Justin Valentine
BUYERS AGENT

A MELBOURNE BUYER'S TOOLKIT

The Melbourne Home Buyer's Decision Kit

The tools, checks and worksheets I use to help owner-occupiers decide what to buy, what to pay, and when to walk away.

PREPARED BY **JUSTIN VALENTINE** · BUYERS ADVOCATE · MELBOURNE'S EASTERN SUBURBS

Buying a home shouldn't feel like gambling.

We've all heard the saying that for most people, buying a home is the biggest financial decision they'll ever make. What gets said far less often is that it is also one of the least practised.

Most buyers will purchase three or four properties in a lifetime. The people on the other side of the table work in this market every day. That gap is why so many capable, intelligent buyers still feel uncertain, overwhelmed, or quietly worried about making an expensive mistake.

Over the years I have worked with teachers, engineers, tradies, accountants, business owners, retirees, young families and first home buyers. Different people, same handful of mistakes — not through carelessness, but because so many of the assumptions buyers make about property simply are not true.

This kit is designed to change that.

Rather than another list of generic tips, it gives you the framework I use with clients, plus the worksheets that turn that framework into something you can actually hold in your hand at a Saturday inspection.

Every property should answer five questions before you make an offer. Answer them honestly and you dramatically reduce your chance of an expensive mistake.

Whether you buy on your own or work with an advocate, I hope this helps you buy with more confidence.

Justin Valentine

BUYERS ADVOCATE

**You don't need decades of experience to buy well.
You just need a framework for making good decisions.**

It isn't about intelligence. It's about repetition.

3–4

PROPERTIES IN A LIFETIME

Enough to learn a few lessons. Nowhere near enough to become an expert at valuing, checking and negotiating property.

Every day

FOR THE PROFESSIONALS

Selling agents watch buyer behaviour, pricing psychology and negotiation play out week after week, year after year.

That does not make the process unfair. It does explain why I hear the same three sentences over and over:

“I'm worried about paying too much.”
“I don't know what it's really worth.”
“I'm scared of making a mistake.”

Those are not signs of poor judgement. They are the predictable result of making one of life's biggest financial decisions without much opportunity to practise.

The good news: you do not need twenty years in the market to buy well. You need a repeatable way to decide. That is what the rest of this kit is.

HOW TO USE THIS KIT

Read pages 4 to 5 once. Then **print the worksheets and use them per property**. The Property Scorecard and the Pre-Offer Red Flag Checklist are designed to be filled in on the day, not admired on a screen.

One framework.
Seven tools you'll actually use.

Tool 01 — **The 15-Minute Buyer Brief** — 06
Decide what you're looking for before you open another listing.

Tool 02 — **The Suburb Shortlist Matrix** — 07
Score suburbs against your life, not against a "best suburbs" list.

Tool 03 — **The Property Scorecard** — 08
A 100-point score for every home you inspect. The heart of the kit.

Tool 04 — **The Saturday Inspection Sheet** — 09
25 checks, plus the eight questions to ask the selling agent.

Tool 05 — **The Five-Comparable Method** — 11
Work out what it's worth, using evidence instead of the price guide.

Tool 06 — **The Pre-Offer Red Flag Checklist** — 12
What to check before you sign anything. This one saves people money.

Tool 07 — **The Offer & Auction Planner** — 13
Set your ceiling at the kitchen table, not on the footpath.

> A NOTE ON WHAT THIS IS NOT
>
> This isn't a step-by-step guide to buying a house — Consumer Affairs Victoria publishes that for free, and it's good. **This is the decision framework I use**, which is the part nobody gives you.

Every property should answer five questions before you offer.

If you can't answer one of them, that doesn't mean don't buy. It means you need more information before making one of the biggest financial decisions of your life.

1

CLARITY

What am I actually looking for?

Creates clarity before you begin searching, so every property can be judged against the same standard. **Tool 01 and 02.**

2

VALUE

What is this property really worth?

Helps you avoid overpaying by anchoring to comparable sales rather than a marketing campaign. **Tool 05.**

3

DUE DILIGENCE

What don't I know yet?

Identifies the hidden risks before they become expensive surprises. **Tool 04 and 06.**

4

LIFESTYLE

Will this property actually work for my life?

