

The Renter's Guide to Homeownership in Cincinnati

*A Clear, No-Pressure Path for People Who Aren't Sure They Can
Afford to Buy*

Start Here: A 5-Minute Overview

Who This Guide Is For

This guide was written for renters and people relocating to Cincinnati who are curious about homeownership but unsure if it's realistic—or if it's the right choice.

You might be actively searching, casually exploring, or just trying to understand your options. You might feel 6 months away or 3 years away. Wherever you are, this guide meets you there.

Who This Guide Is Not For

If you're already working with a lender and an agent, actively touring homes, and confident in your plan—you probably don't need this. This is for people who are still figuring things out.

What This Guide Will Help You Decide

- Whether you can actually afford to buy (most renters are closer than they think)
- What programs and strategies exist to reduce your upfront costs
- Whether buying makes sense for your life right now—or if waiting is smarter
- What your first step should be, based on where you are today

When Buying Often Makes Sense

- You're planning to stay in the Cincinnati area for at least 3–5 years
- Your income is stable and you have some emergency savings
- You're tired of rent increases and want to build equity instead of paying a landlord
- You qualify for assistance programs or have access to help with your down payment

When Waiting May Be the Smarter Choice

- Your income is unstable or you're changing careers
- You're carrying high-interest debt that should be paid down first
- You have less than \$2,000–\$3,000 saved after your down payment
- You're not sure you'll stay in the area for at least 3–5 years
- You genuinely value flexibility more than building equity

Bottom Line

This guide gives you the information to make the best decision for your life. Not everyone should buy. Not everyone is ready. But most people who think they can't afford it are surprised when they talk to a

lender and learn what's actually possible.

Read what's relevant to you. Skip what isn't. And if you ever want to talk through your situation, I'm here.

— Jeff Williamson

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If Buying Feels Out of Reach—Read This First

If you're renting in Cincinnati and homeownership feels impossible right now, you're not imagining things. Prices are higher than they were five years ago. Rates are higher than they were during the pandemic. And every time you look at listings, the gap between what you can afford and what's available feels discouraging.

But here's what most renters don't know—and what this guide will show you:

You probably don't need what you think you need.

- You don't need 20% down. Most first-time buyers put down 3–5%.
- You don't need perfect credit. FHA loans accept scores as low as 580. Some programs go lower.
- You don't need to wait for rates to drop. You can refinance later if they do—but waiting could cost you more if prices keep rising.
- You don't need to know everything before you start. Clarity comes from conversations, not research.

Most people don't feel ready when they start.

They feel anxious. They worry about making a mistake. They think they need to save more, fix their credit more, or understand the process better before they reach out to anyone.

But here's the truth: the people who buy homes aren't necessarily more prepared than you. They just took the first step.

That first step isn't making an offer. It's not even looking at houses. It's talking to a lender—someone who can tell you where you actually stand, what's possible, and what needs to happen if you're not ready yet.

That conversation costs nothing. It commits you to nothing. And it changes everything.

This guide exists to help you take that step with confidence. It's not here to convince you to buy. It's here to give you the information you need to make the best decision for your life—whether that's buying now, planning for later, or deciding that renting still makes the most sense.

What This Guide Is—and Isn't

Before you go further, here's what you should know:

- ✓ **This is NOT a sales pitch.** I'm not here to convince you to buy a home. If renting makes more sense for your life right now, that's a valid choice. This guide gives you information—what you do with it is entirely up to you.
- ✓ **You don't need to buy to benefit from this guide.** Many people who read this will be 12–36 months away from buying. Some will be years away. Some may never buy. That's okay. The goal is clarity, not conversion.
- ✓ **Planning is progress.** Even if you're not ready to buy today, understanding your options, checking your credit, or talking to a lender are all meaningful steps forward. You don't have to act on everything immediately.
- ✓ **This guide respects your timeline.** There's no urgency here. No 'limited time' pressure. No guilt about renting. You move at your pace, when it makes sense for your finances and your life.
- ✓ **Renting can still be the right choice.** For some people—those who move frequently, who value flexibility, or who aren't financially ready—renting makes perfect sense. This guide helps you figure out which path fits you, without judgment either way.

