

Welcome to the Headphone Guide

The intention of this guide is to provide a reference for beginners looking to get into headphones. I've tried to include headphones from all price ranges up to \$1000.

This guide is ordered into tiers based on **recommendability**. I define recommendability as how easy it is for me to recommend a product at its current price. Stick to the top tier if you just want the absolute best you can get for your budget. If availability is spotty for you or you find some heavy discounts, feel free to look and Good and Okay value.

Feel free to message me on discord at [Cicero#5516] if you have any questions. Additionally, the Headphone Headquarters discord is a great place to ask.

I want to make it clear right off the bat that **these are all based off of my personal opinions**. Yes, I'm currently employed at Stereoland. No, I will not be trying to sell you a product or mislead you in any way. If you disagree with my opinions or think I have missed anything, be sure to message me and we can talk about it. Thank you and have a nice day :)

Here are the tiers:

Best Value	The best headphones (in my opinion) at their respective price points. Try to stick to this tier as much as possible.
Good Value	Headphones that are good but either a bit overpriced or too niche for me to recommend them normally.

Okay Value	These headphones are probably significantly overpriced or have major flaws, but at least don't sound awful.
Terrible Value	Headphones I genuinely do not recommend for any reason. I'm including these just so people stop asking me what tier they're in.
Avoid	Why are you even considering these?
>\$1000	Stuff above \$1000 that doesn't fit into a tier.

Headphones I Couldn't Include

In this guide, I have tried to only include headphones that I have either listened to or have a really good idea of how they sound based on trying similar models. This means that there are some products I simply am unable to put in this guide, either because I don't know or don't remember how they sound. I'll do my best to list them here for you.

- Hifiman HE-500, HE-5SE, HE-560 V1, HE-1000, HE-6, Edition, Sundara, Ananda, Arya, and Susvara
- EMU Teak, Denon D2000, D5000, D7000
- The whole ZMF lineup (they're mostly over \$1000 anyway)
- Any of the Stax worth mentioning
- I intentionally left out most of Grado because it doesn't really get better after SR80

*yellow highlight = used

Best Value					
Name	Price	Type	Sound Notes	Product Notes	Availability
Koss KSC75/X	\$17	Open Back	Neutral/Bright. Above average soundstage, great imaging. Amazing resolution/detail that competes with anything under \$100 and great timbre. You could buy these and never feel unhappy listening to music.	Cable: 4ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination. *On-Ear. *They clip onto your ears and aren't very comfortable. *Massdrop version has inline mic.	Amazon Massdrop
Koss PortaPro/X	\$30-40	Open Back	Warm. Above average soundstage, great imaging. Basically a warmer and darker KSC75.	Cable: 4ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination. *On-Ear. *Much more comfortable than the KSC75. *Massdrop version has inline mic.	Amazon Massdrop
Creative Aurvana Live! (CAL)	\$60-70	Closed Back	Warm U-shape. Solid technical performance, and decent soundstage/ imaging for a closed back. Amazing and punchy bass; probably the best bass for under \$200.	Cable: 5ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *Build quality issues. *Doesn't isolate like a closed back. *Small for an over ear, may cause slight comfort problems.	Amazon eBay japan import (search "HP AURVN LV")
AKG K550 (used)	\$100	Closed Back	Neutral/Warm. Close soundstage, decent imaging. The cousin to the K553. Not that much different sound-wise.	Cable: 9.5ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *Decent isolation. *Fit problems for some people.	Head Fi Classifieds r/AVexchange eBay
Audio Technica A900X (used)	\$100-150	Closed Back	Warm. Wide soundstage for a closed back and great imaging. Amazing timbre and good technical ability. If you need an isolating closed back, I'd get this or K553.	Cable: 10ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *Good isolation.	Head Fi Classifieds r/AVexchange eBay
AKG K612 Pro	\$140	Open Back	Neutral/Bright. Wide soundstage, decent imaging. Overall solid can with no giant flaws, unlike a lot of AKG's.	Cable: 10ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *Uncomfortable headband.	Amazon

