

How To Buy GEAR on the Web

Online auctions: the good, the bad, and the ugly.

Online auctions have increased access to vintage electronics and components for many of us. There are many auction services online, but my experience has been with eBay. If you have read my restoration articles in *audioXpress*, you have seen many pieces and parts I have bought online. My goal is not to provide you with a step-by-step learning manual, but to provide some guidance on how to do business online, both buying and selling.

I currently have over 1500 transactions on eBay, with a very high positive feedback score, and the experiences and advice I am going to share with you are designed to make your experiences positive. I am going to help you develop a skeptical eye to look at auctions and steps that prevent disappointment and frustration. All of the examples I use are from my actual experiences.

ONLINE COMMERCE

eBay is the largest auction service in the world! If you can't find an item, it probably doesn't exist (well, within reason) or is illegal. They are also one of the most successful dot-coms, and their annual income is very impressive (some might say excessive). They charge fees for everything and also own PayPal, which charges fees to sellers for accepting electronic payments. Combined, these two companies control a large part of online commerce.

A few basics: eBay allows people anywhere in the world to list, buy, and sell items to a worldwide audience. They take *no* responsibility for the accuracy or

truth of any of the listings (this is your first lesson—*buyer beware*). They do have very strict rules about what *cannot* be sold on eBay, and they can be very nasty if you try to sneak around those rules. You can find the basic rules on their site, but like many websites, it is not easy to find answers to questions.

Almost every seller has “terms” for purchasing his/her items, and lesson 2 is to read those terms before you bid. Let me repeat: *Read the terms completely before you bid!* My auctions include the following:

Terms—Please read: by bidding you are agreeing with the following terms:

1. I accept money orders and PayPal only.
2. I will invoice you at the end of the auction. Please be sure to provide a complete address and phone number. If I am shipping via Fed Ex, they require a phone number to accept the package.
3. I expect payment in a reasonable period of time (2-7 days depending on mail or PayPal). Once I receive payment, I usually ship the next day.
4. I leave feedback on a weekly basis. I don't hold you hostage for your feedback. Many sellers won't leave feedback until they receive it, claiming that is to make sure the buyer is satisfied. But beware; these are shiftier sellers. If you look at the few negative feedbacks I have received, you will find they were left by deadbeats in retaliation for filing a complaint with



eBay or PayPal. Many of these people are no longer users of eBay or PayPal. Guess why? They were banned because of consistent bad behavior. I am fair and honest with people, and will treat you that way. However, a problem has arisen with buyers not leaving feedback after they have purchased an item, so, unfortunately, I have instituted a new policy.

If I don't receive feedback from you within 2-3 weeks after the transaction, I will contact you to ask that you provide feedback. If at this point you still don't provide any, I will block you from any of my further auctions. This sounds really nasty, but feedback is important to both sellers and buyers and helps make eBay a safer place.

5. I make every attempt to work out issues with buyers, but you need to be aware that I don't refund money for the following reasons:

- You didn't know what the item was and now don't know what to do with it
- You didn't read the description and didn't realize you weren't buying a moneymaking machine (see above)
- You had no idea what the item was worth and paid a lot more than you should have (see above)

If there is a problem with your purchase, e-mail me or call me and we'll try to seek a resolution. If you look at my

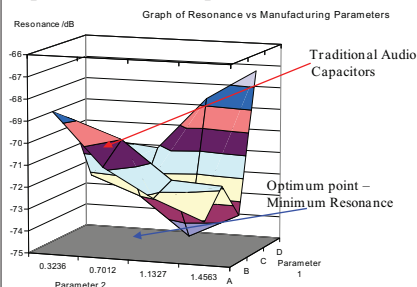


MR Capacitor

The MR range of capacitors is, we believe, the ultimate audio grade capacitor currently available on the market.

It is the result of a two year research program into the influence an audio capacitor has on overall system sound quality. The research program was conducted in cooperation with the world renowned Acoustics Research Centre at the University of Salford.

No stone was left unturned; the research encompassed all of the materials used in audio capacitors and any existing performance data together with analysis of manufacturing processes and techniques. The crucial factor to emerge was the effect that mechanical resonances within a capacitor have on sound quality and the importance of reducing or controlling a capacitor's sonic output.



The new MR range harnesses all of the knowledge gathered throughout the research program and we believe it offers the market a superior product based upon science and research rather than snake oil.

Please visit our web site at www.madisound.com for more information. Download the informative pdf file illustrating the science behind the MR cap.

Value	Price Each	Value	Price Each
0.82 mfd	\$67.00	6.8 mfd	\$179.00
1.0 mfd	\$69.00	8.2 mfd	\$183.00
2.2 mfd	\$84.00	10.0 mfd	\$188.00
3.1 mfd	\$99.00	12.0 mfd	\$283.00
3.3 mfd	\$102.00	15.0 mfd	\$289.00
3.9 mfd	\$115.00	16.0 mfd	\$292.00
4.1 mfd	\$117.00	18.0 mfd	\$298.00
4.7 mfd	\$119.00	22.0 mfd	\$299.00
5.6 mfd	\$144.00	27.0 mfd	\$311.00
6.2 mfd	\$146.00		

feedback rating—as a buyer and seller—you will see that I am honest and willing to work with people.

