Most people are familiar with zooms on 35 millimeter film cameras. A camera might be rated at 35-70 mm.

The X's are based on the same system. Cameras have a base rate. Manufacturers usually show it in camera specifications on their Web sites. Usually, the base rate is equivalent to 37 or 38 mm. If the base is 37 and the zoom 3X, multiply 37 by 3. That is 111 mm. You could shoot at anything from 37 mm to 111 mm, depending on what you need.

So long as you're looking at optical zoom, higher X ratings are better.

**Batteries**—Always get rechargeable batteries for the camera. Digital cameras are notorious for being battery power hogs.

**Memory Chips**—Many cameras come with a 16 Megabyte chip. You may wish to purchase a chip with more storage capacity. These chips are available at most computer stores. Look for sales!