

**Having trouble making the...**

# Digital Decision?

The question seems to come up once a week, “Which digital cameras should I buy?” As more and more of my schools go from film to digital I hear it almost every day. So, I thought that this month I would create an overview of how to make that digital decision for yourself.

You should also know that I am not going to make any actual recommendations of cameras, brands or types here. What is right for you and your yearbook staff may not be for someone else. But I am going to give you plenty of resources to help you make the right choice as you move to digital photography.

Not ready to go digital yet? Clip and save this article for when you are.



## Where to start

Sit down and answer these questions on paper before you begin your search:

- 1) Do we already own a digital camera?
- 2) If yes, do we like it and the pictures it takes?
- 3) Do we own a substantial amount of media for this camera? (Media is the “film” of digital cameras. It is the type of card you will put in the camera to hold the photos you take.)
- 4) How big do we want to print the pictures in the yearbook that we will take with this camera?
- 5) Will we want to shoot sports action shots?
- 6) What is the budget for this camera purchase?

## Already have a camera

If you can answer questions one, two and three with a yes, then why not just decide what new features you are looking for and buy the same brand you are currently using but with the upgrades you want.

If you are unhappy with your current camera(s) but you answered question three with a big yes, then you should try to stick to a camera that uses the same media you currently own. Why would you want to throw away a big investment in digital media if you can find a camera with the improvements you want that will use it.

## Considering your resolution needs

Digital camera are often categorized simply by the amount of detail they can capture, measured by the number of pixels available in the sensor, regardless of their other features. While the resolution of the camera may be 1600 x 1200 pixels (or some other figure), they’re advertised only by the total number of pixels they can grab. Thus, they’re classified as 2-megapixel, 4-megapixel, or 5-megapixel cameras, as if that resolution figure is the only measure of the camera’s value. In practice, the resolution you require depends a lot on what you plan to do with the photos you take.

Do you plan on printing 8-x-10-inch or larger prints in your yearbook? If so, you need a camera with a minimum of 3.3 to 6 megapixels.

Is it likely that you’ll crop a small section out of the center of an image and print that as a 5-x-7-inch? You’ll need one of those high-resolution cameras, too.

Will you rarely make prints larger than 4 x 6 inches? A camera with 2 to 4 megapixels will probably do the job for you. With the money you would have spent on pixels, you can invest in a camera with a better zoom lens or more digital media so you can take more pics without downloading them to your computer.

# Features you may want

There are a number of variables in digital cameras. You need to know what you need before you buy.

## Zoom

One of the features that the manufacturers push heavily is zoom. Make sure you buy an optical zoom as opposed to



a camera with only digital zoom.

Optical zoom is a true zoom lens. It is built into the camera and does not change the size or amount of resolution in the photo. Digital zoom is all about cropping a small part from the edges of the picture and enlarging the center. If a camera says it has a digital zoom that's great but it is not something you are ever going to use. Most of the photo pros recommend that you turn this feature off.

## Flash

Will you want a built-in flash? In all likelihood yes. We would guess that more than 75% of the pictures you will end up taking with this camera will be indoors or at night and flash will be essential. Besides, a camera that does not already have a flash built in will probably not have the capability to attach a flash as an attachment.

## Media cards or sticks

Most of the cameras come with a fairly small media card. Usually the smallest one that will work in that camera. You will undoubtedly need more than the one that comes with the camera and in most cases, the media card will be much less expensive at a Costco, Wal-Mart or other discount store. This means you can afford to buy a larger card that will hold more photos and reduce the need for frequent downloading.

## Cases and straps

Since this camera is going to be used by students, protective cases and straps that your photographers should be required to wear are a very important part of the deal. If you don't get these with the camera, save some money to buy them later.

## Personal Preference

When I am pressed to make a choice and express a personal preference, it is not so much as for a particular camera maker but rather for a type. As a photographer, I truly believe that the lens is the most important part of the camera. Therefore, I usually recommend buying a camera made by a long-time camera maker. They know lenses and their cameras are well-made. Companies like Nikon, Olympus and Canon are examples.

# The Best Digital Camera Websites



First, surf to **Wolfe's Camera camera comparison grid** at [www.wolfes.com/digital/digitalcameras/comparisons.html](http://www.wolfes.com/digital/digitalcameras/comparisons.html) for a super digital camera comparison chart.

Jostens has an relationship with Wolfe's camera in Topeka. This page on their website is the place to start when looking for a camera. It is a complete comparison of most of the models from the top manufacturers. Everything from the low end to high, from inexpensive to \$\$\$\$.

**Digital Photography Review** at [www.dpreview.com/](http://www.dpreview.com/) is a good site to visit when you want a professional review. There are a limited number of personal user reviews and comments about the cameras as well.

**Epinions** at [http://www.epinions.com/digital\\_cameras](http://www.epinions.com/digital_cameras) Once you have narrowed down your search and know the camera you want and have read the critics' reviews, stop by this site to see what thousands of users have said about the cameras they already own and you are considering. It may not change your mind but it will help you find out if the camera you are looking at has any quirks or glitches you should know about.

**Camera Review** at [www.camerareview.com](http://www.camerareview.com) has thousands of consumer reviews and ratings of hundreds of digital cameras. If you are in the market for a traditional film camera, they have reviews of these as well.

## Spending big bucks for big features

So you have a bunch of money you want to spend and you are replacing a great little SLR with all the lenses and such? Can you get the same type of camera in a digital model? Yes, you can, but you will pay for it. Single lens reflex type digital cameras usually start in the neighborhood of \$1,000 and go up from there.

If you are truly in love with your current film camera (and it is top of the line) and you have lots of money invested in lenses and other accessories, you may want to investigate the possibility of purchasing a digital back for that camera. They are very expensive but they fit on to your current SLR camera and take the place of the film. That way you can still use the same camera with the same features as you have been for years but your output will be digital. Big word of warning—don't have a panic attack when you see the price of these backs. Some are as much as \$5,000.