Read This If...

Not sure where to start? Jump to the section that fits where you are right now:

■ **'I don't think I can afford to buy'**

→ Start with: Renting vs Buying and Down Payment Assistance

■ **'The whole process feels overwhelming'**

→ Start with: How to Use This Guide and The Home Buying Process

■ **'I'm 12–36 months away from buying'**

→ Start with: Talk to a Lender Now and Understanding Your Options

■ **'I'm afraid of making a huge mistake'**

→ Start with: State of the Housing Market and When Buying May NOT Make Sense Yet

■ **'I'm just exploring—I'm not ready to commit'**

→ Start with: Introduction and The Psychological Shift

Introduction and Who This Guide Is For

If you're renting in Cincinnati and you've ever wondered whether buying a home is still possible—or whether it makes sense for you—this guide was written with you in mind.

You might be someone who scrolls through Zillow late at night, watches home prices climb, and feels a quiet sense of discouragement. Or maybe you've been told you need 20% down, perfect credit, and a six-figure income to even think about buying. Perhaps you're simply tired of rent increases and want to understand your options without being pushed into anything.

This guide is for renters at all stages of readiness. You might be:

- Actively searching and ready to make offers within the next few months
- Starting to plan seriously with a 6–12 month timeline
- Early in your research, thinking 18–36 months out or even longer
- Just curious about whether homeownership could ever work for you

Wherever you are, you belong here.

My name is Jeff Williamson. I'm a Realtor here in Cincinnati, a veteran, a father, and someone who genuinely loves this city and its people. I wrote this guide because I've worked with dozens of first-time buyers who felt overwhelmed, confused, or convinced they'd never qualify. Most of them did. And they found homes they love.

But I also know that homeownership isn't right for everyone, or at least not right now. My goal isn't to convince you to buy. It's to give you the information you need to make the best decision for your life, your finances, and your future.

The Psychological Shift: Most Buyers Don't Feel Ready at First

Here's something most first-time buyers don't talk about: they didn't feel ready when they started.

They felt anxious. Uncertain. Like everyone else had it figured out except them.

They worried about:

- Making a terrible financial mistake
- Getting stuck in a home they couldn't afford
- Missing something important in the fine print
- Buying at the wrong time and regretting it later

And yet, they bought homes. Good homes. Homes they're happy in.

So what changed?

It wasn't that they suddenly became experts in real estate or lending. It wasn't that they saved the perfect amount or timed the market perfectly.

What changed was that they started having conversations.

They talked to a lender and learned they qualified for more than they thought—or they learned exactly what they needed to work on to qualify in six months.

Clarity doesn't come from research. It comes from action.

And the first action isn't looking at houses. It's not making an offer. It's not even saving more money.

The first action is a conversation with a lender.

That conversation costs nothing. It commits you to nothing. And it transforms 'I don't know if I'll ever be able to buy' into 'Here's exactly where I stand, and here's what I need to do next.'

Talk to a Lender Now—Even If You're 12–36 Months Out

This is the most underrated move in the entire home buying process, and it's the one that changes the game for renters who feel stuck.

You don't need to be ready to buy to talk to a lender.

In fact, talking to a lender early—even if you're a year or two away—is one of the smartest things you can do.

Why Talk to a Lender Early?

- 1. You'll know where you actually stand.** Most people guess at their readiness. A lender will tell you exactly what you qualify for—or what needs to happen before you do.
- 2. You'll get a roadmap.** If you're not ready yet, a good lender will give you a clear, actionable plan.
- 3. You'll save time and avoid surprises.** You'll go into your search with clarity and confidence.
- 4. You'll build a relationship.** The earlier you start, the more comfortable you'll feel when it's time to move forward.

Recommended Cincinnati Lenders

Lender	Contact	Phone	Email
Rob Anderson RiverHills Bank	NMLS: 2665469	513-658-6258	randerson@rhb24.com
Brian Lennertz PRMG		513-608-7270	BLennertz@prmg.net
Tony Autullo AnnieMac Home Mortgage		513-769-2071	TAutullo@Annie-Mac.com

Now Let's Talk Numbers

State of the Housing Market and Affordability

Let's talk about the market—not to hype it up or scare you, but to give you context so you can make decisions based on reality, not headlines.

