A FREE GUIDE

The First-Time Buyer's Blueprint

A step-by-step, no-fluff roadmap from "I think I want to buy a house" to keys in your hand.

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EMERALD COAST, FL · METRO ATLANTA, GA

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What's Inside

Before You Do Anything Else, Know Your Numbers

The single biggest mistake first-time buyers make is falling in love with a home before knowing what they can afford. Don't do this. Get the numbers first.

Your credit score matters more than you think:

- 760+ = best rates available
- 700–759 = good rates, solid options
- 640–699 = FHA loan territory, higher rates
- Below 620 = you may need to wait and rebuild

760+	700–759	640–699	<620
BEST RATES	GOOD RATES	FHA TERRITORY	REBUILD FIRST

Pull your free credit report at AnnualCreditReport.com. Look for errors, they're more common than you think and can cost you thousands in higher interest rates.

Your debt-to-income ratio (DTI): Lenders look at your monthly debt payments divided by your gross monthly income. Most conventional loans want this under 43%. FHA loans allow up to 50% in some cases.

Your savings: You need more than just a down payment. Budget for:

- Down payment: 3–20% of purchase price depending on loan type
- Closing costs: 2–5% of purchase price
- Moving costs: $1,000–$5,000 depending on distance
- Immediate repairs or updates: budget at least $2,000–$5,000
- 3–6 months emergency fund after closing

Get Pre-Approved Before You Look at a Single House

Pre-approval is not the same as pre-qualification. Pre-qualification is a guess. Pre-approval is a real review of your financials by a lender, and it's what sellers actually respect.

What you'll need:

- Last 2 years of tax returns (W-2s or 1099s)
- Last 2 months of bank statements
- Last 30 days of pay stubs
- Government-issued ID and Social Security number

Loan types to know:

- **Conventional:** 3–20% down, best rates for 700+ credit scores
- **FHA:** 3.5% down, more flexible credit requirements, requires mortgage insurance
- **USDA:** 0% down for eligible rural/suburban areas, many Emerald Coast and Atlanta suburban communities qualify
- **VA:** 0% down for veterans and active military

3%	3.5%	0%	0%
CONVENTIONAL MIN.	FHA MIN.	USDA	VA

Important: Getting pre-approved does a "hard pull" on your credit. Multiple lenders pulling your credit within a 45-day window counts as ONE inquiry, so shop around without fear.

Down Payment Programs, Free Money Most Buyers Miss

Down payment is the single biggest hurdle first-time buyers name, and most never find out how much real help is available. These are active, real programs in Florida and Georgia today, not vague promises. Amounts and eligibility shift year to year, so treat these as a starting point and confirm your exact numbers with a lender before you budget around them.

Florida programs

- **Hometown Heroes:** up to $35,000, 0% interest, deferred second mortgage for teachers, nurses, first responders, and other frontline workers. 5% of your first mortgage amount, no monthly payment. Repaid only when you sell, refinance, or move out.
- **FL Assist:** up to $10,000 toward down payment and closing costs, 0% interest, deferred. A solid fallback if your occupation doesn't qualify you for Hometown Heroes.

Georgia programs

- **Georgia Dream Homeownership Program:** $10,000 to $12,500 in 0% interest down payment assistance, available statewide, no monthly payment.
- **County and city programs:** Fulton County, Cobb County, and the City of Atlanta each run their own additional down payment assistance, worth up to $22,500 more depending on where you're buying and what you qualify for.

Example: A teacher buying a $300,000 first home with an FHA loan needs about $10,500 down at 3.5%. Hometown Heroes alone can cover roughly $16,900 of that, more than the entire down payment, with money left over for closing costs.

Every program has its own income limits, credit minimums, and paperwork. I'll walk you through exactly which ones you qualify for and run the real numbers before you ever make an offer.

Finding the Right Agent, and Why It Costs You Nothing to Start

Since the 2024 NAR settlement, buyer's agents work under a signed buyer representation agreement: a short form that spells out what your agent does for you and how they're compensated. This isn't a red flag. It's transparency, and it protects you as much as it protects the agent. In the vast majority of purchase transactions, the seller still covers the buyer's agent commission as part of the deal, meaning skilled representation typically costs you nothing out of pocket at closing.

