

Using the Internet for... Shopping



Using the Internet for Shopping

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Lifesteps offers you a range of online and printed guides. Written by staff from Irish public libraries, each guide contains easy to follow, step by step explanations of how to use the Internet to achieve a specific goal or 'life step'.

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Introduction

This guide tells you how to shop for and buy things on the Internet. After completing the guide, you will be able to shop around for and then buy records, books and **consumer goods** online.

What is online shopping?

There are thousands of shops across the world that sell goods over the Internet. They accept payment by **credit card** and ship the goods to you by post or using a courier company.

Why shop online?

Price

Shopping online lets you **find and compare prices** across different shops and also across different countries. Online shops have low overheads (rent, etc.), which let them drop prices.

It is important to remember that you also have to pay shipping (post or courier) costs. These must be added to the price, to find out how much you actually pay.

Variety

Shopping online gives you access to a **huge variety** of goods, many of them not available on the high street. The more specialist your requirement, the more likely it is that the Internet will be a good place to find it. On the other hand, the stiff competition online means that consumer goods such as electronics, books, music and clothes are available at excellent prices.

What if it does not fit/breaks?

Care is needed if you are buying something online which you would usually need to touch before purchasing. Just like mail-order, it is tedious to **return** goods that do not fit and then wait for a new size.

For some goods, buying across borders may have an effect on **after-sales service and warranty**. A so-called '**grey market**' exists in some goods, where they are bought in a cheaper country and distributed in a more expensive country. Grey-market imports sometimes have warranty problems.

Where to buy from?

Due to the cost of shipping, buying goods from United States' online retailers is rarely worthwhile. Shipping, VAT and customs charges can double the base price, while returns are almost impossible. This means that, with a few exceptions, the EU is the best place to shop. While the UK has the obvious language advantage, it is often worth looking at sites from Germany, the Netherlands, France and Spain, where online shopping is big business, prices are in euro and the market is much larger than Ireland.

Need to Know

A basic familiarity with the Internet and PC is required. Also, given the enormous range of items available online, you should have a good idea of what you want to buy, or shopping may take a long time.

Need to Have

1. A **credit card** for payment.
2. A delivery address for shipping. There should be someone at the address during business hours; for this reason, many people have online purchases delivered to work, rather than home.

Related Guides

- 'Internet Basics' covers the 'Need to Know' requirements for this guide.
- The travel guide provides specific examples of shopping online for flights and accommodation, rather than durable or grocery goods.

Quick Guide

The following are the most important steps to buying something online:

1. Find sites selling what you want. Consider particularly sites in the UK, Germany, France and Spain, as well as in Ireland.
2. Find the best price, combined with the best shipping costs.
3. Read the terms and conditions carefully. In particular, check the **returns policy**, who pays for postage and support for manufacturer warranties.
4. Decide if this is really any better than **buying locally**.
5. Add the item you want to your shopping list or **basket**.
6. Proceed to the **checkout**.
7. Fill in your name and address and shipping destination.
8. Pay by credit card.
9. Receive goods.

Step-by-Step Guide

This section of the guide focuses on the purchase of consumer goods (CDs, books, electronics, etc.). The example used is buying the book *The Lord of the Rings* by JRR Tolkien.

Step 1: Finding the right site

You need to find sites on the Internet that sell books. To do this, use a search engine such as Google (www.google.com).

For this guide, let us suppose that your most promising result is Amazon at <http://www.amazon.co.uk>

Step 2: Prices and shipping

First, find out what the shop is charging. If at all possible, get the prices in euro.

Search

To find the actual prices, you will have to search the shop for the item you are looking for. Pretty much every online shop has a **search form** on the front page, to help you find the products they sell.

For example, the Amazon one looks like this:



Third party price lists

A number of online services exist that collect and compare prices for similar goods on the Internet. They aim to give the user the best price, while benefiting from advertising revenue. Good examples are kelcoo (www.kelcoo.com) and pricingcentral (www.pricingcentral.com) and Google's Froogal service (www.froogle.google.com).

Click into results

Enter the name of the book you are looking for and a page of results is returned. You can click on the book you want to buy, to get full details, including price, for the book.

As an example, here are Amazon (UK)'s results:

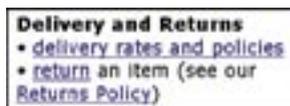


Remember books, for example, come out in paperback and hardback, special editions, boxed sets, etc. Using a unique number like the **ISBN** while searching may help.

Shipping Costs

Practically every online shop gives the shopper an indication of shipping prices, on an appropriately named page.

Amazon.co.uk has a suitable link at the bottom of the screen:



Exploring this indicates a delivery cost of £5 or about €7.50 for a total cost of €23.50.