The housing market has been a source of stress for renters over the past few years. Prices went up sharply. Rates went up even more sharply. Inventory stayed low.

But here's what's important to understand: the market is always changing, and it's more nuanced than the headlines suggest.

Where We Are Now

As of early 2026, rates have come down from their 2023 highs but are still hovering in the 6–7% range. Inventory has improved slightly but remains below pre-pandemic levels. The result is a more balanced market—not a frenzy, but not a crash either.

Rates in Historical Context

The 3% rate era was an anomaly. From 1971 to 2020, the average 30-year fixed mortgage rate was around 7.8%. The sub-3% rates of 2020–2021 were the lowest in history. Today's rates are much closer to the long-term average.

You can always refinance. If you buy now at 6.5% and rates drop to 5% in two years, you can refinance and lower your payment. But if you wait for rates to drop and prices go up, you've missed the opportunity to build equity.

Renting vs Buying: The Hidden Math

Let's address the big question: should you keep renting, or is it time to buy?

The True Cost of Renting

Over time, rent increases eat away at your budget. If you're paying \$1,200/month in rent today and it increases just 3% per year, you'll be paying \$1,393/month in five years, \$1,612/month in ten years, and \$2,234/month in twenty years. Over that twenty-year period, you'll have paid \$366,000 in rent—and you'll own nothing.

The True Cost of Buying

When you buy, your mortgage payment is fixed. Every payment builds equity. Even modest 3% annual appreciation compounds. A \$200,000 home appreciating at 3% per year is worth \$269,000 in ten years and \$361,000 in twenty years.

Renting vs Buying in Cincinnati: A Typical Monthly Comparison

Category	Renting (2BR Apt)	Buying (Starter Home)
Monthly Housing Payment	\$1,200–\$1,600	\$1,500–\$2,000
Utilities	~\$150	~\$200–\$250
Maintenance/Repairs	\$0	~\$100–\$200/month avg
Insurance	~\$20–\$30/month	~\$100–\$125/month
Building Equity	\$0	~\$400–\$600/month initially
Total Monthly Outflow	~\$1,370–\$1,780	~\$1,900–\$2,675
What You Own After 10 Years	Nothing	Significant equity + appreciation

Important: Higher monthly costs when buying are offset by equity building and potential appreciation. After 5–7 years, many buyers' total costs become lower than renting when equity is factored in.

Mortgage Programs: What's Available and What Fits

One of the biggest misconceptions is that you need a 20% down payment and perfect credit. You don't.

Conventional Loans

- Down payment: As little as 3%
- Credit requirement: 620 minimum
- Best for: Buyers with decent credit and stable income

FHA Loans

- Down payment: 3.5% (credit score 580+)
- Credit requirement: As low as 580
- Best for: First-time buyers with lower credit scores

VA Loans

- Down payment: Zero
- Credit requirement: No official minimum
- Best for: Veterans and active-duty service members

USDA Loans

- Down payment: Zero
- Credit requirement: 640 minimum
- Best for: Buyers in suburban/rural areas with moderate income

Understanding Down Payment Assistance and Grants

Here's what a lot of first-time buyers don't know: you don't have to save it all on your own. Down payment assistance programs can provide thousands of dollars to help with your purchase. But it's important to understand how these programs actually work—including their benefits and tradeoffs.

Types of Down Payment Assistance

Not all assistance programs work the same way. Here are the three main types:

1. Forgivable Loans

How it works: You receive assistance as a loan, but if you stay in the home for a set period (typically 5–7 years), the loan is forgiven and you don't have to pay it back.

Pros: You get significant help (often \$7,000–\$20,000) without needing to save it yourself. After the forgiveness period, it's essentially a grant.

Cons: If you sell or refinance before the forgiveness period ends, you may have to repay some or all of the assistance. This can limit your flexibility if life circumstances change.

Best for: Buyers who are confident they'll stay in the home for at least 5–7 years.

2. Deferred Payment Loans (Silent Second Mortgages)

How it works: You receive assistance as a loan with 0% interest that doesn't require monthly payments. You repay it when you sell, refinance, or pay off your first mortgage.