What a good buyer's agent actually does:

- Pulls listings before they hit the public portals and flags overpriced or problem properties before you waste a weekend touring them
- Writes offers that are structured to win, not just high, but smart
- Negotiates repairs after inspection without blowing up the deal
- Coordinates with your lender, the title company, and the listing agent so nothing falls through the cracks
- Knows the neighborhood-level detail (flood zones, HOA drama, school boundary lines) that a national app can't tell you

Questions to ask before you sign with anyone:

- How many transactions have you closed in this specific market in the last 12 months?
- Can you walk me through how you'd structure an offer in a multiple-offer situation?
- Who handles my file if you're unavailable, is there a team?

Whether you're searching 30A and Destin or Marietta and Alpharetta, local reps matter. An agent who works both the Emerald Coast and Metro Atlanta markets brings the same discipline to both, but always ask for area-specific comps, not statewide averages.

Reading the buyer representation agreement

Before you tour a single home, you'll likely be asked to sign a buyer's agreement. Read the term length (30, 60, 90 days, or longer), the geographic area it covers, and the exact compensation structure. A reasonable agent will explain every line and won't pressure you to sign on the spot at an open house. That's actually a good early test of who you're working with.

Watch for these red flags when interviewing agents:

- They can't produce recent, specific sales data for your target neighborhoods, only generic market talk
- They push you toward homes above your pre-approved budget "because you'll probably get approved for more"
- They discourage you from getting a home inspection to keep the deal moving faster
- They represent both the buyer and seller on the same transaction (dual agency) without clearly explaining what that means for your representation

A good agent should feel like an advocate, not a salesperson. If a relationship isn't working, most agreements include a way to part ways. Ask about that up front, before you need it.

House Hunting the Smart Way

Once you're pre-approved and have an agent, it's tempting to start touring everything in your budget. Don't. Unfocused house hunting burns weekends and leads to decision fatigue, which is exactly when buyers make expensive mistakes.

Build a two-column list before your first showing:

- **Non-negotiables:** bedroom count, commute radius, school zone, garage or no garage
- **Nice-to-haves:** updated kitchen, fenced yard, pool, home office

Anything that fails a non-negotiable, skip the tour. Anything missing only nice-to-haves is worth a look; those are the things you can change later.

Use technology to pre-screen: Ask your agent to set up an automated MLS search matching your criteria so new listings hit your inbox the moment they go live, not a day later after a national portal has scraped and republished them. In competitive price bands, that head start matters.

Red flags to catch during a showing

- Fresh paint in one isolated spot (often hiding a water stain or repair)
- Musty smell in the basement or crawlspace
- Doors and windows that stick, can signal foundation movement
- Uneven floors or visible cracks wider than a hairline in brick or drywall

Location-specific checks: In Emerald Coast markets, always ask for the flood zone designation and whether flood insurance is required. It can add $1,000–$3,000+ a year depending on elevation and proximity to water. In Metro Atlanta, pull the exact school attendance zone (not just the district) directly from the county site. Boundaries shift and directly affect resale value.

Finally, don't skip the neighborhood drive-by at a different time of day than your showing. A quiet street at 10am on a Tuesday can look very different at 6pm on a Friday.

Touring efficiently

Group showings geographically and cap your day at 4–6 homes. Past that, they all blur together. You'll be scrolling photos on your phone that night trying to remember which one had the good backyard. Take your own photos and a short voice memo walking out of each home while it's fresh, noting your honest gut reaction.

Virtual tours and video walkthroughs are useful for a first pass to eliminate homes, but never make a full-price offer on a home you haven't walked through in person. Photos and video flatten scale, smell, and light in ways that matter.

Think about resale before you buy

Even on your first home, think like a future seller. Odd floor plans, busy roads, homes backing directly to commercial property, and being the most expensive house on the block all make resale harder later. A slightly smaller home on a better street will usually outperform a bigger home in a weaker position.

Making an Offer That Wins

A winning offer isn't always the highest number. It's the offer that gives the seller the most confidence the deal will actually close. Here's how to build one.

Earnest money: This is your good-faith deposit, held in escrow and credited back to you at closing. Typical range is 1–3% of purchase price. A stronger earnest money deposit signals seriousness in a competitive listing.