REFUNDS

Because I sell restored vintage audio equipment, I have had a couple of issues with what I call “vintage audio evaluators.” These are people who buy a piece of vintage equipment, audition it for a couple of months, and then contact you before the 90-day feedback window expires with a “problem” with the equipment. It usually is some vague complaint, such as hum at low levels, and they want to return the equipment for a refund.

Like most sellers, I go out of my way to work with a customer and will do this, minus the shipping costs. I had this happen twice. One time the amp was perfect (except the buyer kept a very nice preamp tube and substituted a piece of Chinese junk—I assume he didn’t think I would notice); the other involved the buyer actually cutting a ground wire under the chassis. This would never leave my shop this way, because all the equipment I rebuild meets or exceeds original specs and is burned in for several weeks after restoration. Needless to say, I now will only offer a refund within the first 10 days.

LIGHTS, CAMERA, AUCTION!

It is important for you to understand that eBay is just like a real live auction. The auction company takes no responsibility for the object, and they just collect a percentage for listing it and collect a percentage of the selling price. If you bid and win, you own it, and will have to pay for it.

That said, let’s look at the process in more detail. To get started, simply go to www.eBay.com and browse around a bit. You do not need to register or use the “guest” status to just look, only to bid. Once you register and set a screen name and password, the potential addiction begins! The eBay search bar is your gateway to the world.

The way you phrase your search can have a profound effect on the search results. Typing in “tube audio” might bring up several hundred items ranging from single tubes used in audio all the way to complete audio systems using tube components. You are also at the mercy of the

person writing the listing, whether he/she was up front and honest or just trying to get the biggest bang from the ad. (eBay charges you for listing in second categories and provides categories for the items, as well as rules about what you can and can’t say in your listing.) You can’t say, “built like a McIntosh” to get the item listed with vintage McIntosh equipment. This is not to say this doesn’t happen, but it is against the rules and if eBay discovers it, or someone reports it, they will delete the listing and send a warning to the seller.

You will discover many situations like this, and, unfortunately they have millions of auctions at any given moment and can’t police them all. It is your responsibility to use common sense and skepticism online. It is better to be more selective in your searches by using terms such as “Dynaco tube,” “Heathkit tube,” or “tube audio transformers” to narrow the results. Save your search if it returns no results, so you will automatically be notified when an item is listed that matches your description. (No hits is rare, so check the spelling of your search terms before saving it.) It takes time to become really good at search terms and finding what you are looking for.

I set up a search a couple years ago for *Phillips Motion Feedback speakers* and just recently got a hit, and actually ended up buying a pair of them. This three-way system with three amps in the cabinets is pretty rare, made in the 70s. They sense distortion and modify the signal to prevent it. They were quite expensive when they originally sold (about \$1200 each). One requires service on the woofer amp, so I got what I consider to be a very good deal. Of course, this brings up the question: “What am I going to do with them?” I have a house full of audio equipment and have 20 plus pairs of vintage speakers. Remember what I said about addiction to eBay!

SECURITY

Once you sign up for eBay, spam will start flowing to your e-mail account. Some of this will be just your garden variety “improve your sex life” garbage, but some can be very damaging! Never answer any inquiry that comes to your personal e-mail account. Only open ones that you find in “My eBay” account

“messages.” You should log in to your eBay account to get your messages. It is well worth the extra few minutes to protect your password and account.

Spammers (usually outside the US) will send what appears to be an eBay question or inquiry form on eBay letterhead asking you to respond to a question or to dispute an unpaid item alert. When you click on the “respond” button, it will send you to a fake site that will ask you to log in with your eBay screen name and password. When you do, nothing will happen (usually). They will have just stolen your screen name and password, which will allow them to access your eBay personal file and possibly your credit card or bank account information. Do not respond to or open eBay (or PayPal) inquiries without first logging onto their official sites (via your own saved link or using your browser).

Delete any messages you get in regular e-mail. In my e-mail account I average five spoofs, phishes, or Spams per day allegedly from eBay and PayPal, trying to steal my account information. I know people who have set up a new e-mail name and account just for eBay. This can help limit the spam and phishing coming into your normal e-mail account.

My account was recently compromised by a method I had not seen before. The e-mail was titled Auction Cancellation. When I opened it, the text said an auction I was bidding on, with its item number, had been canceled. It didn't ask me to log in. When I clicked on the auction number, an auction page appeared, with a link for the reason the auction was ended. I clicked on the link, logged in, and (stupidly) provided my password.

