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Home Entertainment 101: Choosing the Right TV and Remote Control

The most difficult thing to judge when shopping for a TV is how good the picture looks. Good is a subjective term, so relying on the judgment of reviewers may not get you exactly what you want.

Most electronics stores show their televisions on a big wall, fed by the same video signal split a hundred times. Although bright lights, suspect salespeople, and a lack of remote controls will probably make any picture-quality judgment difficult, here are a few things to look for:

Don't fall for brightness. Almost every television on the sales floor is set to the brightest picture settings, so try to get the salesperson to reduce the controls of the TVs you're comparing. You want the pictures -- not necessarily the controls -- to be roughly equal in brightness, contrast, and color.

Go out of the light. Few living rooms are as well lit as the sales floor, so see if the salesperson can reduce the amount of light shining on the picture. If nothing else, try to shade the screen if light is shining directly on it.

Bring your own DVD or Blu-ray disc. If you have a disc that you're familiar with, see if you can use it instead of the TV signal that's normally shown. Blu-ray provides the best picture a television can display, so it makes for the best reference from which to judge. And if you're used to the look of a particular DVD, use it instead.

Try all the picture modes. Many sets come with numerous picture presets, such as Movies and Sports, which radically affect how the image appears. After you peruse the manually adjusted pictures, try the different presets and modes to see which ones look best.

TVs: Size Versus Placement Distance

After you have your budget squared away, you need to decide how large of a screen you want. Usually, the largest screens cost the most, but regardless, the TV should deliver the right-size picture for where you'll sit relative to the screen. Sitting closer to a smaller TV means you won't have to spend as much on a big screen. But if you sit too close, the picture will look poor.

Nearly every TV sold these days is a wide-screen HDTV, so the chart below only applies to those sets. If you have a regular TV that's not wide screen, the rule of thumb is that you should sit no closer than twice the diagonal measurement in inches. Wide-screen televisions showing high-resolution DVD and HDTV look better than regular sets, allowing you to sit closer and experience a more immersive, theater-like picture.

With wide-screen sets showing DVD or HDTV, you can sit as close as 1.5 times the screen's diagonal measurement and still not notice much of a loss in quality, while sitting farther away than three times the screen size means you're likely to miss out on the immersive feel.

Here are the minimum and maximum recommended viewing distances for wide-screen sets:

16:9 TV diagonal screen size	Min. viewing distance (in feet)	Max. viewing distance (in feet)
26	3.3	6.5
30	3.8	7.6
34	4.3	8.5
42	5.3	10.5
47	5.9	11.8
50	6.3	12.5
55	6.9	12.8
60	7.5	15
65	8.1	16.2

Generally, 30-inch and smaller sets are great for bedrooms or guest rooms but too small for the main living room. Sets with bigger screens are large enough for the whole family to enjoy and will probably be too much for most small bedrooms.

If you're mounting the set inside an entertainment center, be sure it fits in every dimension; also, leave a couple inches on all sides so that the TV has enough ventilation. If you're getting a bigger set, you may want to consider a dedicated stand. Many such stands also include space for your TV-related components, like cable boxes and DVD players.

Source: CNET.com

Universal Remotes: Using a Single Remote to Control Home A/V System

Have you got five or six remote controls crowding the coffee off your coffee table? Even if the clutter doesn't drive you crazy, the logistics just might. A simple task such as changing the volume may require you to remember whether the sound is coming from your TV or from your home theater receiver — then finding and using the appropriate remote. Or maybe *you've* got it all figured out, but how about the rest of the household, or your house guests?

The solution could be a universal remote. With a universal remote, you can easily control all your components with a single device. And while they're all designed to replace multiple controllers, universal remotes come with different features to meet different needs. Considering all the options before purchasing can ensure you get the right universal remote for your system.

"Multi-brand" remotes – getting control of your system. Multi-brand remotes, which are a type of universal remote, are often free with certain gear, like TVs, receivers, and disc players. They generally come pre-programmed with infrared codes for many popular brands of gear, so

you can control more than just one component in your system. Normally, these remotes can give you basic control over an assortment of standard audio/video components, such as receivers, Blu-ray players, HDTVs, and cable boxes.