Sennheiser HD580 (used)	\$100-200	Open Back	Neutral*. Below average soundstage, okay imaging. The granddaddy of the HD600 series. Many consider this one to be the best, but it's only available used. Even less bass than HD600.	Cable: 10ft, detachable, 3.5mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *Will almost definitely need new (\$50) pads if used.	Head Fi Classifieds r/AVexchange eBay
AKG K371	\$150	Closed Back	Neutral*. Close soundstage, decent imaging. Fixes many issues with the K550 and overall sounds very nice for a sub-\$200 closed back.	Cables(3): 4ft and 10ft detachable cables, 3.5mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *Better comfort than the older K550/K553. *Decent isolation.	Amazon
Audeze Sine (used)	\$150-200	Closed Back	Neutral*. Close soundstage, decent imaging. Like an on-ear HD600 with tighter and faster bass. Great technical performance for the price.	Cable: 8ft(?), detachable, 3.5mm termination. *On-ear. *You will probably have comfort issues. *Difficult to drive for a "portable".	Head Fi Classifieds r/AVexchange eBay
beyerdynamic DT 880 Pro/Premium	\$150-200	"Semi" Open Back	Bright U-Shape. Decent soundstage, excellent imaging. Great detail and resolution, relatively non-offensive sound signature.	Cable: 10ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *32ohm variant for mobile use (not recommended) *250ohm variant for desktop use. *600ohm variant for amp use.	Premium Amazon Pro Amazon
Sennheiser HD6XX	\$220	Open Back	Neutral/Warm. Below average soundstage, okay imaging. Amazing detail and resolution, and arguably the best mids in any headphone, period (tied with 580/600).	Cable: 6ft, detachable, 3.5mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *Tight clamp force.	Massdrop
Sennheiser HD600	\$300 (<200 used)	Open Back	Neutral*. Below average soundstage, okay imaging. Basically a more neutral 6XX with less bass bloat and doesn't sound as "veiled".	Cable: 10ft, detachable, 3.5mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *Tight clamp force. *You should buy this used.	Amazon r/AVexchange eBay
Fostex TR-X00 Mahogany	420 (250-300 used)	Closed Back	Warm. Like a super CAL, with better detail and technicalities. Bass impact is quite a lot better too.	Cable: 10ft, detachable, 1/4" termination. *Slightly better isolation than CAL. *Improved comfort and build a bit over CAL as well.	Massdrop

Audeze LCD-2 (used)	\$500	Open Back Planar	Warm/Dark. Decently wide soundstage, good imaging. All around solid technical performance but not really comparable to Elex or HD800.	Cable: 6ft, detachable, 1/4" termination with 3.5mm adapter. *Really heavy. Some people experience neck pain.	Head Fi Classifieds r/AVexchange eBay
Focal Elex	\$700	Open Back	Neutral*. Average soundstage, great imaging. Improved resolution, dynamics, and bass punch over HD600 but a slightly metallic timbre. The closest thing to a direct upgrade over the 600 you can get under \$1000.	Cables(2): 6ft, detachable, 1/4" and 4-pin XLR terminations. *Very open; blocks out less sound than even most open backs.	Massdrop
Sennheiser HD800 (used)	\$700	Open Back	V-shape. Sucked out upper mids. The best soundstage and imaging of any headphone, period. Top tier resolution. Mediocre tonality and timbre with a sharp 6khz peak some may find sibilant as a tradeoff for sheer technical performance.	Cable: 10ft, detachable, 1/4" termination. *Incredibly lightweight, little clamp force. Some love that, some don't.	Head Fi Classifieds r/AVexchange eBay

* When I write "Neutral", I do not mean true neutral. I mean relatively perceived neutral. A better word would be "balanced", but it's not as aesthetically pleasing ;)