Pros: No monthly payment on the assistance amount. Gives you breathing room in your budget.

Cons: You still owe the money eventually. It limits refinancing options since you'd need to repay it or roll it into the new loan. It also reduces the equity you can access when you sell.

Best for: Buyers who need help now but expect their income to increase or can repay when they sell.

3. True Grants

How it works: You receive assistance with no repayment requirement—ever. It's yours to keep.

Pros: Maximum flexibility. You can sell, refinance, or move whenever you want without owing anything back.

Cons: True grants are rare and often have limited funding or strict eligibility requirements. Competition for these programs can be intense.

Best for: Anyone who qualifies—but don't assume these will be available when you're ready to buy.

Important Truths About Down Payment Assistance

Assistance often comes with a slightly higher interest rate. Many lenders increase your rate by 0.25–0.50% when you use assistance programs. This is the cost of accessing the funds you didn't have to save.

Assistance is a tool, not 'free money.' While grants and forgivable loans can feel like free money after the forgiveness period, they come with conditions. Understanding those conditions is critical before you commit.

Some programs limit your refinancing flexibility. If rates drop and you want to refinance, having a deferred payment loan or a forgivable loan before its forgiveness period can complicate the process. You may need to pay it back or include it in your new loan.

You may face income limits or home price caps. Many assistance programs are designed for low-to-moderate income buyers and limit the price of the home you can purchase. Make sure you understand the rules before you fall in love with a house you can't use the program for.

Available Ohio Programs

OHFA (Ohio Housing Finance Agency)

- **Your Choice! DPA:** 3–3.5% assistance, forgiven after 7 years
- **Ohio Heroes:** Reduced rate for teachers, nurses, police, firefighters, EMTs, military, veterans
- **Mortgage Tax Credit:** Up to \$2,000/year in tax credits

Local Cincinnati Programs

- **Cincinnati ADDI:** Up to \$14,000 (5-year forgiveness)
- **The Port:** 3–5% grant, no repayment required
- **FHLB Welcome Home:** Up to \$20,000 (reopens March 2026)
- **Middletown HOME:** ~\$5,000 forgivable assistance

KEY TAKEAWAY: Down payment assistance can make homeownership possible when you don't have a large amount saved. But it's not a magic solution—understand the terms, the tradeoffs, and whether the restrictions align with your life plans. A good lender will explain your options honestly and help you choose what makes sense for your situation.

How the Right Agent Can Lower Your Out-of-Pocket Costs

A skilled buyer's agent doesn't just help you find a home—they can actually reduce the amount of money you need to bring to closing. Here's how strategic negotiation and seller credits can work in your favor.

What Are Seller Credits?

Seller credits (also called seller concessions) are when the seller agrees to contribute money toward your closing costs or other expenses. This money doesn't go into the seller's pocket—it goes toward costs you'd otherwise have to pay out of pocket.

For example, if your closing costs are \$8,000 and you negotiate a \$5,000 seller credit, you only need to bring \$3,000 to closing instead.

How Seller Credits Can Be Used

1. Cover Closing Costs

The most common use. Closing costs typically run 2–5% of the purchase price. If you're buying a \$225,000 home, that's \$4,500–\$11,250 in costs. Seller credits can cover some or all of this.

2. Temporary Rate Buydown

Your agent can negotiate for the seller to pay for a temporary rate buydown, which lowers your interest rate for the first 1–3 years. For example, a '2-1 buydown' might give you a rate 2% below market in year one, 1% below market in year two, then the full rate in year three. This makes your first few years more affordable while you adjust to homeownership.

3. Permanent Rate Buydown (Discount Points)

If you plan to stay in the home long-term, seller credits can be used to 'buy down' your interest rate permanently by paying discount points upfront. Each point typically costs 1% of the loan amount and lowers your rate by about 0.25%. Over time, this saves you thousands in interest.

