GO BIG

Sometimes the widely hyped “next big thing” in TV tech turns out to be a painful waste of money, which is why a lot of 3D glasses are hibernating in drawers right now. But you rarely regret investing in screen size. If you have the room for it, a mega-television inspires maximum awe for your dollar and showcases your favorite movies, TV shows, and games in all of their high-def glory.

As you’d expect, bigger TVs take a bigger bite out of your budget, especially when the screen gets into the stratosphere of 65 inches and larger. But prices have in fact been falling. You can still spend upward of $3,000 for a loaded flagship model from a major brand, but you’ll also find 60-inch sets with top-notch picture quality starting at about $900. In our latest TV Ratings, which include at least 40 sets with screens 60 inches or larger, more than half cost $1,500 or less.

Of course, “big” is relative. In some rooms, a 70-inch set looks like a wall, but in others, it just seems menacingly large. But thin-bezel designs and super-slim depths common in many new models make them far less imposing.

When it comes to the right TV size, there are no hard-and-fast rules; personal preference and even visual acuity come into the picture, so to speak. But there are general guidelines. To figure out the size that’s best for you, use one of the many online calculators or apply the following simple guidelines.

- With a 1080p set, pretty much standard for high-def resolution these days, you’re looking at 60 inches or a bit more. You want the set a bit farther back from the room’s seating positions. If you can get a 60-inch, all the better.

- With a 4K set, which has four times the resolution of 1080p, you can go larger, with some manufacturers saying you need to go up to 80 inches or even more, and our own analysis supports this.

- With a 8K set, the size is a bit more of a guess, but we can say that you want to go larger than 80 inches if you can afford it.

With a 1080p set, pretty much standard for high-def resolution right now, measure the distance in feet between your couch and where you’d like to place the TV. Then divide that number by 1.5 and multiply the result by 12 to determine the size of the optimal set in inches (measured diagonally). If you’re going to sit 8 feet from the set, for example, you should shop for a model that’s no bigger than 60 inches. With UHD TVs, which have higher resolution screens with more densely packed pixels, you can go larger.

The goal is to create comfortable, immersive viewing experience. You don’t want to be so close that you can’t see the whole picture or so far back that you miss the high-def detail that you just paid for. Ideally, that Discovery Channel documentary on lions should fill your field of vision.

In terms of screen technology, the decision pretty much has been made for you, which may come as a relief to confused customers. Manufacturers no longer make plasma sets, and OLED TVs, which combine the deep blacks and unlimited viewing angles of plasma sets with the thinness and energy efficiency of LCD TVs, are prohibitively pricey.

So, the average buyer will almost certainly be purchasing an LCD set. Just don’t confuse so-called LED TVs with OLED sets; LED TVs are just LCDs with LED backlights. The downside to LCDs, however, is that many models have fairly narrow viewing angles, so the picture can look washed out or hazy if you’re seated too far to the side of a room instead of directly in front of the screen. Don’t rely on the manufacturer’s viewing-angle claims of 170° or better. Consult our Ratings and spot-check TVs while in a store by stepping off to each side and viewing from above and below the center of the screen to assess the picture quality from various positions.

GO SMALL

Giant-screen TVs are great for a living room or basement home theater, but you probably don’t want to shoehorn a 65-inch set into a bedroom or tiny apartment. You can find plenty of sets at 32 inches and smaller without skimping on features or picture quality.

Start by thinking about what content you’ll be watching. If you’re looking for a bedroom TV for basic TV viewing, a basic set may do. But if you plan to stream movies and TV shows from Amazon Prime or Netflix, a smart TV with built-in Internet access may be a better choice. Don’t pay too much more for that access, though, because you can add a streaming media player for as little as $35 if your TV has an extra HDMI input.

You can get 1080p on even the smallest screen sizes, but it’s not necessary. Many viewers will be just as happy with a 720p model. At normal viewing distances, you won’t notice the dip in detail and resolution. (But if the TV is doubling as a computer monitor, go with the higher resolution. It will produce cleaner, easier-to-read text and more detailed images.)

The viewing angle is just as important with a small TV as a large one, especially when the set isn’t placed directly in front of your bed, chair, or sofa. Most of the smaller models we’ve tested have fairly narrow angles, but there are a few standouts that will let you get a clear view of Jimmy Fallon’s hijinks even if you’re sacked out on the side of the room.

Relatively few TVs this size have 120Hz refresh rates (see “Tricky TV Terms Translated” on page 47), but don’t sweat it. Here again, it’s hard to detect a difference at normal viewing distances.

Many small TVs will let you down in audio quality. Few in our Ratings do a bang-up job there. But if the dialog is intelligible, even so-so sound from the built-in speakers may be sufficient for newscasts and sitcoms. If you watch a lot of concerts, movies, or action-oriented fare, you may want to consider adding a sound bar speaker. Many of them have Bluetooth, so they can be used to play music from a phone or tablet as well.

Don’t forget about the TV’s connections, too. Smaller sets generally have only one or two HDMI inputs, the most common way to connect Blu-ray players, cable boxes, game systems, and other devices. Make sure your set has enough for all of the high-def sources you use. If it doesn’t, you may need to spend another