Makes sure you're buying a home rather than a floor plan that scores well. **Tool 03.**

5

TERMS

How do I secure it on the best possible terms?

Price is one lever. Settlement, deposit and conditions are the others. **Tool 07.**

WHY IT MATTERS

I once inspected a home advertised at **$2.8m to $2.9m**. On the comparable sales evidence, I put its market value closer to **$2.4m to $2.5m**. That is a $400,000 gap between a marketing range and the market.

The 15-Minute Buyer Brief

Complete this before you open another listing. If you're buying with a partner, fill it in *separately* and then compare. That exercise alone has redirected more searches than anything else I do.

YOUR NON-NEGOTIABLES

Absolute budget ceiling		Property type	
Bedrooms / bathrooms (min)		Parking	
Land or internal size (min)		Outdoor space	
School zone requirement		Renovation appetite	
Max commute, door to door		Move-in deadline	

SORT EVERY REQUIREMENT INTO ONE OF FOUR BUCKETS

REQUIREMENT	MUST HAVE	WOULD LIKE	DON'T CARE	DEALBREAKER
	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐
	☐	☐	☐	☐

THE THREE THINGS I AM GENUINELY WILLING TO COMPROMISE ON

1

2

3

FROM A REAL SEARCH

Luke and Kat had been searching for **two and a half years** with two young daughters. Nothing about the market changed when we started — we just turned an expanding wish list into a realistic target list of four suburbs. They secured a home **ten days later**.

The Suburb Shortlist Matrix

Forget "Melbourne's best suburbs". Score each candidate out of 10 against *your* life. The winner is rarely the one with the best reputation — it's the one where your budget actually buys the home you need.

SCORE EACH OUT OF 10	SUBURB A	SUBURB B	SUBURB C	SUBURB D
What my budget actually buys here				
Volume of suitable stock				
Commute, door to door, at peak				
Schools (verified on Find My School)				
Walkability and shops				
Public transport				
Proximity to family and friends				
Lifestyle and green space				
Will still suit us in ten years				
Quality of housing at my budget				
Total out of 100				

PRIMARY SUBURBS

SECONDARY SUBURBS

STRETCH SUBURBS

ONE LEVEL DEEPER

Suburbs are not uniform. In Doncaster, the ridge, the Ruffey Lake side and the Doncaster Road corridor behave like three separate markets. In Blackburn, two homes three streets apart can differ by four hundred thousand dollars. **Score the pocket, not the postcode.**

The Property Scorecard

Property address .... Date ....

Location
/ 25

Street quality · Noise at peak · Transport · Schools · Orientation and light · Neighbouring properties

The property itself
/ 25

Layout and flow · Natural light · Condition · Land and garden · Parking · Storage

Long-term suitability
/ 20

Still works in five years · Room for the family to grow · Can I extend or renovate · Resale appeal

Value
/ 20

Comparable sales support the price · Guide versus evidence · Likely competition · Cost of work required

Risk
/ 10

Contract and Section 32 · Easements and covenants · Overlays and zoning · Building issues · Owners corporation

TOTAL SCORE / 100

WHAT IS PULLING THIS PROPERTY'S SCORE DOWN — AND CAN IT BE FIXED?

....

....

85–100
Strong candidate. Move to full due diligence.

70–84
Worth investigating. Find out what's pulling it down.

55–69
Significant compromise. Be honest about which one.

Under 55
If you still want it, emotion may be doing the buying.

> USE IT ON THE DAY
>
> Score it in the car before you drive home, while the house is still fresh. **Compare scores, not memories** — memory quietly flatters whichever home you saw most recently.

The Saturday Inspection Sheet

Twenty-five things to physically do at an open home. Most buyers walk through and look. These are the checks that actually tell you something.

WATER, DAMP AND SERVICES

- [ ] Turn on every tap and check the pressure
- [ ] Open the cupboards under each sink and look for staining
- [ ] Run your hand along the base of external walls for damp
- [ ] Smell the bedrooms and bathrooms, especially the corners
- [ ] Test the heating and cooling if the agent will allow it
- [ ] Check the age and location of the hot water unit
- [ ] Count power points in the rooms you'll actually use
- [ ] Look at the switchboard: fuses or safety switches?