When nothing happened, I knew I had been “phished” and immediately went to my account to change my password, only to find it had already been accessed and my password didn't work. I immediately contacted eBay and we spent the next four hours securing

my accounts and resetting passwords. The biggest problem was proving to eBay I was the owner of the account. They asked me questions about auctions that occurred over two years ago, and I had no clue about some of them. They were cooperative enough to lock my accounts and auctions down until I could fax them my driver's license to prove my identity.

Just a word to the wise: Keep a folder or notebook with all your transactions by date, so if this happens, you will be able to prove to eBay security that you are the actual account owner. Better yet, follow the rule I violated. Rule 3: “Never answer any inquiry without first logging onto eBay or PayPal directly via your own link.”



SELLING/BUYING

Some sellers put a low starting bid on an item and let it go for whatever the bids hit. Others start low, but have a reserve price, so the item will not sell if the bids don't reach their hidden reserve. Another method includes a high minimum bid, so you know the minimum they will take for an item. And still another method is a combination of these with a “Buy It Now” (BIN) price. The BIN can be a very good deal or a very poor deal, depending on the item and how badly you need it. BINs are temporary and disappear once you bid on the item, so keep in mind that if you don't BIN, it may actually go for more at the end of the auction.

Your success in getting a “good deal” is to know what an item is worth, and what it is worth to you. In almost all cases, I have a price in mind when I am bidding on an item and don't exceed that amount. You can place a bid on eBay, substantially higher than the beginning amount, and if no one else bids, the selling price is the lowest increment of your bid. If someone else bids higher, the selling price will advance incrementally. If this best bid is higher than yours, and exceeds the amount of your maximum, he/she is the high bidder.

This is how a lot of money is spent. You see someone's bid and start taking little cracks at higher amounts, usually at \$10 a bid, until you find out how much he was willing to pay. Pretty soon you are the high bidder, but then you realize that your bid is much higher than you intended and exceeds your maximum. Welcome to online auctions.

There is actually a very simple way to avoid this, as well as keep your bid completely secret until the last seconds of the auction. The system is called eSnipe™ (esnipe.com), an automated bid system. Once you put your eBay bidder name and password into the system (and prepay for

fees—very reasonable), it will bid for you automatically at the very end of the auction. It gets its name from people who will sit up all hours of the night to bid on an item in the last ten seconds of the auction, to try to “snipe” your bid.

Before I tell you more, I must warn you: eBay really hates this program! It can potentially reduce selling prices on auctions, which has the potential to limit their income. The bidding on most auctions really heats up in the last 5-10 minutes, which tends to drive prices up for the buyer. The snipers sit back and don't show any interest in an item until the last ten seconds and then place a bid (or multiple bids, hoping they are larger than your maximum bid).

With eSnipe, you enter your maximum bid and how many seconds before the end of the auction you want your maximum bid placed, and it does the rest. They claim their high-speed servers can place a bid in the last two seconds before an auction ends. I typically have mine set for five seconds, which works very well. If a sniper is sitting at his computer and my bid on eSnipe goes above his, he may still have enough time for one more bid (if he has his bid set and is waiting at the final bid screen). But if he bids and the fast servers at eSnipe see his bid, they increase mine up to the maximum I have specified (as time allows). I really believe their claim about the speed of their servers!

The real beauty of the system is that I can set up my maximum bids at the very beginning of the auction and forget about them until I get a notice that I won or lost the auction. You can set it up to "check" the bid price before the auction ends and alert you if the price has already exceeded your maximum. This is a very cool system that can keep bidding "fever" to a minimum. I have reached the point where I no longer bid on anything without eSnipe.

JARGON OF EBAY

I am going to use some personal examples as well as my interpretation of eBay jargon to help you assess an item's value. My examples (actual auctions) are probably very typical of most buying and selling on eBay. I tend to be a little skeptical after ten years of trading online.

Read the descriptions and terms very carefully! Some sellers are extremely professional (usually with very good feedback ratings 99% or better), and some are just dumpster divers trying to make a quick buck from the less than knowledgeable buyer. Before you bid, read the seller's feedback and rating. I tend not to bid when the seller has less than 97% positive feedback, but not always. To determine the seller's feedback, just click on the feedback number and it will take you directly to the feedback page, which displays the feedback and sums the positive, negative, and neutral responses. It is well worth your time to do this *before you bid!*

Next, you need to read and interpret the actual auction script, which can be

extremely confusing. Some sellers have contradictory statements in the body of the auction and misinformation in other sections. Some sellers list the shipping in the shipping section of the auction and then have a shipping calculator in another section that doesn't give the same amount. Read everything carefully before you bid. Trying to figure out exactly what the seller means can be frustrating. I have established the following dictionary of phrases and terms that may help

you:

A. "As is," "as found," "parts," "for parts," and so on—This is usually pretty self-explanatory. Many of these items are from dumpsters, garages, barns, estate sales, or maybe accumulations of years of collecting (or eBaying). These are usually the bottom of the barrel, but may yield some very nice buys. You really need to know your stuff to bid on these items. If the seller's pictures are clear and

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complete, you may have answers to your questions, but if they are blurry, or incomplete, by all means ask the seller questions before you bid. Be very cautious of extremely short descriptions or very long ones that don't really tell you anything.