Contingencies, know what each one protects:

- **Financing contingency:** lets you walk away (and keep your earnest money) if your loan falls through
- **Inspection contingency:** lets you negotiate or exit based on what an inspector finds
- **Appraisal contingency:** protects you if the home appraises below the purchase price

In a slower market, keep all three. In a hot, multiple-offer market, you may choose to shorten timelines or waive one strategically, but never waive all three without a real conversation with your agent about the downside risk.

The appraisal gap

If you're competing against cash or highly qualified buyers, sellers often favor offers that include an "appraisal gap guarantee": a promise to cover some amount, in cash, between the appraised value and your offer price if they don't match. Only agree to a number you could actually write a check for.

Example: You offer $450,000 with a $10,000 appraisal gap guarantee. The home appraises at $443,000. You'd cover $7,000 of that gap in cash, and the loan is based on the lower appraised value plus your gap contribution.

$450K	$443K	$7K
OFFER PRICE	APPRAISED VALUE	CASH GAP COVERED

On personal letters to sellers: Skip them. They feel personal, but under Fair Housing law they can create liability for sellers around protected classes, and many listing agents now advise their sellers not to read them at all. Let your offer terms do the talking.

Escalation clauses (an offer that automatically increases by a set increment above competing offers, up to a cap) can work well in multiple-offer situations, but ask your agent whether they're common or discouraged in your specific market before using one.

Closing cost credits, a lever a lot of buyers forget: instead of asking a seller to lower the price, you can ask them to contribute a set dollar amount toward your closing costs. This can be more valuable than a price reduction because it reduces the cash you need at the table, without changing the loan amount much. Lenders cap seller contributions as a percentage of purchase price depending on loan type, so ask your lender for your specific limit before you write it into an offer.

Timeline terms matter as much as price: A flexible closing date, a rent-back option for the seller, or a quick close can all make your offer more attractive without costing you a dollar more. Ask your agent what the seller's ideal timeline looks like. Sometimes it's in the listing notes, sometimes your agent can find out with one phone call to the listing agent.

The Home Inspection, Your Best Protection

Your inspection period is arguably the most valuable few days of the entire transaction. A general home inspection typically runs $350–$600 depending on home size and market, and it is money you should never skip, even on new construction.

$350–$600	$150–$300
GENERAL INSPECTION	SEWER SCOPE

What a general inspector checks: roof condition and remaining life, HVAC function and age, electrical panel and wiring, plumbing and water heater, foundation and structure, attic insulation, and major appliances.

Georgia specifics

Most Georgia lenders require a Wood Destroying Organism (WDO) report, commonly called the termite letter, before closing. Georgia's climate makes subterranean termites a real and common issue, not a formality. If active infestation or damage is found, it becomes a negotiation point, and treatment plus a termite bond is often requested from the seller.

Florida specifics

In addition to a general inspection, Florida buyers should strongly consider a 4-point inspection (roof, electrical, plumbing, HVAC) and a wind mitigation inspection. Both directly affect your homeowner's insurance eligibility and premium, sometimes by thousands of dollars a year. Homes near the coast should also be checked for prior flood or hurricane damage disclosures.

Negotiating after inspection, your three options:

- Ask the seller to complete repairs before closing
- Request a credit at closing and handle repairs yourself after you move in
- Walk away, if your inspection contingency is still active and the findings are serious

A good agent will help you separate "worth negotiating" from "normal wear and tear on a home this age." Don't let a long list of minor items derail a deal on a fundamentally sound house, but never skip negotiating a real safety or structural issue.

Specialized inspections worth the extra cost

- **Sewer scope ($150–$300):** a camera run through the sewer line, critical on homes over 25 years old, since a collapsed line can cost $10,000+ to replace
- **Mold and air quality testing:** worth it if you smell must, see prior water damage, or the home sat vacant
- **Pool inspection:** a must for any home with a pool, cracked shells, failing pumps, and bad liners are expensive surprises
- **Radon testing:** inexpensive and common in both Georgia and Florida contracts, elevated levels are a straightforward, affordable fix

Your inspection period typically runs 7–10 days from acceptance. Schedule your inspector the same day your offer is accepted. Good inspectors book out fast, and losing two days to scheduling eats directly into your negotiating window.