Step 3: Read terms and conditions

Almost every online shop will list its terms and conditions. It is important to understand who bears the costs of returns, how support or complaints are dealt with, etc.

Step 4: Is this better than buying locally?

You should now consider whether or not it would be better to buy locally.

In this case there is no advantage to buying this book online. It is cheaper to buy it in the shop.

However, if you were buying CDs, the prices online are often a deciding factor. A chart CD costs £9 or €13 on CD-WOW (www.cdwow.com), including shipping. The same CD costs from €16 to €21 in Dublin shops.

However, let us continue with our purchase of *The Lord of the Rings* at Amazon.

Step 5: Add to basket

Online shops typically have a button or link that you click in order to buy a product. In the case of Amazon, it is a button that says . In many sites, it looks like a shopping trolley or basket.

The computer running the online shop adds this to a list of items that you are interested in. Each time you add an item to the basket, the computer

remembers this. You can always remove items from your basket at the checkout, if you change your mind.

In general, it is cheaper to buy many things at once, because the cost per item for shipping goes down.

Step 6: Proceed to checkout

Having finished shopping, proceed to the checkout. This means that, like in a shop, you can decide at any time that you have enough in your basket. The appropriate button is often at the top or bottom of the screen.



This brings you to a screen where all your chosen purchases can be reviewed. This lets you take things back out of your basket, ask for multiple copies of the same thing, etc.



Clicking on the **'Proceed to checkout'** button on the right brings you to the first part of the checkout, where you sign in. This signing-in process allows Amazon to create a **user account**. This only needs to be done once; in the future Amazon will 'remember' who you are, so that you do not have to fill in your details again.

Step 7: Enter name and address

The precise details of the **signing-in** or **'registration'** process are different from one online shop to the next. Basically, the shop needs to know where to send the goods that you buy, and it needs to check that the credit card you use for payment actually belongs to you.

Ordering from Amazon.co.uk is quick and easy

Enter your e-mail address:

I am a new customer.
(You'll create a password later)

I am a returning customer,
and my password is:

[Forgot your password?](#) [Help](#) [Sign out](#)

Amazon.co.uk Auto Shipping Guarantee
We guarantee that every transaction you make at Amazon.co.uk will be safe. This means you are entering a guaranteed, uncontracted change are made to your credit or debit card in a matter of hours at Amazon.co.uk.

Any online shop will ask for an e-mail address. This is where a confirmation e-mail will be sent, telling you that your order has been received.

Enter the delivery address for this order

Enter the name and address you'd like your order to be delivered to. Please indicate also whether your home address is the same as the delivery address entered. When finished, click the "Continue" button. Or, if you're sending items to more than one address, click the "Add another address" button to enter additional addresses.

Full Name:

Address Line 1:

Address Line 2:

Town/City:

County:

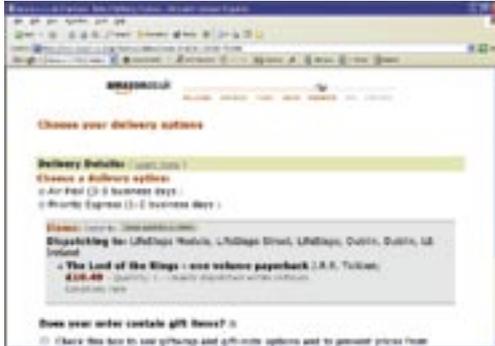
Postcode:

Country:

Phone Number:

In common with any other mail order process, a delivery address is required, so that Amazon knows where to send the goods. **It may be worthwhile to use a work address, since parcels often do not fit through letter-boxes, leading to delays if no-one is at home.**

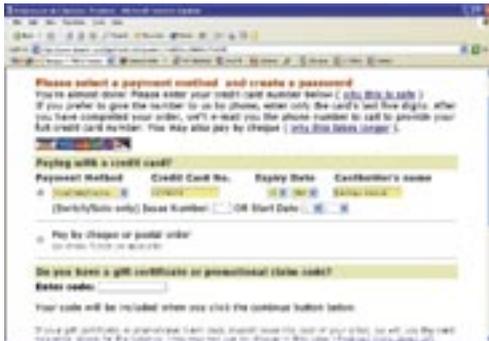
Most online shops expect you to enter a postcode, and for many this address field is mandatory. However, a 'fake' value such as 'none' is usually sufficient.



Step 8: Pay by credit card

A credit card is essential for payment. The online shop will generally forward you to a **secure server** for payment. This means that the credit card information that you enter will be encrypted by your **Web browser** and so will not be visible to potential **online attack**. A secure connection can be recognised by the presence of a small padlock at the right of the **status bar** at the bottom of your screen: 

Online shops will often allow you to provide credit card information over the phone if you are not happy to use a secure server.