I recently saw an auction for a McIntosh MR 71 tuner with a very low starting price, but the accompanying picture was a little blurry. The seller had cut and pasted over two pages of specs from Roger Russell's McIntosh site (a very cool site, Roger) and described the tuner as "one of the world's best." The other pictures were much more revealing: The tuner was missing knobs, the front glass was broken, and the very end of the auction description stated "parts missing and operational condition unknown." You are buying it *as is*.

It's a good idea to view the seller's other auctions. When I did this, I found many of the missing items listed in another auction. An operational and cosmetically nice MR 71 will bring a substantial amount of money. You can probably guess what the actual operating condition was before he stripped parts. Many times you will see tube gear selling without tubes, which you will find for sale by checking the other auctions from the same seller. Again, it tells you about the operating condition of the unit. (It also tells you something about the honesty and ethics of the seller.)

I had a similar experience recently with a radio I bought from a seller with some questionable feedback (I know I broke my own rule—and I paid for it). It was a B and O Dynaco Shortwave radio (Dynaco originally sold many B and O products before their focus on kits). I had purchased a very nice unit some time ago and because this was only the second one I had ever seen, I decided to check it out further.

This seller had two whole pages describing his operation, terms, and so on (all in different colors and type sizes and styles—very visually annoying—this may even be a way to discourage people from completely reading the terms). The final sentence

read "as found." His shipping estimate was fairly outrageous (I will discuss shipping later), and the three photos (not very high resolution) showed it to be a little dirty, but complete. His feedback indicated a few negatives and neutrals, but wasn't terrible. He rated the unit as "fine." I won the auction, at a fairly reasonable amount, and paid immediately with PayPal.

When the radio arrived, the condition was, at best, "poor." The bottom 2" of the radio was covered in rust scale, and the battery compartment was pretty much gone. None of the auction pictures showed this part of the radio, so I had no visual clue. If you are familiar with rating systems for coins, watches, guns, or antiques, you know that fine is a fairly high rating, well above good, average, or poor. These designations vary a little bit by system, but the actual definition of the condition terms is very clear in all the systems. By any of the definitions, this radio would be in the poor range.

When I e-mailed him about my disappointment and asked which rating system he used to come up with fine, he was pretty indignant and pointed out that the auction stated "as found," so he really did have me. Just a word to the wise: If a seller makes a claim to a rating, be sure to ask how it was rated and the actual meaning of that rating. It would be wise to ask for more complete pictures and whether there is any visible damage to the item.

B. "Powers up," "tubes light," "works but needs work." "Not functionally tested" is also sometimes included here. As most of you know, powering up vintage tube equipment that has been sitting for a while requires some time and skill to avoid damage. Failure to slowly bring up tube amps not only can result in blowing up electrolytic caps, but can also destroy power and output transformers, especially if there is no load connected—in short, quickly turning a collectible amp into a pile of junk. These terms indicate that the equipment doesn't function, even though the "tubes light." Would you buy a very expensive vintage car on the basis that the "lights work"?

By nature, most people can't resist plugging in tube equipment to see whether it works! So they plug it in, the tubes light, and then the lights dim and a small puff of smoke appears above the unit. Another dead giveaway is the statement "tubes light, no further way of testing." Be very, very leery.

After all, how many people don't have a speaker and an audio source to plug into the amp? How many pawnshops don't have at least some speakers sitting around or an audio test setup station to test all the car stereos before they buy them? Check the seller's other auctions and sometimes you will find the "rest" of the stereo system listed separately: speakers, tuners, and CD players. Sometimes these other auctions will describe the item and say "works great," so they have actually tested the lot, but are not willing to tell the truth. On the other hand, this situation can sometimes work to your advantage.

I recently saw a tuner advertised as "powers up," but no way to test its functions. I e-mailed the seller and asked him to hook a 5' length of wire to the antenna terminals, turn the tuning dial, and tell me whether the meters moved. He replied that both meters moved and the stereo lamp came on. He didn't add that information to his description, and I ended up buying a very nice tuner. It functioned perfectly with a reasonable antenna, and required only some switch and control cleaning and an alignment touchup to meet all factory specs. It ended up being a bargain for me. Sometimes you take a chance, but bid accordingly.

The "needs work" category requires some discussion. Without a schematic, or if you are unable to otherwise service equipment yourself, you will likely spend much more money getting your purchase working. Good tube techs charge \$50-100 per hour. This can turn a good buy into a very questionable one. Even if you have service skills and access to schematics and test equipment, there can be some very interesting challenges.

