Digital television has spent most of the past decade as a moving target, and that's not likely to change for the next few years. But I think -- or maybe I just hope -- that if you keep those principles in mind, you don't have to buy a set now that will be outdated in a few years. If you're not sure what to look for, here's some advice.

**Analog TV** vs. **Digital TV**

Digital TV broadcasts can be received in a variety of ways -- over the air, or, for a much larger selection, via cable or satellite. But while any analog TV sold today only needs an antenna to tune into cable channels, many analog sets are not capable of receiving digital signals.

To display an HD picture if it's fed a digital signal by an external box -- a cable, satellite or off-air tuner. A set sold as "HD-ready" isn't ready for HD.

**Digital TV formats**

Many of the technologies I've mentioned here are new; CableCard sets, for instance, went on the market only at the beginning of last month. The Digital Television Transition Act of 2004 requires all new television sets to be digital-ready by July 1, 2009. This is an issue of technology, economics and politics: The technology keeps advancing, but the economics and politics are not nearly as advanced.

The Federal Communications Commission had to pick a standard in the mid-1990s, embracing all 18 formats available was the best it could do. But already, a few formats are in visible decline, and three others have been dropped.

There are two main HD formats: 720p and 1080i. Both are "progressive scan," which means that the entire picture is refreshed each 60th of a second, the way old-fashioned analog TV works. Both 720p and 1080i are wide-screen formats, with a 16:9 aspect ratio close to a movie-theater screen's proportions. The difference is in the resolution:

- **720p**: 1,280 pixels horizontal x 720 pixels vertical.
- **1080i**: 1,920 pixels horizontal x 1,080 pixels vertical.

If your set is "HD-capable," it should display 720p or 1080i images if they're available on your channels. If it only supports 480i (which uses 480 interlaced scan lines), is often marketed as "Enhanced Definition." But on those 42-inch plasmas, the difference between ED and HD won't be hard to spot. When in doubt, look up a set's spec sheet. The Commission had to pick a standard in the mid-1990s, embracing all 18 formats available was the best it could do. But already, a few formats are in visible decline, and three others have been dropped.

**HD and the "broadcast flag"**

Last year, the FCC unwisely voted to require that, as of July 1, 2005, any device capable of receiving a digital signal off the air must support the "broadcast flag." This scheme is supposed to stop full-quality copies of digital programs from circulating online. The idea is to boost the selection of HD shows available over the air and thus speed the digital transition (the government needs stations to switch to the spectrum).

If you buy too late, or you buy a set that's already flagged, there's still a way out of this copy-restriction mess. An HD set that includes a satellite tuner might be a good idea, but it doesn't exist. Sorry.

**Digital cable or digital satellite**

Rather than buy a set that doesn't have all the channels you want, consider getting one of those "cable-ready" analog sets that have an ATSC tuner after the Advanced Television Systems Committee that devised the digital system.

"Cable-ready" set-top boxes are coming. But the FCC has not yet required that all cable companies offer them. This is an issue of technology, economics and politics: The technology keeps advancing, but the economics and politics are not nearly as advanced.

For those already committed to digital, consider watching shows over the air if you have a "cable-ready" set and an ATSC tuner: Many big-name channels, including Fox, ABC, NBC, CBS, and ESPN, have moved their signals off the air.