Appraisal, Underwriting & the Home Stretch

Once your inspection is resolved, two processes run in parallel: the appraisal and full loan underwriting. Both need to clear before you get a "clear to close."

The appraisal: An independent, licensed appraiser (never chosen by you or the seller) visits the home and compares it to recent comparable sales to determine market value. Your lender orders this, typically within 1–2 weeks of your accepted offer. If it comes in at or above your contract price, you're clear on that front. If it comes in low, you'll need to renegotiate the price, cover the gap in cash, or (if you kept the contingency) walk away.

Underwriting: This is where the lender's underwriter verifies everything in your file (income, assets, debts, the appraisal, and title work) against their loan guidelines. Expect requests for additional documentation even after you thought you'd submitted everything. This is completely normal; respond quickly to keep your closing date on track.

Once underwriting issues a "clear to close," your lender will send your Closing Disclosure (CD). Federal law requires you receive this at least 3 business days before closing, giving you time to review your final numbers line by line against your original Loan Estimate.

The five things NOT to do between offer acceptance and closing: don't open a new credit card, don't finance a car or furniture, don't change jobs, don't make large unexplained cash deposits, and don't co-sign a loan for anyone else. Any of these can change your DTI or trigger a re-verification that delays or kills your closing.

Title work and homeowner's insurance, don't leave these to the last minute

While your loan is in underwriting, a title company runs a title search on the property to confirm the seller has clear legal ownership and to uncover any liens, judgments, or ownership disputes. You'll purchase an owner's title insurance policy at closing: a one-time cost that protects you if a title issue surfaces after you own the home.

Start shopping homeowner's insurance the moment you're under contract, not the week of closing. In both Florida and coastal Georgia markets, insurance availability and pricing can vary dramatically between carriers, and your lender cannot clear you to close without a bound policy in hand. Get at least two quotes. The difference between carriers on an identical home can be hundreds of dollars a month.

Closing Day, What Actually Happens

Closing day is the finish line, but there's a specific sequence to it. Knowing what to expect keeps it from feeling overwhelming.

1. Final Walkthrough: 24–48 hours before closing, confirm repairs done, no new damage, included items still present.

2. Bring Your Documents: Photo ID, cashier's check or wire confirmation, and proof of bound homeowner's insurance.

3. Sign Closing Documents: Loan documents, the deed, and the Closing Disclosure, attorney-led in GA, title/closing agent in FL.

4. Funds Disburse & Deed Records: Same-day or next business day, depending on the county.

5. Keys in Hand: You're officially a homeowner.

What to bring to closing:

- Government-issued photo ID
- Certified or cashier's check for your remaining closing costs (or confirmation of a completed wire)
- Proof of homeowner's insurance, bound and effective as of closing day

Wire fraud warning, take this seriously: Scammers actively target real estate closings by sending fake wiring instructions that look identical to your title company's real ones. Never wire funds based on an email alone. Always call your title or closing agent directly, using a phone number you look up independently, not one from the email, to verbally confirm wiring instructions before you send a single dollar.

Who's in the room: This varies by state. Georgia is an attorney-closing state, meaning a real estate attorney conducts the closing. Florida closings are typically handled by a title company or closing agent, sometimes with an attorney present. Either way, you'll sign a stack of loan documents, the deed, and the Closing Disclosure.

Once funds are disbursed and the deed is recorded (sometimes same-day, sometimes the next business day depending on the county), you get your keys. Congratulations. You're a homeowner.

Your first 30 days

- File your homestead exemption. Georgia counties and Florida counties both offer property tax savings for owner-occupied primary residences, but you must apply; it's not automatic. Deadlines vary by county, so ask your closing attorney or agent for your specific date
- Transfer or set up utilities effective closing day: electric, water, gas, internet
- Update your address with USPS, your bank, employer, and insurance providers
- Locate your main water shutoff and electrical panel before you need them in an emergency
- Save every closing document digitally and physically. You'll need the Closing Disclosure and deed for taxes and any future refinance

NEXT STEPS

Ready When You Are

This guide covers the fundamentals, but every market, every lender, and every buyer's situation is a little different. If you're thinking about buying on the Emerald Coast or in Metro Atlanta, let's talk through your specific numbers, timeline, and target neighborhoods. No pressure, just a straight answer on what's realistic for you.

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