I recently bought a very cosmetically nice McIntosh 1900 receiver

that was described as “one channel dead and the other one passing a weak signal—needs work.” Imagine my surprise when I opened the case and found that both driver boards were missing! I have no idea how it was able to pass a weak signal without the driver board. Neither did the seller, and we actually worked out a reasonable deal. I now have a very nice “tuner,” until I can find a junker 1900 to get driver boards.

C. “Easy fix,” “probably a bad bulb” (stereo decoder), or “may need a tube” are also suspect descriptions. If it was an “easy fix,” why didn’t the seller fix it? The bad bulb excuse is almost universally wrong when it comes to stereo decoders. With the exception of the Dynaco FM 5, very few tuners ever burn out the stereo decoder lamps alone. Sometimes I’ll read descriptions of equipment that contains lots of cut and paste specs, descriptions of how wonderful and classic a certain piece of equipment is, how rare it is, and how it is probably an easy fix. I’ll then discover the seller is conducting other

auctions selling a complete estate, including clothes and jewelry (and junk) and no other electronic equipment. What makes them experts on repair of vintage electronics?

For some unknown reason, estate sellers and antique store owners seem to think anything with tubes is worth a small fortune, just because they saw a Marantz 8B sell for \$10,000. If it sounds as though I am taking a shot at some sellers—I am. Most sellers are good people, but you must be very careful online!

D. “Works perfectly,” “sounds great,” “guaranteed not DOA”—These descriptions sound pretty good, but they can be misleading. It all depends on your perspective and the knowledge and education of the seller. A tuner that is out of alignment may work “perfectly” even though it is only operating at 20% of its sensitivity. It still may be a bargain, but if you must spend another \$150 to get it professionally aligned, it might not be such a good deal.

A couple of years ago, I bought a

McIntosh MC 30 from a guy selling lots of guitar stuff on eBay. His description said “serviced, re-tubed, sounds great.” It was a little cosmetically challenged, with some extra cooling holes drilled around the output tubes (gee, if McIntosh didn’t think this was necessary, who was the brain surgeon who figured it was a good idea?). It also featured a pair of coke bottle 6L6 new production “red lettered” output tubes as well as some rust on the chassis.

Purists won’t generally bid on “modified” equipment, so I gave it a shot. (I think the MC 30 is one of the best small amps ever built. I have another five of them—this is the addition of eBay.) I bid more than I should have, but because it was “serviced,” I figured I would take a chance.

When it arrived, retubed turned out to be interesting; the phase inverter and driver tubes were used (and weak), the rectifier was the wrong type, and the input tube was a 12AT7 not the 12AU7. The outputs

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were new and looked as though they just got off the boat from China. I put in correct, good tubes and slowly brought it up on the Variac (with a load, input source, and voltmeter connected to it). It didn't make any scary noises, but it really sounded awful and put out about 3W of power before it broke up.

I took it to my friend, Larry, the McIntosh expert. The coupling caps to the grids of the outputs were very leaky, passing lots of DC that disrupted the bias; the phase inverter tube balancing resistors were way off (40%); the power supply decoupling resistors were wrong (probably an attempt to fix the low B+ caused by the wrong rectifier tube); and one of the cathode feedback windings was connected to the wrong pin on the output tube (essentially not functioning as cathode feedback). After replacing coupling caps, balancing resistors, and correcting the wiring error, it sounded like a MAC. I contacted the seller and told him what I discovered, and he swore his tech had given it a clean bill of health and that it sounded great with his guitar.

Back in college I worked on many guitar amps, and I know that rock guitar players like their distortion, but this was way past anything I have seen. Guitar amps generally don't make good hi-fi amps, and vice versa.

When a purchase arrives that isn't right, contact the seller right away to advise him/her of the issue. Then work through the process I will discuss later.

Sometimes, a description will proclaim, "works perfectly, sounds great," but will later indicate, "as with all vintage equipment sold as is" or "because of the age of this equipment no guarantee is offered." Seems like a contradiction in terms, doesn't it? It really is. There is absolutely no reason that any well-serviced, restored, or well-maintained vintage audio equipment shouldn't survive shipping, and function just like it did before shipping (I will discuss packing and shipping at length later). You could always e-mail these sellers and ask specific questions about the

equipment's history, condition, and how long it was operated. This is especially important with estate or dumpster diver sellers, who sometimes interpret lights coming on as working (see B above).

E. **"Rebuilt," "refurbished," or "guaranteed."** These items can be a very good deal, although you should expect to pay more for them than other categories. With these, it is important to be clear on the return terms. Most honest sellers will accept returns, but not refund shipping costs either way, so you need to be sure of terms before you buy.

F. **Parts.** I have bought lots of parts and tubes via eBay, and most were exactly what I expected, but sometimes there are issues. I bought a set of output tubes that were described as NOS and matched. When they arrived they looked very used. The lettering was faded and brown and they were nowhere close to being matched. I contacted the seller and explained my observations and he said he didn't realize that they were used because they were in boxes and rubber-banded together. He actually refunded all my money, including shipping and told me to keep the tubes. Since then I have continued to buy tubes from him, and his expertise and descriptions have improved dramatically.