STRUCTURE AND CONDITION

- [ ] Look for cracks above doorways and window corners
- [ ] Check whether floors feel level as you walk
- [ ] Open and close every door and window
- [ ] Look at the roofline and gutters from the street
- [ ] Note any freshly painted patch in an odd place

OUTSIDE AND AROUND

- [ ] Stand in the back garden and just listen for two minutes
- [ ] Work out which way the rear yard faces
- [ ] Look at the neighbours' windows — who overlooks you?
- [ ] Check where the water goes when it rains: drainage and fall
- [ ] Walk the boundary and look at fence condition and position
- [ ] Test the driveway with your actual car in mind
- [ ] Look for development potential next door and behind
- [ ] Note the distance to the nearest main road

BEFORE YOU LEAVE

- [ ] Photograph anything you'd want a builder to look at
- [ ] Check phone reception in the rooms you'd work from
- [ ] Drive past again at a completely different time of day
- [ ] Time the walk to the station or bus at your commute hour
- [ ] Ask yourself what you'd change in the first twelve months

WHY THIS MATTERS

On an older home for clients, a building and pest inspection found a **main floor bearer that had been cut during earlier plumbing work** and a ducted heating system that didn't run. Neither stopped the purchase — the report simply meant they paid a price that reflected the repairs.

Eight questions for the selling agent

Ask them calmly and in this order. The agent is not your enemy — they're simply working for the other side. What you're listening for is as important as what you ask.

1 **"Why are the vendors selling?"**

Listen for: a deadline. Already purchased elsewhere, a settlement to meet, a relocation. Motivation is leverage, and it's rarely about price.

2 **"What settlement would suit them?"**

Listen for: anything other than "standard". A settlement that suits the vendor can be worth more to them than another $20,000.

3 **"Have you received any written offers?"**

Listen for: the difference between "there's a lot of interest" and an actual written offer. Only one of those is a fact.

4 **"Has the contract been amended for anyone?"**

Listen for: changes already granted. If they've moved once, the terms are negotiable.

5 **"Has a building and pest inspection been completed?"**

Listen for: a report that already exists but isn't being offered. Always commission your own regardless.

6 **"What comparable sales did you use to set the quote range?"**

Listen for: whether the comparables are genuinely comparable — same pocket, same land, same condition, sold recently.

7 **"What would it take to buy it before auction?"**

Listen for: whether the vendor will consider it at all. Sometimes the whole campaign is winnable on a Tuesday.

8 **"What do you do if you receive an offer?"**

Listen for: the actual process. Every agency handles this differently — some take it straight to the vendor, some shop it to every other buyer first, some set a deadline. Knowing that before you write anything changes how you write it.

> A CAUTION
>
> Nothing an agent tells you replaces evidence. Verify comparables yourself, and read the Section 32 with your conveyancer. **Ask the questions, then check the answers.**

The Five-Comparable Method

A price guide is part of the marketing campaign. Market value is what informed buyers pay, supported by evidence. Find five genuinely comparable sales, then position your property against each one.

COMPARABLE ADDRESS	SOLD FOR	DATE	LAND	BED	CONDITION	BETTER OR WORSE?

IT IS NOT A COMPARABLE IF…

- [ ] It sits in a different school catchment
- [ ] The land size differs materially
- [ ] The street quality is clearly different
- [ ] One is renovated and the other isn't
- [ ] One fronts a main road and the other doesn't
- [ ] It's an apartment being compared to a townhouse
- [ ] It sold more than about six months ago
- [ ] It's in a different pocket of the same suburb

MY CONCLUSION, ON THE EVIDENCE

Low .... Likely .... High ....

MY ABSOLUTE CEILING $ ____________

WHY NOT JUST USE AN ONLINE ESTIMATE?

Automated valuations are built on properties that often aren't truly comparable in size, condition, pocket or recency. A range of **$1m to $1.3m** doesn't tell you what a home is worth. It tells you the model isn't sure.

The Pre-Offer Red Flag Checklist

The goal of due diligence isn't to find reasons not to buy. It's to make sure that whatever you're taking on, you're taking on knowingly.