Good Value

Name	Price	Type	Sound Notes	Product Notes	Availability
Koss KPH30i	\$30	Open Back	Like a Porta Pro but a bit warmer. Personally I found this to be too warm in comparison to the other two.	Cable: 4ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination. *On-ear. *Slightly more comfortable than Porta Pro.	Amazon
beyerdynamic DT250	\$200	Closed Back	Neutral/Warm. Good resolution, very solid tonality. Easily the most natural sounding beyerdynamic. I'd still take a K371 over it just to not have to mod.	Cable: 10ft, detachable, 3.5mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *Decent isolation. *Channel imbalance issues, but can be fixed with a simple mod.	Amazon
AKG K712 Pro	\$250- 300	Open Back	Bright. Wide soundstage and decent imaging. Basically a better K612. I would never get this over an HD600, however.	Cable: 10ft, detachable, 3.5mm termination with 1/4" adapter.	Amazon
Verum One	\$350	Open Back Planar	Warm/Dark. Decent resolution and detail, but I wouldn't quite put it at HD600 level. Basically like a mini LCD2, and one of 2 great budget planars.	Cable: 6ft(?), detachable, 3.5mm termination with 1/4" adapter. * <i>Interesting</i> aesthetic *Heavy but comfortable.	Verum Store
Hifiman Sundara	\$350	Open Back Planar	Neutral* Good detail and resolution, but timbre and tonality are not as good as the HD600. I'd recommend the 600 9 times out of 10.	Cable: 5ft, detachable, 3.5mm termination. *Build quality issues, like every other modern hifiman.	Amazon
Sennheiser HD660S	\$400- 500	Open Back	Neutral/Warm. A slight upgrade to the HD600/650 in terms of clarity, but a step back in tonality. These should be \$250 at most.	Cables(2): 10ft, detachable, 1/4" and 4.4mm termination, 3.5mm adapter.	Amazon
Fostex TR-X00 Ebony	\$520	Closed Back	Like a more neutral and slightly clearer Mahogany for \$100 more. Not worth the extra money in my opinion but still really good.	Cable: 10ft, detachable, 1/4" termination. *Mediocre isolation.	Massdrop

Sendy Audio Aiva	\$600	Open Back Planar	Bright. Great clarity and treble, but wonky mids. A nice planar, but not one I'd recommend for everyone.	Cable: 6ft, detachable, 4.4mm termination with 3.5mm adapter.	MusicTeck
Sennheiser HD800S (used)	\$1,000	Open Back	V-shape. Sucked out upper mids. Like HD800 but with a tamed 6k peak and slightly bloater bass. Not worth the extra money in my opinion when you can SDR mod the HD800 to be better than this for cheaper.	Cables(2): 10ft, detachable, 1/4" and 4-pin XLR terminations. *Incredibly lightweight, little clamp force. Some love that, some don't.	Head Fi Classifieds/eBay /AVexchange

Okay Value

Name	Price	Type	Sound Notes	Product Notes	Availability
Superlux HD681	\$30	Open Back	U-shape. Okay soundstage, good imaging. Worse than the Koss on-ears by a good margin. Wonky tonality and overall odd and hazy sounding.	Cable: 8ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *Decently comfortable considering the price.	Amazon
Superlux HD668B	\$30	Open Back	U-shape. Essentially an HD681 but even more wack tonality.	Cables(2): 4ft and 10ft, detachable, 3.5mm termination. *Uncomfortable stock pads.	Amazon
Samson SR850	\$30	Open Back	U-shape. Same sound as the HD668B in the body of an HD681.	Cable: 8ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *Decently comfortable considering the price.	Amazon
Status Audio CB-1	\$60	Closed Back	Warm U-shape. Like a CAL with worse bass and technical performance. Only reason to buy this is for the detachable cable. Even still, just get the CAL.	Cables(2): 10ft, detachable, 3.5 mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *Pretty comfortable. *Terrible build quality.	Amazon
E-MU Purpleheart	\$75	Closed Back	V-Shape. It's a CAL but with a more pronounced V-Shape. Almost recommendable except that the CAL is cheaper and sounds better.	Cable: 4ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination. *Build quality issues. *Doesn't isolate like a closed back. *Not the most comfortable.	Massdrop
Grado SR60e / SR80e	\$80 \$100	Open Back	Bright, no bass. Wonky tonality and timbre. Okay resolution and easiest the best value grado, not that that's saying much. If you want to experience Grado sound, just stick with these.	Cable: 5.6ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *On-ear. *Poorly built. *Terrible comfort.	SR60e Amazon SR80e Amazon