So, how do you avoid or handle these types of situations with audio gear you buy? First, it is very important to review the auction ad and details. Contact the seller before you do anything else (unlike I did with the MC 30) and politely explain your thoughts, cite the ad, and try to work out a compromise. If this fails, consider other options I will discuss later.

If I have a question on an item, I ask it early in the auction, to allow the seller time to reply. I often get questions on my auction within less than a day before the auction ends, and this sometimes—unfortunately—results in the bidder not getting an answer before the auction ends. Most sellers have real jobs and don't sit by the computer to wait for questions. I have had many sellers never respond to my questions, even if asked very early, and in most cases I don't bid on their auctions. If you don't get an an-

swer to your question, or if it is evasive, don't bid!

SHIPPING

One of the major cost factors with many auctions is shipping. This affects both the buyer and seller, and a complete book could be written about proper packing and shipping of vintage electronics. Most auctions will have a specified shipping cost or a shipping calculator to your zip code (shipping calculators allow the seller to include cost for packing material and "profit"). If neither of these is available, you need to ask about shipping to your location before you bid.

Some sellers also add a "handling and packing fee." I used to think this was just a way of making more money, but it might be to your benefit. Consider you have just bought a \$2500 tube amp and the cost of packing and shipping is \$80 from the coast to the Midwest. This may seem like a lot, but if the seller is buying two boxes, bubble wrap, and packing peanuts, it is probably cheap (a big roll of bubble wrap costs \$53).

Why shouldn't the seller make use of "used" boxes? The major shipping companies will not provide insurance payments for damaged items if the packing materials are not new. Any box with evidence of a previous label or packing tape will invalidate your claim for damage. This is a little-known issue that you will only discover if you have a problem. I routinely reuse packing and boxes, but not on shipments of expensive or delicate items.

I have had very few problems with damage because I am obsessive about packing, but this is not the case with all eBay sellers. It is important to remember that shipping companies can also refuse to pay claims for anything they determine was "inadequately packed." What is inadequately packed?

Last year, I bought three pieces of Dynaco equipment from a young gentleman on the East Coast. It included a PAT 4, an FM 5, and an ST 120. His packing and shipping fee was \$50, which was a little high, but I paid it and asked him to make sure they were packed well, to ship the amp separately, and to insure them. When they arrived, they all were thrown in one box separated by a few sheets of newspaper. The front of the

preamp was destroyed, and the FM 5 had the dial broken and the tuning knob shaft broken off. The 120 had a crimp in the chassis and the cage was dented. His actual shipping cost was \$29 (evidenced by the USPS printed label).

When I called him, he couldn't understand why I was upset and why it was damaged—he blamed the Postal Service. I asked him about filing a claim and then found out he hadn't insured them, even though he charged me for insurance. He explained that because he sold the pieces for less than he had paid for them, he had to recoup his investment somewhere. This is a clear example of someone being pennywise, pound foolish.

To list an item online is pretty inexpensive if you start with a low beginning price. It costs more for a high start price and more for using a "reserve" (eBay's final fee is based on the selling price, and you still get to pay that, but if you are selling an item that will go for big bucks, you can save a few cents by starting it low—always a risk, shows who is cheap). By trying to minimize his expenses, by listing them for less than he paid for them, and writing a bad description, he didn't get very much action, and I should have gotten a pretty good deal. He then tried to make up the difference by inflating shipping costs and not spending money on packing. Unfortunately, by the time we were done, he had lost a bunch more money and I had three parts units to strip. I would have preferred to have the units in good condition for rebuilding rather than for parts.

If you are buying some expensive or very pristine piece of equipment, be willing to pay for expert packing and shipping and *insist* the seller pack them the way you request (be willing to pay for it). There are some sellers who try to use shipping as a profit center. This is not right, and I won't bid on an item with ridiculous shipping charges. You often see this with Chinese or Hong Kong sellers. They sell a new manufactured copy of the Marantz 9 for a reasonable or low price and then charge \$195 for shipping.

I ship items all over the world, and the actual cost for something this size and weight via airmail would be about \$45. Another one is laptop computer batteries. Online sellers in the US get about \$39.95 plus \$12 shipping. Hong Kong

sellers list them at a BIN for \$24.95 with a \$29.95 shipping cost. Where should you spend your money? It might even be better to check with Batteries Plus™, where the same battery sells for \$49.95.

A rough estimate for domestic shipping is about \$1 per pound of final weight. This assumes it is not oversize and does not include the packing materials. I don't usually become too excited about what a seller charges for shipping as long as he/she understands the item must arrive safely! When I pay for an item, I note how I would like the item packed and shipped and offer to pay an additional cost for the service.