TITLE AND LAND

- [ ] Easements — and what they prevent you building
- [ ] Covenants and single-dwelling restrictions
- [ ] Boundaries match the fences on the ground
- [ ] Zoning
- [ ] Planning and heritage overlays

THE BUILDING

- [ ] Independent building inspection
- [ ] Pest inspection
- [ ] Permits and approvals for past renovations
- [ ] Electrical and switchboard
- [ ] Plumbing, drainage and stormwater
- [ ] Roof and gutters
- [ ] Asbestos considerations in pre-1990 homes
- [ ] Everything works on the day: heating, cooling, hot water

THE AREA

- [ ] Flood risk
- [ ] Bushfire considerations
- [ ] Planning applications lodged nearby
- [ ] Road, rail or transport projects
- [ ] Noise at peak hour, not on a Saturday
- [ ] School catchment verified on Find My School

LEGAL AND CONTRACTUAL

- [ ] Section 32 Vendor Statement read in full
- [ ] Contract reviewed by a conveyancer or solicitor
- [ ] Owners corporation records, minutes and sinking fund
- [ ] Owner-builder warranty considerations
- [ ] Settlement terms understood and achievable
- [ ] Deposit amount and timing confirmed
- [ ] Finance position confirmed in writing

> **THE MOST VALUABLE CHECK I EVER RAN**
>
> A home ticked every box on paper. Due diligence turned up **an easement that would have blocked the extension** the clients were counting on. We walked away. That was the result — not a purchase.

The Offer Strategy Builder

The strongest offer isn't always the highest. It's usually the one that best meets the needs of both sides. Fill this in before you speak to the agent about numbers.

THE NUMBERS

Value on the evidence ....

Vendor's quoted range ....

My opening offer ....

My ideal purchase price ....

My walk-away ceiling ....

THE TERMS I CAN MOVE ON

Settlement length ....

Deposit ....

Conditions ....

Offer expiry ....

WHAT I KNOW ABOUT THE VENDOR

Why they're selling

....

What matters most to them

....

Where my leverage is

....

....

PRICE IS ONE LEVER OF FIVE

For an upgrading family in Doncaster we secured the home at **$2.6m against a $2.7m budget**, on a **120-day settlement**. That longer settlement suited both sides: the vendor got the time they needed, and delaying the loan drawdown saved the buyers roughly **$30,000** in interest. One negotiation, three wins — and only one of them was the price.

BEFORE YOU SEND IT

Put your ceiling in writing and tell someone else what it is. **A number you've said out loud is much harder to quietly move** at 9pm on a Thursday.

The Auction Game Plan

Auctions are designed to create pressure. The single best defence is deciding everything in advance, in a quiet room, with the evidence in front of you.

MY EVIDENCE-BACKED CEILING $ ____________

DECIDED BEFOREHAND

Who is bidding	....
Opening bid strategy	....
Preferred increments	....
Where I slow down	....
Where I stop, absolutely	....

ON THE DAY

- [ ] Deposit funds confirmed and available
- [ ] Contract already reviewed by my conveyancer
- [ ] Any contract variations requested in advance
- [ ] Building and pest already completed
- [ ] Bidder registration sorted
- [ ] Agreed that nobody present on the day can raise the ceiling
- [ ] Plan for if it passes in and we're the highest bidder

IF IT PASSES IN

If you're the highest bidder when a property passes in, you'll usually have the first opportunity to negotiate with the vendor. That can be valuable, but it doesn't mean you should bid simply to secure that position. The right strategy depends on the competition, the vendor's expectations and the leverage you may have after the auction. **Decide beforehand whether you need to be at the front of the negotiation, or whether you're better positioned to wait.**

THE LINE THAT MATTERS

Your maximum gets decided at the kitchen table. **Not on the footpath, with thirty people watching.**

Sometimes the best buying decision is not buying.

Walking away from a property you've become attached to is hard, especially after months of searching. But buying the wrong home because you're tired of looking costs far more than another few weekends of inspections.

ASK YOURSELF: WOULD I STILL WANT THIS HOME IF…

- [ ] …there were no other bidders at all?
- [ ] …the agent hadn't mentioned "huge interest"?
- [ ] …the styling and furniture weren't there?
- [ ] …another similar home appeared next weekend?
- [ ] …it needed $100,000 more work than expected?
- [ ] …I had to live in it for the next ten years?

WALK AWAY WHEN

The evidence doesn't support the price. Due diligence uncovers a risk you're not comfortable accepting. You're compromising on a genuine non-negotiable. Or you're making the offer because you're exhausted, not because it's the right home.