When Seller Credits Work—and When They Don't

When credits are realistic:

- The home has been on the market for 30+ days
- The seller is motivated (job relocation, already bought another home, etc.)
- The market is balanced or favors buyers
- You're offering close to (or at) asking price
- The home needs minor repairs or updates

When credits are less likely:

- The home just hit the market and has multiple offers
- The market strongly favors sellers (low inventory, high demand)
- You're offering significantly below asking price
- The home is move-in ready and priced aggressively

Stacking Assistance and Credits Responsibly

In some cases, you can combine down payment assistance with seller credits to maximize your benefit. For example:

- You use \$7,000 in OHFA assistance for your down payment
- You negotiate \$5,000 in seller credits to cover closing costs
- Result: You bring very little cash to closing and still get into the home

Important: Loan programs have limits on how much in seller credits you can receive (typically 3–6% of the purchase price, depending on your down payment and loan type). A good agent knows these limits and structures offers accordingly.

What This Means for You

The right buyer's agent doesn't just open doors and write offers. They act as a strategist who understands the local market, reads seller motivations, and structures deals that reduce your upfront costs wherever possible.

This doesn't mean you'll pay nothing—you still need your down payment and some reserves. But strategic negotiation can make a meaningful difference in how much cash you need to bring to the table.

KEY TAKEAWAY: An experienced agent can negotiate seller credits and structure your offer in ways that lower your out-of-pocket costs. Not every situation allows for this, but when it does, it can save you thousands. Ask potential agents how they've successfully negotiated credits for past clients.

What Buying Actually Looks Like in Cincinnati

What Buying Looks Like in Today's Ohio Market

Disclaimer: These are examples for illustration only. Your actual payment depends on your loan type, interest rate, credit score, down payment, taxes, insurance, and HOA fees. Markets change—these prices reflect early 2026 Cincinnati-area conditions.

Example 1: Entry-Level Starter Home (\$210,000)

- Down payment: 3.5% FHA (\$7,350)
- Estimated monthly payment: ~\$1,750–\$1,900
- What you might get: 3BR/1.5BA in Colerain Township, Fairfield, Norwood, or Reading

Example 2: Move-Up Family Home (\$380,000)

- Down payment: 5% Conventional (\$19,000)
- Estimated monthly payment: ~\$3,000–\$3,200
- What you might get: 4BR/2.5BA in Mason, West Chester, Blue Ash, or Loveland

Example 3: Urban Condo/Townhome (\$285,000)

- Down payment: 10% Conventional (\$28,500)
- Estimated monthly payment: ~\$2,350–\$2,550 (including HOA)
- What you might get: 2BR/2BA in Newport, Covington, Oakley, or Hyde Park

Example 4: With Down Payment Assistance (\$220,000)

- Down payment: 3% (\$6,600) + \$7,000 OHFA DPA
- Your cash needed: ~\$6,600 (plus closing costs, which may be covered by seller credits)
- Estimated monthly payment: ~\$1,900–\$2,050
- What you might get: 3BR/2BA in Sharonville, Forest Park, Florence (KY), or Independence (KY)

Example 5: Top School Districts / High Demand (\$510,000)

- Down payment: 10% Conventional (\$51,000)
- Estimated monthly payment: ~\$3,900–\$4,200
- What you might get: 4BR/3BA new construction or updated home in Mason, West Chester (Lakota schools), or Anderson Township

KEY TAKEAWAY: These examples show real-world price ranges across different neighborhoods and home types. Your actual budget depends on your income, debt, credit score, and the loan program you use. A lender can tell you exactly what you qualify for based on your specific situation.

How Buying Actually Works

The Home Buying Process Step-by-Step

Here's what to expect from start to finish:

1. Get Pre-Approved

Talk to a lender and provide documentation (paystubs, tax returns, bank statements). You'll receive a pre-approval letter showing how much you can borrow.

2. Find a Buyer's Agent

Someone who represents your interests, not the seller's. A good agent is a strategist, negotiator, and guide.

3. Define Your Criteria

Work with your agent to clarify must-haves vs nice-to-haves. Be realistic about your budget and priorities.

4. Tour Homes

Don't tour more than 5–6 homes per day—you'll get overwhelmed and homes will blend together.

5. Make an Offer

Include earnest money (\$500–\$1,000+) and contingencies (inspection, appraisal, financing). Your agent structures the offer strategically.

6. Home Inspection

Costs \$500–\$1,000. This is your chance to look under the hood and negotiate repairs or credits if issues arise.

