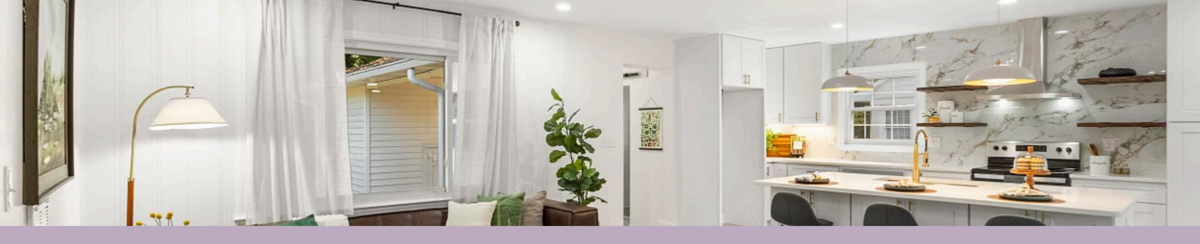

Before You Buy: The First-Time Buyer Strategy Worksheet

Stop dreaming. Start strategizing.

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Why This Worksheet Exists

Here's something most people don't tell you when you start thinking about buying your first home: **your first home is not your forever home. Your second probably isn't either. And that's actually a good thing.**

Your first home is your entry point. It's how you stop paying someone else's mortgage and start building your own wealth. It's your first stepping stone, and every stepping stone after that gets you closer to the home you truly want.

> The buyers who win? They stop searching for perfect and start searching for *strategic.*

This worksheet will help you figure out what kind of buyer you are, what trade-offs you're willing to make, and which strategy fits your life right now so you can get into the game and start building. Buy the home you need today, not what you think you'll want forever.

Take your time. Be honest. There are no wrong answers.

SECTION 1: The "Right Now" Reality Check

Let's anchor your strategy in where you actually are, not where you wish you were.

1. How long do you realistically see yourself in your first home?

- ◯ **1–3 years**
  Short runway — appreciation and low-maintenance matter most
- ◯ **3–5 years**
  Mid range —
  room to make it your own
- ◯ **5+ years**
  Longer horizon —
  more flexibility to take on a project

Keep in mind: if you don't plan on staying in your home more than 3 years, then home buying may not be for you. The costs of buying and selling eat into your equity quickly in a short window. Let's talk through whether renting makes more sense for your situation right now.

Notes / Questions:

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Worksheet Continued

2. What does your ideal day-to-day life look like around your home?

You cannot check all of them because that home doesn't exist. What day-to-day lifestyle do you crave that will make you the happiest?

- ◯ Walking or biking to restaurants, shops, and parks
- ◯ A quiet neighborhood with space between neighbors
- ◯ Land — I want room to breathe, garden, or have animals
- ◯ A neighborhood with a strong sense of community
- ◯ Close to work/commute routes
- ◯ Close to top-rated schools (now or for future planning within my estimated length of ownership)
- ◯ Other: ____

3. If you want land or acreage, what's driving that? (Check all that apply)

- ◯ Privacy — I don't want to see another rooftop from my window
- ◯ I want chickens, goats, horses, or other animals
- ◯ Gardening or homesteading
- ◯ Room to expand or add a structure later
- ◯ I just love open space
- ◯ This isn't a priority for me right now

A Note Before You Go Further

Real talk: no one gets everything on their list. A lot of the questions in this worksheet present an either/or scenario, not a "yes to all of the above" scenario. The buyer who wants new construction, on acreage, in a walkable neighborhood, in the best school district, under budget? That property doesn't exist; at least not all in the same zip code. The goal of this worksheet is to help you get honest with yourself about what actually matters most to your personality, your lifestyle, and your finances. The biggest source of buyer's remorse isn't the interest rate or the square footage; it's not thinking these options through before signing on the dotted line and ending up with a home that doesn't fit how you actually live, what you can comfortably afford, or your mindset around owning a home. **Pick your priorities. Own your trade-offs. That's how you buy smart.**

SECTION 2: The Home Itself — Condition & Effort

How much are you willing to take on? Be honest — this shapes everything.

4. Which of these best describes you? (Choose one)

1. ◯ **Easy Button**
   I want to move in and not think about maintenance for years. New construction or move-in ready only.
2. ◯ **Lock-and-Leave**
   Low maintenance is a must. I travel, I'm busy, or I just don't want the hassle of upkeep.
3. ◯ **Slow Builder**
   I'm willing to update room by room over time. I like the idea of building equity faster than the market gives it to me.
4. ◯ **Opportunity Seeker**
   I'll roll up my sleeves. Show me the "ugly" house other buyers skipped. I see potential where others see problems.

5. How do you feel about buying a home that needs cosmetic work if it meant a better price or less competition?

- ◯ Totally open to it — that's how you find the deals, and I can live with a cosmetic project
- ◯ Only if it's very basic like paint and flooring. I need to like the kitchens and bathrooms.
- ◯ No. I need to be able to love everything from day one. That is non-negotiable for me.