Sony MDR-V6	\$80	Closed Back	Neutral with a treble peak. Close soundstage, decent resolution. Dead dynamics and overall super boring sound. Not recommended for music.	Cable: 10ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination with 1/4" adapter.	Amazon
beyerdynamic DT770	\$100- 150	Closed Back	V-Shape. Wide soundstage for a closed back and decent resolution. Muddy, one-note bass and sharp treble peak kill this thing. Something like a K371 or A900X are a better buy.	Cable: 3m, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination with 1/4" adapter.	Amazon
Sennheiser HD 559/579/598/599	\$100- 150	Open Back	Neutral/Warm. Wider soundstage than the HD600 series but much worse detail, clarity, and grainy treble. Differing degrees of warmth throughout the lineup. Sharp 10k peaks across the board. I recommend just saving for an actual 600 series.	Cable: 10ft, detachable, 1/4" termination. Some have 3.5mm adapters or other cables. Similar designs across the board. 559 is the warmest while 579, 598, and 599 all sound similar.	Sennheiser Amazon Page
Audio Technica ATH-AD900	\$150	Open Back	Neutral/Bright. Wide soundstage but it's behind your head, makes imaging weird. Overall bright sound with those traditional honky AT mids. Good if you like anime music or whatever.	Cable: 10ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination with 1/4" adapter. *The new version is the AD900X. I can't comment on how it's changed since the revision.	Amazon
Sennheiser HD 58X	\$160	Open Back	Neutral/Warm. A frankendriver that sounds most similar to the HD579 but has the poor soundstage and imaging of the HD580. Marketed in an HD580 shell to make you think it's actually good. A terrible deal when you can get a used 600 for the same price or a new 6XX for slightly more.	Cable: 6ft, detachable, 3.5mm termination with 1/4" adapter.	Massdrop
beyerdynamic DT990 Pro/Premium	\$150-200	Open Back	Strong V-Shape. Like a DT880 but worse. Treble so sharp it hurts your ears, bass way too forward and muddy.	Cable: 10ft, non-detachable, 3.5 mm termination with 1/4" adapter.	Pro Amazon Premium Amazon

beyerdynamic DT1990	\$450	Open Back	V-Shape. Slight upgrade to the DT880 in resolution but treble is much sharper and grainier. Supposedly the same driver death problem as the 1770.	Cable: 10ft, detachable, 3.5mm termination with 1/4" adapter.	Amazon
Audeze LCD-2C	\$800	Open Back Planar	Warm/Dark. Decently wide soundstage, good imaging. All around solid technical performance but not really comparable to Elex or HD800.	Cable: 6ft, detachable, 1/4" termination with 3.5mm adapter. *Really heavy. Some people experience neck pain.	Audeze Website