Amazon checks the credit card while you wait and then confirms that your payment is complete. **You should do nothing (click no buttons, etc.) while your credit card is being checked. This can lead to uncertainty as to whether the payment transaction is completed or not.**

Glossary

- Basket:** An online shop creates a 'virtual shopping basket' of all the items you choose when shopping. This basket is a list of the items, including their cost.
- Buying locally:** Buying goods in a 'real' shop, on the street, where you see and touch the goods before purchase.
- Checkout:** The screen where your purchases are listed out for your approval, prior to payment. In many online shops, the checkout is also where the online shop system calculates your shipping charges.
- Confirmation email:** An email sent to you by an online shop, airline or other website, which confirms the details of a transaction you have just completed. A confirmation email will typically review what you have just purchased, as well as giving additional information such as a flight reference, or delivery details. A confirmation email remains available in the longer term (once you receive an email, you can print it out, save it, etc.), and is typically used as a record of a web-based transaction, which is no longer visible after you leave a website.
- Consumer goods:** Goods that are aimed at the mass consumer market. Good examples are electronics, books and CDs, clothing, sports equipment, etc. This allows you to shop with confidence overseas. Some countries use different standards and systems to others. For example, 'Region 1' DVDs do not play on many Irish DVD players, and 'SECAM' televisions do not work in Ireland.

- Credit card:** Most online shops accept Visa and Mastercard credit cards. A majority also accept American Express and Diners Club, while some also take lesser-known cards such as JCB, etc.
- Forwarded to a secure server:** It is common for small online shops not to handle credit cards themselves, because of the cost of security measures. Instead, they send ('forward') the user to a company that specialises in handling credit card transactions, where you make the payment. Such companies use secure servers to protect your credit card details. Afterwards, the payments website tells the shop website that your payment has gone through and your order can be shipped.
- Grey market:** Global consumer goods producers often set different prices for their products in different countries. Some businesses buy wholesale goods in one country and then sell them on a retail basis in a 'more expensive' country. This is referred to as 'the grey market'. While not usually illegal, it is not what the producers intended.
- ISBN:** The unique number on every edition of every book that identifies it. Useful if you are looking for a particular edition of a particular book.
- Online attack:** The possibility exists for malicious people to eavesdrop on, and to intercept, communications going from computer to computer across the Internet. This is not easy to do and is relatively rare, since finding the right information to attack in the 'chatter' on the Internet is difficult, and the rewards are small.
- Return:** An item sent back to the shop (usually by post), for repair or replacement.

Returns policy:

Shops have rules under which they are prepared to allow you to return goods to them. In many cases, returns are limited to seven days after receipt of goods. While local shops are governed by national legislation such as the Sales of Goods Acts, these often do not apply across national borders.

Search:

Searching is the process of finding a particular word or topic within a website or on the Internet. When you search, you type in one or more words which describe what you are searching for, and a search engine program looks up a database and shows a list of links to pages that may match what you are looking for. When you search, it is up to you to have some idea of what you are looking for – you have to type in the words to search for. Searches vary in scope – many websites allow you to search the site and all its pages; bigger search engines such as Google allow you to search the whole Internet. Typing CTRL-F lets you search the Web page you are looking at.

Secure server:

A secure server is a web server that encrypts all the information being sent between your PC's web browser (Internet Explorer, Mozilla Firefox, etc.) and the server itself. The encryption process means that sensitive information, such as credit card details, cannot be 'eavesdropped upon' or monitored by third parties who might use it illegally. Secure servers use URLs (Web addresses) that start with 'https://' instead of 'http//'; they also show a security symbol such as a padlock in the status bar at the bottom of the browser window.

Signing in/Registration:

Signing in (or logging in), involves typing in your name and your password. Then, the online shop 'knows' who you are and can automatically fill out forms, etc. for you. Usually done the first time that you shop in the online shop.

Status bar:

The bottom line of a browser window. Usually, this is blank, except for 'Internet' on the lower right (when you are online) and a small logo at the bottom left. When connected to a secure server, a small padlock appears on the lower right.

User account:

Each online shop creates a record of your name, your email, your address, a password and (sometimes) the items that you have bought in the past. Creating an account is called 'registration'. These records are called 'user accounts'.

Web browser:

A computer program, running on the human user's PC, which gets information from web servers and displays it on the screen. These instructions are usually in the computer language HTML.

Links

For more website links please see our website at www.lifesteps.ie

Final Notes

The process of shopping online is relatively simple, once you have done it a couple of times. There are, of course, shop websites that are difficult to use and hard to find your way around, but in general the basic layout and logic is the same for all.

Many overseas shops provide a full English-language version of their sites – look for the UK or American flag icons.

Shopping online makes an enormous range of items available for purchase. For variety and convenience it is hard to beat. For the comfort of seeing and touching before you buy, there is no substitute for traditional street shopping.