THE RESULT I'M PROUDEST OF

Clients found a home that ticked every box. Due diligence turned up an easement running through the block that would have blocked the extension they were planning in five years' time. We walked away. **They didn't buy a house that day. They bought back five years of their plans.**

The longer a search runs, the easier it becomes to lower your standards just to make it stop. That is when expensive mistakes happen.

ONE THING TO REMEMBER

There will always be another property. **There won't always be another chance to avoid the wrong one.**

Seven things Melbourne buyers get wrong.

1 **Searching before defining the brief**
The search doesn't start on realestate.com.au. It starts by deciding what success looks like, in writing, before the first inspection.

2 **Treating the quoted range as a valuation**
A price guide is a marketing decision. Market value is an evidence decision. They are produced by different people for different reasons.

3 **Comparing the wrong properties**
Different pocket, different land, different condition, sold nine months ago. Four bad comparables produce a confident, wrong number.

4 **Assuming every street in a suburb is equal**
They aren't, and the gap is often hundreds of thousands of dollars. Buy the pocket, not the postcode.

5 **Falling in love before due diligence**
Once you've mentally placed the furniture, every piece of bad news gets quietly discounted. Do the checks while you can still hear them.

6 **Negotiating price but ignoring terms**
Settlement, deposit and conditions are worth real money to a vendor. Buyers who only negotiate price leave the cheapest concessions on the table.

7 **Deciding the maximum during the negotiation**
A ceiling set under pressure isn't a ceiling. It's a starting point that moves every time somebody else raises their hand.

THE GOLDEN RULE

Don't make an offer until you can confidently answer all five questions. **Confidence doesn't come from guessing. It comes from understanding.**

Found a home you're serious about? Send it to me before you offer.

Send me the listing and a little about what you're looking for. I'll tell you what I'd be checking, what the comparable evidence suggests, and the questions I'd be asking the agent. No cost, no obligation, and an honest answer either way.

STEP ONE

Send the listing

The address or link, your budget, and whether it's auction or private sale.

STEP TWO

I review it

Comparable evidence, the risks I'd want checked, and the questions I'd ask.

STEP THREE

We talk it through

A relaxed 15-minute call. If I don't think you should buy it, I'll say so.

HOW TO SEND IT

Email the listing with the subject line **Reality Check** — or call and read me the address. Either works.

WHAT THAT CONVERSATION HAS LED TO

$110,000

under budget, in the school zone the family wanted. Vermont.

10 days

after two and a half years of searching alone. Croydon.

120 days

settlement built around the family, at $100k under budget. Doncaster.

$0 spent

on the home with the easement. Sometimes that is the result.

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Buying a home should be exciting.

For a lot of people it's stressful, overwhelming and full of uncertainty instead. That's why I do this.

My role isn't to convince anyone to buy property. It's to help people make better decisions. I work exclusively for buyers across Melbourne's eastern suburbs, helping families, professionals, downsizers and first home buyers purchase the right home with confidence.

Whether that's finding an off-market opportunity, assessing a property you've already found, negotiating with the selling agent, or bidding at auction, the focus is the same: save you time, reduce the stress, and keep you away from expensive mistakes.

I spent nearly twenty years working with animals, eight of them managing a team at Melbourne Zoo. It's an unusual path into property. It also taught me more about patience, risk and reading a situation calmly than any sales course ever could.

Justin Valentine

BUYERS ADVOCATE · MELBOURNE'S EASTERN SUBURBS

MY PHILOSOPHY

Educate first.
Evidence over opinion.
Understanding builds confidence.
Confidence leads to good decisions.

HOW I WORK

- [ ] Owner-occupiers only — never investors
- [ ] No referral fees or commissions from agents, ever
- [ ] Full Service is 1.5% of the purchase price, or lock the dollar figure in upfront
- [ ] Balance payable at settlement, not at exchange
- [ ] You work with me, start to finish

WHO I WORK WITH

- [ ] Families upgrading into more space or a school zone
- [ ] First home buyers who have been looking too long
- [ ] Downsizers who want the move handled properly
- [ ] Professionals whose weekends are worth more than the fee

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Before you make an offer, know what to check, what it's worth, and where your walk-away point is.

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HELPING OWNER-OCCUPIERS BUY WELL ACROSS MELBOURNE'S EASTERN SUBURBS