

Digital SLR Tripod Buyer's Guide

Version 2.0



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Let's Get Started

If you are looking for the best tripod for DSLR photography, then you have a number of factors to consider before you buy a tripod.

This isn't an easy decision and I spent months researching tripods on forums and on Amazon before I finally pulled the trigger. Let's just say I was pleased with the [digital SLR tripod](#) I got for my money.

And...

I believe buying a solid tripod and head made a substantial improvement in my photography (sharp, sharp, sharp!).

Do You Need a Tripod for Your DSLR?

Yes! One of the absolute easiest ways to improve your photographs is to start shooting from a tripod.

The additional stability helps make your shots tack-sharp and you can really frame your subject well.

Popular Manufacturers

There are a number of popular tripod manufacturers, A few of these include Bogen Manfrotto and Gitzo ([click here](#) to see some of their tripods in [our Amazon store](#)).

I'm most familiar with Bogen Manfrotto and I love and use their gear, so I'll use a number of their tripods and heads as examples.

What to Look For

With so many tripods and tripod heads available, how do you decide?

Some of the factors you should consider include:

1. What type of photography do you do?
2. Will you be traveling or carrying your tripod with you (on foot) over any



- extended period of time?
3. How tall or how low do you need your new tripod to go?
 4. Will you be using your tripod in a windy, harsh, or cold environment?
 5. How heavy is your SLR, your lenses and any other accessories?
 6. What's your budget? Are you the type of person that likes to pay a small amount over and over or do you prefer quality that will last you for a number of years at a higher price point?

The type of shooting you will be doing will determine the durability, the design, the maximum and minimum heights and the type of "head" you will be using with the tripod.

The Head

The "head" is the hardware that goes between the tripod "legs" and your camera or camcorder (yes, you can use some tripods for both but you may want to invest in a "fluid video head" if you are going to be shooting video).

Most of the mid-range to upper-end tripods will allow you mount a number of different "heads" based on the type of photography you are doing. The cheap tripods usually come with a head pre-attached.

"Quick Release" Mounting Plates

Your tripod head is usually going to screw onto your tripod legs, which means it takes a long time to separate the head from the legs. The same is true of the plate that attaches the head to your camera.

Smart manufacturers realized it was going to be a pain in the butt for you to have to unscrew your camera from the head - especially when there is some action where you want to just pick up your camera and go.

To make your life easier, they developed

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Manfrotto 3275 / 410

Compact Geared Head (supports up to 11.1 lbs)



Manfrotto 322RC2

something called “Quick Release Mounting Plates” that allow you to disconnect your camera from the head quickly (while still leaving the plate attached to your camera).

This makes it super-easy and super-fast to just hit a button, pull your camera off, shoot, then come back and connect your camera to the head so you can start taking shots from your tripod.

Ball Head Versus Geared Head

Ball heads feature a ball and socket that allows you to very quickly reposition the camera by reducing friction using a knob, moving the camera, then tightening the knob to re-apply the friction to the ball.

A popular variation of the ball head is the “joystick head” like the Manfrotto 322RC2 which allows you to move the camera around very rapidly by squeezing a “trigger” and then locking the camera in place just as quickly by releasing the trigger. This is a great setup if you are filming young children or animals that are moving around rapidly.

Geared heads require you to reposition the camera by turning knobs (attached to gears). If you need to move your camera very precisely between shots, a geared head makes it easy.



[Manfrotto 498RC2 Ball Head with Quick Release](#)



[Manfrotto 516 Pro Video Fluid Head Tripod](#)

Video Heads vs. Still Photography Heads

With the introduction of HD video into so many of the digital SLR cameras now available, you might want to consider getting a video head that you can use when you want to shoot video with your camera.

The reason is that the heads designed for still photography are not designed to move smoothly from left to right (“pan”) or up and down (“tilt”) - they will move, but they move in a “jerky” motion that

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shows up on your video.

The best video heads are "fluid heads" which are made up of two plates in a viscous solution that slows down the movement of the plates to make your pans and tilts as smooth as glass.

There are different grades of fluid heads - the more expensive grades actually do separate the plates with fluid.

The cheaper heads are known as "near-fluid" heads or "fluid-effect" heads where the plates actually touch but with some lubrication to reduce the friction.