Terrible Value - Not Recommended

Name	Price	Type	Why it's not recommended
Philips SHP9500/S	\$60	Open Back	Horrible treble grain. Below average soundstage, mediocre imaging. Poor detail. Sharp 6k peak. Incredibly overrated by people who don't know what a good headphone is.
AKG K240 Studio	\$70	"Semi" Open Back	Muddy, bad midrange tonality, overall low-res. The original K240 Sextett was okay, but this thing is just a mess.
Audio Technica ATH-AD500	\$80	Open Back	Borderline incapable of producing sound below 100hz. No sub-bass and barely any midbass. Unusable for music and not even that great for games.
Audio Technica ATH-AD700	\$100	Open Back	More bass extension than AD500, but still not as good as AD900. If you really want the wide soundstage and bright signature of this lineup, just get the 900.
V-Moda Crossfade Wireless	\$100-140	Closed Back	Fat V-shaped signature with no mids to speak of and muddy bass + grainy treble. I'm including this one just for you Tim.
Any Sennheiser Closed Back	\$100-200	Closed Back	Sennheiser just doesn't make good closed back headphones. The HD280 and 380 sound flat out wrong, and the 569/598CS have wayyy too much bass to the point of being terribly muddy.
Audio Technica ATH-M50X/M40X	\$100/150	Closed Back	Really uncomfortable, sounds compressed as hell, bloated bass and wonky mids, no extension. Just bad all around.
Hifiman HE4XX	\$180	Open Back	Massdrop really cursed this one. No bass, terribly peaky treble. Bad build quality. I don't know how people like this.
AKG K7XX	\$200	Open Back	The biggest bass bloat you've ever seen. Very poor imaging as a result of bad bass bleed and an already lackluster imaging solution.
Hifiman HE400i (post 2017)	\$200-250	Open Back	It started out as a mediocre headphone, but recent revisions turned it into essentially an HE4XX clone.
Hifiman HE560 V2 and V3	\$300	Open Back	Another okay headphone ruined by Hifiman's "updates".
V-Moda Crossfade M-100	\$250	Closed Back	The same problems I mentioned with the Crossfade wireless plague the rest of V-Moda's headphones as well. I'm including the M-100 in particular because it's popular for some reason.
Monoprice M1060	\$270	Open Back	The worst ringing I have EVER heard in a headphone. These will actually kill your ears.

Philips Fidelio X2	\$300	Open Back	Like a SHP9500 but somehow even worse. More grain and imaging really sucks. It's praised by people who hear the wide soundstage and warm sound and assume that means it's good. It is not.
Meze 99 Classic	\$309	Closed Back	I don't think Meze knows other frequencies exist outside of midbass.
beyerdynamic DT1770	\$450	Closed Back	Barely an upgrade from DT770; huge driver failure problem.
Fostex TR-X00 Purpleheart	\$470	Closed Back	Like someone took an X00 Mahogany and blew up the bass and treble. Way too V-shaped to the point of sounding truly gross.

Trash (Please Don't Buy These)

Name	Why it's not recommended
Anything made by Beats (except Solo 3 and EP)	Horrible, horrible bass bloat. If this is all you've heard, I'm sorry for you. The exceptions to this are Solo 3 and maybe EP.
Gaming Branded Headsets	There are a great many reasons not to buy these. Very poor sound quality in general, as most of the price is devoted to marketing. The few exceptions come in the form of the HyperX Clouds, Cooler Master MH751, and Sennheiser's open back headsets.
Anything you'd find in the supermarket electronics department (i.e. Walmart great value earbuds, etc.)	Do I really have to explain this one? Going to your local supermarket and buying \$10 earbuds is not going to get you good quality.

I've decided that the super high end (>\$1000) stuff is unreasonable to fit in a tier because you're obviously not looking for value if you're spending this much. Therefore, this page is to document my opinions on all the super expensive stuff I've heard.

>\$1000					
Name	Price	Type	Sound Notes	Product Notes	Availability
Focal Clear	\$1,500	Open Back	Neutral*. A bit more resolution than the Elex but less soundstage and it's twice the price. If you're gonna upgrade from Elex, go Utopia or go home.	*Detachable dual 2.5mm cable.	Focal Website
Audeze LCD-3	\$2,000	Open Back	Warm/Dark. A bit of a resolution improvement over the LCD2, but not worth all that extra money in my opinion. Many better options at this price.	*Detachable dual mini-xlr cable. *Really heavy.	Audeze Website
Focal Utopia	\$4,000 (2500 used)	Open Back	Neutral* Edges out HD800 in detail and timbre, kills it in dynamics and tonality. Slight downgrade in soundstage but honestly the difference between the closest and widest headphones is relatively small anyway. My personal favorite headphone I've ever heard.	*Detachable dual LEMO cable. *Great comfort and build. *\$4000 and still somehow has a crap stock cable.	Amazon