Laura's note: Move-in ready homes in strong neighborhoods come at a price. That's not a bad thing, it's just the trade-off. Knowing your answer here helps us search smarter.

6. What age of home feels right to you? (Check all that apply)

1. **New construction (2020–present)**
   Minimal maintenance, builder warranties, modern layouts
2. **Newer resale (2000–2019)**
   Potentially older systems but more established neighborhoods and potential for updating
3. **Older home (pre-2000)**
   More character, often more space, likely needs more maintenance and upgrades
4. **No preference**
   I'm focused on value and location more than age

Notes / Questions:

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SECTION 3: Neighborhood & Market Strategy

This is where buyers leave money on the table or find it.

7. How do you feel about a neighborhood that's actively transitioning or gentrifying? Somewhere new businesses, investment, and infrastructure improvements are coming in, but it's not "arrived" yet?

- ◯ I'm in — early movers get the best prices and the most appreciation
- ◯ Nope - I want to be able to enjoy the neighborhood and nearby amenities from day 1

In transitioning areas, certain lenders also offer down payment assistance or grant programs specifically to encourage homeownership. If that's on the table for you, it can be a great option.

8. Do any of the following describe you? (Check all that apply)

- First-time homebuyer
- Household income is low-to-median for my area
- Active duty military, veteran, or surviving spouse
- Teacher, firefighter, law enforcement, EMT, or healthcare worker
- Member of a federally recognized tribe
- Employer offered assistance

If you checked even one of these, you may qualify for Down Payment Assistance (DPA), grants, or specialized loan programs that could significantly reduce what you need out of pocket. **This is one of the most underused advantages in real estate. It's worth exploring to see if you qualify.**

9. Have you ever considered house hacking?

House hacking means purchasing a property — like a duplex, a home with a separate living space, or even just a larger home with unused rooms — and renting out part of it to offset your mortgage. Some buyers cover the majority of their payment this way.

- ◯ Yes! Tell me more about how to make that work.
- ◯ Heck no — I want my own space.
- ◯ I have no idea what that is. Can we talk through it?

If you answered yes or want to learn more, this is absolutely something we can factor into your search strategy from day one. Note that multi-unit properties are rare in Charlotte, as are ADUs (Accessory Dwelling Units) or homes with second living spaces. BUT if this is your goal or sounds intriguing, we can talk through options and work to find homes that will give you the best life balance between living and having tenants.

Notes / Questions:

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SECTION 4: The "Next Home" Mindset

Your first home teaches you things. Let's think ahead now so you make a sharper decision today.

10. When you eventually move on from this home, what would make you say it was a great investment? (Check all that apply)

- ◯ I built enough equity to use as a down payment on something bigger
- ◯ I didn't get stuck with expensive repairs I didn't see coming
- ◯ I was comfortable — it fit my lifestyle while I was there
- ◯ Other: ____

11. What would be a dealbreaker in a first home that you'd want to avoid repeating?

Think about it like this: buyers who've owned before often say things like "I underestimated how much I'd hate the commute" or "I loved the house but the HOA was suffocating." — or the opposite: "I wish there HAD been an HOA, because the house across the street was never kept up and it bugged me every single day." You don't have to have owned before to think ahead. Write it out:

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SECTION 5: Your Buyer Profile

Based on your answers, which of these resonates most? You may be a blend of more than one.

Buyer Type	What It Means
🔑 **The Easy Mover**	New construction or move-in ready. Low maintenance, low stress. You'll pay full market value and that's okay.
🔨 **The Equity Builder**	You're willing to take on flooring, paint, and minor cosmetics in exchange for a lower entry price and faster equity growth.
📍 **The Opportunity Buyer**	You're flexible on location and condition. You want the deal other buyers missed.
🌱 **The Lifestyle-First Buyer**	Location and lifestyle drive the decision. Community, land and walkability matter more than the house itself.
🏠 **The House Hacker**	You're thinking like an investor from day one. Rental income offsets your mortgage and builds your portfolio while you live there.
🎯 **The Strategic Newcomer**	You're using every advantage available — DPA programs, targeted areas, specialized loans — to get in smart and get in now.

My profile is most like:

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Additional notes:

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Ready to Turn Your Strategy Into a Search?

You've done the hard thinking. Now let's put it into action.

I'm Laura Shinkle

NC & SC REALTOR® serving the Charlotte region. I work with buyers at every stage, from "I have no idea where to start" to "I'm ready to make an offer." My job is to make sure you're not just buying any house, but that you're buying the *right* house, at the *right* price, with the *right* strategy behind it.

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→ Book your free Buyer Strategy Call
LauraShinkle.com

No pressure. No pitch. Just clarity on what's possible for you right now.

Follow along for market updates, buyer tips, and real talk about Charlotte-area real estate: 📸 @LauratheQCRealtor