One thing to note is that video professionals usually use a tripod that is specially made for video - the legs have two rods or cylinders that attach to the center and the feet are usually designed with single or double spikes to improve stability.

With that being said, I regularly use a regular [Manfrotto 190XPROB](#) with a [Manfrotto 501HDV](#) video head and I love the results.

Stability

The whole reason for buying and using a tripod is stability, so you definitely want to buy a tripod that is stable.

An even better option is a tripod that allows you to add additional weight onto the tripod (like hanging a sandbag, water bag or your gear bag from a hook on the tripod center column) so you can stabilize the camera in windy conditions.

If the legs of the tripod that you are considering are not stable, buy a different tripod.

Carbon Fiber versus Aluminum

If you are going to be carrying your tripod around with you a lot or if you are going to be exposing it to some rough conditions (like salt water for example), then consider paying more money for a good, solid carbon fiber tripod.

Carbon fiber is as strong as steel but it is extremely lightweight and has good corrosion resistance.



When you consider the weight of your camera, your lenses, the tripod head, and the rest of your gear, you'll start to realize that every little bit of weight you can save is going to make your life easier.

Maximum Height & Minimum Height (& Low-Angle Adapters)

How tall are you? How high up do you want to position your camera? How low do you want your camera to go? Your answers will also play a role when you buy a tripod.

You can see from this table how low and how high some of the professional tripods will go:

Tripod	Extended Height	Collapsed Height	Un-Extended Height	Tripod Weight	Max Load / Weight of Gear	Lowest Height
Manfrotto 055XPROB	178.5 cm	65.5 cm	142 cm	2.4 kg	7 kg	10 cm
Manfrotto 190XPROB	146 cm	57 cm	122 cm	1.8 kg	5 kg	8.5 cm

Do You Need a Center-Column Tripod?

Sometimes you'll want to get your camera closer to your subject which can be hard to do with a traditional tripod.

That's where a tripod with a center-column comes in (like the [Manfrotto 055XPROB](#) pictured to the right)

You can pull the center column up and then lay it over horizontally to move your camera away from the center of the tripod...



This is where the hook to hang your camera bag from comes in handy as you change the center of gravity of your setup by moving your camera a foot or two away from the center of the tripod.

Some tripods will also allow you to invert the center column so it hangs straight down - this makes it easy to put your camera millimeters off the floor.

Leg Angle Settings

Professional tripods often have multiple points where the legs sort of click into a groove. This allows you to quickly pull the legs out to say 25 degrees on each leg. If you want to put the legs farther away from the center, you push a button on each leg and move the leg out to the next point.

For example, the [Manfrotto 190XPROB](#) has four leg-angle settings: 25, 46, 66, and 88 degrees.

This just makes it easier to get into position while still giving you a lot of options.

Cold Weather

Some tripods like the [Manfrotto 055XPROB](#) come with “leg warmers” to make the tripod easier to handle in cold weather.

The leg warmers don't actually warm anything up, but they do provide a foam-like grip so you don't have to grab cold-metal with your cold hands.

Summary

A digital SLR tripod makes it much easier to produce sharper photographs and I believe that if you are serious about digital photography, you should invest in a good tripod.

When you buy a tripod and buy a tripod head, it really comes down to:

1. What type of photography do you do?
2. Will you be traveling or carrying your tripod with you (on foot) over any extended period of time? If so, carbon fiber is probably worth the cost.
3. How tall or how low do you need your new tripod to go?
4. Will you be using your tripod in a windy, harsh, or cold environment?
5. How heavy is your SLR, your lenses and any other accessories? Add it up and make sure your tripod and your head are rated for the weight you intend to subject them to.
6. What's your budget? I'm a fan of buying high-quality gear that last a very long time (but only because of the time I wasted fidgeting around with low-quality gear that kept breaking or “slipping” out of position).

When you buy your tripod and head, its a matter of finding a tripod that meets your specifications that you will be light enough and functional enough for you to use regularly.

For a listing of quality tripods and tripod heads, [click here to visit our Amazon store right now.](#)

Have Suggestions for this Buyer's Guide?

This report is a work in progress and I would appreciate your feedback at admin@bestdigitalslrreviews.com

Thanks,

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