7. Appraisal

Your lender orders an appraisal to confirm the home's value matches the purchase price. Required for your loan approval.

8. 'Clear to Close'

The underwriter approves your loan. All conditions are met. You're ready to close.

9. Final Walkthrough

Check the home's condition one last time before closing. Ensure agreed-upon repairs were completed.

10. Closing Day

Sign documents, transfer funds, and get your keys. Congratulations—you're a homeowner!

Deciding If and When to Move Forward

When Buying May NOT Make Sense Yet

This guide exists to help you understand your options—but homeownership isn't right for everyone, and it may not be right for you yet. Here are some situations where renting might still be the better choice:

You're not planning to stay in the area for at least 3–5 years

Buying involves transaction costs (closing costs, realtor fees when you sell). If you move too soon, you may not build enough equity to offset these costs. If your job, relationship, or life circumstances are uncertain, renting gives you flexibility.

Your income is unstable or you're changing careers

Homeownership requires consistent monthly payments. If your income fluctuates significantly or you're in career transition, it may be wise to wait until your financial situation stabilizes.

You have significant high-interest debt

If you're carrying high-interest credit card debt or personal loans, paying those down first may be a better use of your money than putting it toward a down payment. Your debt-to-income ratio also affects your loan approval and interest rate.

You have less than \$2,000–\$3,000 in emergency savings after your down payment

Homeownership comes with unexpected costs—broken appliances, roof leaks, HVAC repairs. If buying would leave you with no financial cushion, it might be too risky. Build your emergency fund first.

Your credit needs serious repair

If your credit score is below 580, you'll face limited loan options and higher interest rates. Spending 6–12 months improving your credit could save you tens of thousands of dollars over the life of your loan.

You genuinely value flexibility more than building equity

Some people prefer the freedom of renting—no maintenance responsibilities, ability to move easily, no worry about market fluctuations. If flexibility is more valuable to you than equity building, renting may align better with your priorities.

KEY TAKEAWAY: Homeownership is a significant commitment. Don't rush into it because you feel pressure or because 'everyone else is buying.' Make the decision based on your financial readiness, your life circumstances, and your genuine goals. If you're not ready yet, that's completely okay—use this time to prepare.

Are You Likely Ready to Buy in the Next 12 Months?

Use this checklist to assess your readiness. This is for self-reflection, not judgment.

Income Stability

- Your income has been steady for at least 12 months
- You expect your income to remain stable or increase
- You're not planning a major career change in the next year

Credit Readiness

- Your credit score is 580+ (or you know what to work on to get there)
- You have no major collections or recent late payments
- You're comfortable having a lender review your credit

Emergency Savings

- You have \$2,000–\$3,000 saved beyond your down payment
- You can cover unexpected expenses without going into debt
- You have a plan to maintain savings after buying

Timeline Clarity

- You're planning to stay in Cincinnati for at least 3–5 years
- Your job, relationship, or life circumstances are stable enough to commit
- You're not rushing to buy—you're making a thoughtful decision

Lifestyle Stability

- You're comfortable with the responsibility of home maintenance
- You understand that homeownership reduces flexibility
- You're buying because it makes sense for you, not because you feel pressure

If you checked most of these boxes: You may be closer to ready than you think. A conversation with a lender will give you clarity on what's possible.

If you checked few of these boxes: You may benefit from waiting 6–12 months to work on readiness. That's not failure—it's smart planning.

How I Help Buyers Use This Information

My role isn't to convince you to buy. It's to help you make sense of your options and decide what's best for your situation.

Here's how I help:

I help interpret tradeoffs.

Every decision in real estate involves tradeoffs—location vs price, condition vs budget, school districts vs commute. I help you weigh those tradeoffs based on what actually matters to you.

I help compare neighborhoods and options.

Cincinnati is made up of dozens of distinct neighborhoods, each with its own character, price range, and lifestyle. I help you understand where your priorities and budget align.

I help structure decisions without pressure.

I don't push timelines or create urgency. I give you the information you need to make confident decisions on your own schedule.

I help buyers decide not to buy when that's the smarter move.

Some of the best conversations I have with people end with 'Let's wait six months and revisit.' That's a win. My job is clarity, not closing.