How should audio parts be packed to survive? All delicate or heavy items need to be double-boxed. The item should be wrapped very tightly in large bubble wrap and taped securely; you need at least four layers of bubble wrap and a tight fit in the first box, which you could also line with rigid foam board (pink stuff with foil on one side—not white bead board). Place this box in a second box, allowing at least 4" of *tightly* packed

Styrofoam peanuts. *Never* pack any electronic equipment directly in packing peanuts. If you ever spent an hour removing broken and crushed peanuts from all the wiring and crevices in a tube amp, you know exactly what I am talking about.

I purchased a Stereo 400 amp that didn't work, but the knobs and face were pristine and the price was right (it weighed about 50 lbs). I asked the seller to double-box it and charge me for it. He charged me \$50, which was reasonable. When the UPS guy delivered it, the single box was torn open on one end and there were about 12 peanuts still in the box along with some scrap cardboard. The front panel was bent over about 2" on each corner and two of the knobs were missing. The fan was broken off the heatsink and the cage significantly dented.

I was informed that it was inadequately packed (the UPS driver was right) and that I could file a claim, but I wouldn't get anything. I took digital pictures of the box and amp and e-mailed them to the seller. He claimed it was packed well

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and that it was UPS's fault (it wasn't on either count). After a long string of e-mails we came to an agreement, after I told him I would pack it and ship it back to him, but I expected a full refund and shipping both ways.

I really hate these situations, and they certainly aren't the way either party would like them to turn out. It is very important to pack well and to ask that your items be packed well. Be willing to pay for it and you will both be much happier. Shipping companies don't like damaged shipment either and generally will be of great assistance in advising on packing an item to survive.

Having dealt with all the major companies (UPS, DHL, Fed Ex, and USPS), I can't generally find any one better than the other. I use USPS for small items and love Priority Mail with Delivery Confirmation. They also have some flat rate boxes that are ideal for shipping transformers, and the rate is \$9.95 anywhere in the continental US regardless of the weight.

I recently shipped a 22 lb transformer this way. Because of its weight, I bolted it to a piece of plywood and built a box around it, just fitting the box. The buyer e-mailed me that he was extremely pleased with the condition it arrived and was surprised I went to the trouble to pack it the way I did. It took 10 minutes with my table saw and drill driver, and saved us both grief.

I tend to use Fed Ex for larger and heavier items because they offer a really nice online shipping system and charge the shipping to my credit card. They also offer a 10-15% discount on all online arranged shipments; this keeps the cost reasonable for both parties.

I recently received a shipment with the best packing I have ever seen! This new system uses expanding foam, with the equipment securely sealed in a heavy plastic bag. This system custom-forms a heavy foam shell around the equipment. Unfortunately, it is pretty expensive to buy and set up, but I would love to have one of these systems!

If the seller isn't interested in packing the item properly, ask him/her to take it to a UPS shipping and packaging center for packing. Be willing to pay extra for this, but the bonus is that if any damage occurs the shipper will pay without

hesitation.

It is also very important to insure the shipment for replacement. If you must file a claim:

1. File a damage report with the shipping company. Take pictures of the packing material, box, and item. Keep the packing materials and box (many times the shipping company will want to inspect it). A polite e-mail to the seller will usually bring a like response. If the shipping company denies the claim, due to poor packing, you can arrange to negotiate via telephone or e-mail.
2. Be prepared with a proposal for the damage in case the seller asks you what you want to do. You should try to work through this so that it is fair to both people. Remember: they probably didn't want this to happen either.
3. You need to work through the claim process fairly quickly because eBay and PayPal have time limits on intervention (60 days for claims).
4. If you fail to come to an agreement, you can file a dispute with eBay, and if you used PayPal to pay for it, the dispute will be filed through them. The eBay dispute process requires you to fill out a form and explain your position and your suggested resolution. It is then forwarded to the other party via eBay, and if they do not respond you can ask eBay to intervene. This may result in a suspension of trading privileges for the seller for 30-90 days or even a permanent suspension if this is his/her third infraction.

I have had only two experiences with this system. I had bought some output transformers from a prominent eBay seller, who informed me after I paid for them that it would be 30 days before I received them because he "hand wound" them. This, by the way, is against eBay policy. After 30 days and no transformers, I contacted him and he said four more weeks. Before the end of 60 days, I filed a claim, eBay contacted him, and I eventually got my transformers. But Larry sent him some McIntosh transformers for rewinding and paid upfront and never received them. He also complained to eBay, as did several others, and the seller was permanently banned from eBay trading (or so they say).

Last year I bought three new Dy-

naco ST 35 clone circuit boards and three sets of output and power transformers, plus a complete amp (obviously a business idea gone awry). The seller said he would accept check, money order, cashier's check, or postal money order, but would hold the shipment for 30 days clearance, except for the postal money order.

