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make it comfy - Looks are only the beginning with sofas and chairs. The pieces must fit and be built to last.

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Have a seat.

A simple request, one would think. However, selecting just the right chair or sofa can be as complicated as choosing a mate. With so many styles, fabrics and price ranges to consider, where's a consumer to start? How about with fulfilling that most basic of human needs, comfort. "Comfort is relative," says interior designer and educator Anita Henson. "Look at the size of the space and the size of the people using the chair or sofa. (Then) have them sit on the piece and try out the seat height and depth." Putting a piece of upholstered furniture through a showroom test run serves two key purposes: It helps consumers find just the right "fit" and it allows them the chance to inspect the quality and craftsmanship of the product. To know whether it's a good match, consider Henson's advice: "To me, comfort means sitting down without having to adjust a pillow or cushion for my back. (That there is) firm support and comfortable arm height." Comfort also can be likened to a balancing act. "For a chair to be comfortable, it must be firm enough to support the sitter, but soft enough to relax in," says author Suzanne Trocme in her book, "The New Classics: Fresh Ideas For Rooms That Endure" (Stewart, Tabori & Chang, \$40). "Above all," Trocme says, "it must have the right pitch, the right degree of comfort and support in ergonomic terms." Quality and comfort are inexorably linked, for if a sofa or chair is constructed of substandard materials, the comfort level will be compromised. "Too often, upholstered sofas are bought with the emphasis on appearance - fabric, color, line and design - when workmanship and hidden materials are the key to quality

and comfort," she says. Look to the frame, cushioning, springs and fabric to help determine quality level. "The integrity of the frame is the most important thing," says Rudy De Leon, owner of Rudy's Custom Upholstery and Designs on McCullough Avenue. De Leon warns that some of today's furniture manufacturers cut corners by using plywood or particle board instead of harder, more durable wood. The American Furniture Manufacturers Association suggests that in addition to determining the type of wood used in the frame, inspect the joints to see if they have been reinforced, typically with blocks or small pegs. Beware of reinforcements that are stapled on rather than firmly secured by glue or screws, the group warns. When it comes to upholstered furniture, the stuffing counts. Look for cushions containing spring down (down encasing springs), foam down (foam with a down wrapping) and 100 percent down blended (pure goose down with little to no feathers), De Leon says. With at least 15 grades of foam from which to choose, lean toward "the blended, heavier foam with a good feel," he says, adding that a wise consumer will always ask what percentage is goose down (the higher the percentage, the higher the quality). On the other hand, if the cushions contain polyurethane foam, think density. The AFMA says density ratings of 1.8 to 2.5 indicate a quality piece of upholstered furniture. De Leon and the AFMA are on the same page when it comes to springs, agreeing that eight-way, hand-tied coils set the standard. Though there are other materials used for springs, including steel, in general, quality and cost will be determined by the number of springs and how they are tied. De Leon offers a drumlike technique to test out the coils. "Lift the skirt and hit the bottom of the furniture with your hand, to feel the coils," he says. Low quality will be evident by the "hollow feel." Fabric, the fourth component, embodies a multitude of elements including patterns, textures and colors, the options for which are limitless. Aesthetics aside, fabrics generally fall into one of two categories: natural or synthetic. Linen, cotton, wool, mohair, silk and leather are natural fibers, while the synthetics are made from acrylic, nylon, rayon and blends of these materials. Consider what room the furniture will go in when choosing a cover material, De Leon suggests. "I always recommend natural fibers for living room furniture," leaving the synthetics for family or TV rooms, he says. For many, style is just as important as comfort when choosing upholstered furniture. Luckily, consumers today can find both wrapped up in one package. One rule of thumb, though: "Look is important for a chair that is making a 'statement' - comfort is still the primary issue for casual seating," says Henson. Likewise, to get the most out of the furniture, consider how it is arranged in a room. Henson recommends first thinking about the room's function - is it formal or casual? Coordinating individual furniture items "begins with matching scale and proportion," Henson says. "Pieces should be compatible in size and style." Lastly, put imagination and creativity to work when considering what to put where. An ottoman might function better as a coffee table, and large cushions or pillows can serve as handy extra seats when needed. Don't overlook the versatility of sofa beds and even footstools as alternatives for seating, Henson says. With so

many things to keep in mind when shopping for upholstered furniture, simplify it by remembering this key point: Looks are nice, but it's what's inside that counts. Shopping list

FRAME * Ask the salesperson what materials were used to construct the frame. * Sit on the furniture to ensure that it doesn't creak, sag or wobble. * Peek underneath to check out coils and reinforcements. **FOUNDATION** * Ask the salesperson how the foundation was built, specifically what type of the coils or springs were used. **CUSHIONING** * Try it out. Sit and even stretch out on the cushions as you would at home to get the best idea if it's right for you. * Ask for information on what materials were used, whether it's down or foam. Also, ask about the material's grade or density. **FABRIC** * Ask what type of materials, natural or synthetic, were used. * Take a good look at the weave of the fabric (does it pull?) or the quality of the leather. Source: American Furniture Manufacturers Association

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