If you ever want to talk through your situation—whether you're ready to buy or just exploring—I'm here. No pressure. No sales pitch. Just a conversation.

Frequently Asked Questions for First-Time Buyers

Can renters actually afford to buy a home in Cincinnati right now?

Yes. Many renters can afford to buy—especially with down payment assistance programs providing \$7,000–\$20,000 in help, 3% down payment loans, and Cincinnati's relatively affordable home prices. The question isn't whether renters in general can buy—it's whether you specifically can. A 20-minute conversation with a lender answers that question.

Do I need to wait for interest rates to drop before buying?

No. Waiting for rates to drop is a gamble. While you wait, prices may continue rising. You can always refinance to a lower rate if rates drop in the future. But if you wait and prices increase, you've permanently lost the opportunity to buy at today's price.

What credit score do I actually need to buy a home?

It depends on the loan type. FHA loans accept scores as low as 580 (sometimes 500 with a larger down payment). VA loans have no official minimum. Conventional loans typically want 620 or higher. If your score isn't there yet, a lender can tell you exactly what to work on.

How much money do I really need for a down payment?

Most first-time buyers put down 3–5%. Some loan programs (VA and USDA) require zero down. Down payment assistance programs in Ohio can provide \$7,000–\$20,000 in grants or forgivable loans. The idea that you need 20% down is outdated.

Should I talk to a Realtor or lender before I'm actually ready to buy?

Yes—especially if you want clarity about what you can afford and what the realistic path forward looks like. Talking to professionals doesn't obligate you to buy. Think of it as gathering information. Most buyers who wait until they 'feel ready' discover they could have started 6–12 months earlier.

Is now a bad time to buy because prices are higher than before?

Prices in Cincinnati are higher than five years ago, but they've remained relatively affordable compared to coastal markets. The 'right time' to buy isn't based on predicting the future market—it's based on your financial readiness, your life goals, and whether you plan to stay in the home for at least 3–5 years.

What if I make a mistake?

The home buying process has multiple built-in protections: pre-approval ensures you know what you can afford, home inspections reveal what you're buying, appraisals prevent overpaying, and contingencies allow you to walk away if something goes wrong. Most 'mistakes' are preventable with the right guidance.

About the Author

My name is Jeff Williamson, and I'm a Realtor here in Cincinnati, Ohio.

I'm a veteran, a father, and someone who genuinely loves this city and its people. I got into real estate to help people navigate one of the biggest decisions they'll ever make—not by pressuring them, but by providing clarity and honest guidance.

I work with a lot of first-time buyers who feel overwhelmed or unsure if homeownership is possible. Most of the time, it is. It just takes a plan, some patience, and the right information.

I'm not here to convince you to buy. I'm here to help you figure out if buying makes sense for you, and if so, how to do it in a way that feels right.

How to Reach Me

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A Final Word: There's No Rush

If you've made it this far, thank you.

You don't have to have it all figured out today. You don't need perfect credit, a huge down payment, or a flawless financial history. You just need to be willing to start—and starting can be as simple as a conversation.

If you're not ready now, that's completely okay. Maybe you need six months to work on credit. Maybe you need a year to save. That's not failure. That's planning. And planning is progress.

This guide did its job even if you never buy a home. If it helped you understand your options, feel less overwhelmed, or realize that renting still makes sense for you right now—that's a win.

The market will always be imperfect. There will never be a perfect time to buy. The best time is when it makes sense for your life, your budget, and your goals.

Conversations are for clarity, not commitment. Talking to a lender doesn't mean you have to buy. Looking at homes doesn't mean you have to make an offer. These conversations exist to give you clarity.

This guide is here whenever you need it. Bookmark it. Come back to it. Share it with someone who's asking the same questions.

And if you ever want to talk—about your situation, about Cincinnati, about whether buying makes sense—I'm here. No pressure. No sales pitch. Just a conversation.

Thanks for reading. I'm rooting for you.

— Jeff Williamson

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Sources: NAR, Freddie Mac, FRED, U.S. Census Bureau, OHFA, and other authoritative housing finance sources. All data subject to change. Verify current information with licensed professionals.

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