Although a multi-brand remote can typically operate the basic functions of most components, it may not be able to control every function of every piece you own. For example, a remote pre-programmed with the operating code for your Blu-ray player can normally turn on the player's power, adjust its volume, select the menu item you want, and play your disc. It may not, however, have control over more specialized features, like turning the director's commentary on or off or accessing behind-the-scenes footage.

Learning remotes – going beyond basic functions. You can set up a learning or "programmable" remote to operate about any brand of equipment and to accommodate about any function you want to clone. There are a number of features that universal learning remotes use to simplify operation. Below are just a few:

Rechargeable batteries to keep you going. With some learning remotes, you can avoid changing batteries altogether, and instead plug the remote into your AC power outlet using an included cable to recharge it. A few remotes go one step further and offer a charging cradle. In addition to ensuring that the remote's batteries remain charged, the cradle provides a designated spot for the controller to reside when not in use. If you've ever hunted high and low for the remote, you'll appreciate how useful a cradle can be.

PC programming for easier setup. Some learning remotes can be programmed by computer. For certain models, you simply go to the manufacturer's website, and enter some basic information about your A/V components and how they're connected. All the necessary programming is then downloaded to your remote from your computer via a USB cable. It's a lot simpler than entering in the codes yourself on the remote, or placing the new remote head-to-head with your old remote to "learn" the remote's functions.

Macros – assign multiple commands to a single button. Many learning remotes also feature "macros:" a series of commands that you can program onto a single activity. If, for example, you have to turn on your TV, DVD player, and receiver to watch a movie, you can combine all of those separate steps into one macro or activity. This lets you turn on all three components with a single button push.

Flash memory – program your remote only once. With simple, inexpensive remote controls, a dead battery can be a nuisance. Once you replace the battery, you usually have to reprogram the remote all over again. Many universal remotes avoid this problem by using flash memory to store their programmed commands. Like the popular USB thumb drives, this electronic memory doesn't depend on power to save data. Even with dead batteries, all the commands stored in a remote's flash memory remain intact. Replace or charge the batteries and the remote is fully functional once again – no reprogramming necessary.

LCD screens to show more options. Many advanced universal remotes feature LCD screens – in addition to traditional buttons – that display system information and put even greater control at your fingertips. They generally let you access your components more specialized controls, like turning the director's commentary on or off while you're watching a Blu-ray movie. Most of these LCD screens are also backlit for easy operation when the lights are low.

Touch screens for greater flexibility. Some of the most sophisticated remotes use a touch screen LCD to offer the ultimate flexibility in system control from your sofa. The touch screen is typically spacious, which enables it to display a set of control "buttons" specific to whatever component you select to operate. Some touch screen remotes even offer button layouts that are fully customizable – get rid of the buttons you never use and arrange ones you need in any order you like.

However, despite the high level of customizable control they offer, not everyone likes the feel of a touch screen's "virtual buttons." If you're looking for an ultra-sophisticated remote, but prefer the feel of traditional buttons, then you may want to go with an LCD remote.

RF capability for control beyond line-of-sight. Most remotes send commands to components via an infrared (IR) beam. In order for the command to be received, there must be an unbroken line of sight between the remote and component, which is why sometimes your remote doesn't change the channel when someone passes between you and the TV. Some remotes also use radio frequency (RF) waves to extend control beyond line-of-sight. Just like AM and FM radio waves, the RF signals can pass through walls and ceilings, making it a great option if your audio/video system is stored in a closet or if most of it is in another room.

If your remote doesn't have RF built-in, or if you need to set up an RF system in a particularly large room, then an RF extender can come in handy. As the name implies, RF extenders expand the range of your remote. They use a base station and IR flashers with self-adhesive tips that you attach to your components. They're pretty easy to set up, and are extremely helpful when setting up a multi-room system.

Source: Crutchfield.com