This should have made me suspicious, because each of these payments takes about the same time to actually clear (ten days). The seller also listed a starting price (about one-third the actual cost of the items) but no reserve, and I was the only bidder. I sent him a cashier's check via priority mail with delivery confirmation and signature required. I asked him why he was going to hold shipment for 30 days when the bank told me it would clear in 5-7 days. His response was "he could do anything he wanted to do."

After 30 days I e-mailed him to ask for a tracking number for the shipment. He replied that there was no tracking number because he sent them parcel post (this is really stupid, and a great way to lose stuff). At about 45 days the first box came with half the items I had bought. I e-mailed him and asked about the second box—he said to wait a week. When it didn't come and the 60-day limit to file a dispute approached, I filed one with eBay.

He was not happy, and e-mailed me that the second box had come back to him because of damage (probably a lie) and that he was not going to reship it as long as the dispute was open. I did a really stupid thing and closed the dispute (once you close, you can't reopen it—I guess he knew that and I didn't). Needless to say, I never got the rest of my stuff, and he got negative feedback (you can leave feedback up to 90 days after the transaction). I also filed a report with the USPS for mail fraud, but you know how efficient the government can be. Learn from my mistakes!

I prefer to use only PayPal for buying (because of the previously mentioned intervention) and accept PayPal and money orders for items I am selling (I accept personal checks from repeat customers). I never use bank transfers or cash. Even though the seller pays a fee for every electronic transfer via PayPal and they can even be a hassle to work with, they do offer some security for your money.

Just a few weeks ago I sold some books to a buyer, who paid via PayPal. I shipped the books priority mail, with delivery confirmation. The buyer e-mailed me 15 days later claiming he had not received them. I sent him the confirmation number so he could check the delivery. A week later he e-mailed again and demanded to know where the shipment was, so I used USPS link on tracking, got the complete list of where it had gone and when it arrived at his post office. He filed a non-delivery claim with PayPal, which sent me into the resolution center. I was able to attach the shipping and tracking information, as well as the e-mails we had exchanged (he claimed I had never answered any of his e-mails).

Within 24 hours PayPal had closed his claim and e-mailed me that they considered the dispute ended. I permanently banned him from any of my auctions. I have no idea what he was up to, but in this case having all the documentation was the saving grace for me. Because it wasn't very much money I

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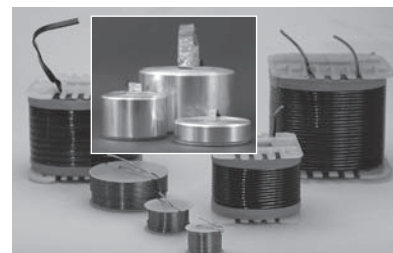


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FEEDBACK

eBay's feedback system allows you to check on buyers' and sellers' previous transactions. Remember Rule #1: You should always check a seller's feedback before you bid on any item. You may choose to reconsider bidding on an item from a seller with a small number of feedbacks or multiple negatives. eBay recently updated its system to allow multiple ratings for communication, packing, shipping, and quality of the item. Reading seller's feedback can give you a pretty good picture of the integrity of the person.

Even negative feedback should be taken with a grain of salt and read carefully. eBay now allows people to respond to, and explain, negative feedback, and sometimes it is very apparent that the negative feedback was retaliation for negative feedback given by the other party. I have had negative feedback—one of these was for leaving negative feedback for nonpayers. The other one was from someone who didn't even con-

tact me about an issue he had with the amp he bought. I have no idea what his problem was. Interestingly enough, I had left him positive feedback.

No one likes negative feedback—neither the seller nor the buyer—and you should do everything you can to avoid getting or giving it. In my ads I list my personal cell number and encourage any buyer who has questions or concerns to call me before taking any action. I am proud of my very high feedback score and will bend over backwards to keep it that way.

One bothersome practice is performed by sellers who state in their ads that "they will leave feedback after you, the buyer, leave feedback for them." This is holding you hostage. It makes me think that they are trying to make sure they don't get negative feedback. It isn't right; after all, you have won the bid and paid for the item, so you have completed 95% of the transaction. I urge you not to do business with sellers who hold you hostage. This is especially true now since eBay allows you to post a response to negative feedback (you can also ask for arbitration and get negative feedback removed).

Once you have received the item, it is also very important for you to leave feedback. This will help other buyers make the right decision about doing business. Although I leave feedback for everyone who buys from me, only about 60% of them ever leave feedback for me. This is just plain laziness or rudeness.

Over the years I have "met" some very nice people via on-line trading. I correspond with many of these people regularly, and we trade equipment back and forth. Even though I have shared some negative examples with you, I really believe that most of the sellers on eBay are honest. There are many people like me, having some fun and buying and selling some neat stuff. If you follow some of the simple suggestions I have made, you will greatly limit your chance of problems.

Because I live in a relatively remote, underpopulated area (South Dakota), online auctions have been a great benefit to me. I have been able to buy gear I would have never run across in my area, and 95% of the time it has been a very positive and fun experience. *ax*

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