

The Ivy House

Home Cinema: Frequently Asked Questions

The following list of questions represents some of the most commonly raised queries and areas of confusion surrounding the world of 'home cinema' or 'home theatre'. Whilst not exhaustive, we hope that this information will prove helpful. Please feel free to send any other relevant questions to enquires@the-ivy-house.com so that we may add to this list.

Q: I've heard people using the expressions 'home cinema' and 'home theatre'. What do these actually mean?

A: The expression 'home cinema' or 'home theatre' simply refers to a video entertainment system in the home which goes beyond plugging a DVD player into a television set. Generally, the use of one of these terms would imply that the user has a large television or plasma screen or even a dedicated projector in their home. It is also likely that the sound from the video source product (e.g. the DVD player) is routed through one or more external amplifiers to multiple speakers in the room, instead of coming from the television. A home cinema system does not necessarily have to be in a dedicated room in the home, although some people do go to extraordinary lengths to reproduce the feel of a cinema in their homes, but it does generally require an additional investment in loudspeakers, at the very least.

Q: I want to buy a good quality DVD player for my system but I am confused by the badges which appear on the front of different models. How important are these?

A: Most DVD players also play audio CDs. The two most prominent badges on the front of a DVD player are therefore likely to be the "DVD Video" symbol and the "CD" symbol. Other badges generally relate to the audio formats that the player supports and can decode. Examples would include:

- DTS Surround
- Dolby Digital
- DVD-Audio
- THX

Many consumers use these badges to create a shopping list of "must haves" when researching a new purchase. However, it is important to understand what each of these formats and standards is and actually does. With advice from a good retailer or specialist installer, you may discover that a format or standard you previously considered essential turns out not to be important to product performance or appropriate for your proposed system after all!

There are many web sites offering an unbiased and impartial view of the merits and limitations of the many formats available.

Q: I've heard a lot of people talking about "Progressive Scan". What is it and is it important?

A: Progressive Scan is another product 'badge' that people refer to when conducting their product research. The term simply refers to the way that an image is created on a screen. Traditional TV sets display an image using a process called "Interlace Scanning", whereby 2 'fields' of 400 horizontal lines are drawn per frame, one after the other, interlacing about 30 times per second.



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Progressive Scan involves scanning the image from top to bottom in one pass. Whilst this may seem more attractive, it is crucial to note that Progressive Scan is only compatible with HDTV (High Definition Digital Television) products. If you do not own an HDTV television set or product, there is little point in actively seeking out a DVD player which features Progressive Scan functionality - you will not see any real benefit. Many TV's now offer 100Hz scanning, which is considered an equal alternative to Progressive scan since the 100Hz refresh rate results in a complete absence of flicker.

Q: I have a DVD player but am not satisfied with the image from my TV. What new TV should I buy?

A: This depends on quality of image that you are looking for, your budget and the features that you feel are important. There is a very wide range of large CRT, flat screen and plasma screen televisions on the market today and your local retailer or specialist installer should be able to help you choose the most appropriate model for you. At the top end of the spectrum, digital projectors currently offer the best possible image quality available.

Q: I have a large television and a DVD player. How many loudspeakers should I buy?

A: It depends on your budget and the quality of audio performance that you want for your home. The maximum number of loudspeakers you are likely to buy is currently six. However, the following options are all possible:

- Buying two speakers for the front of room will give you two-channel stereo sound.
- Buying an additional 'centre' channel speaker, which usually sits between the two front channels directly facing you as you watch the screen, adds an additional dimension to the movie experience.
- Adding two 'rear' or 'side' channel speakers, which sit behind you as you face the screen, helps to add surround sound to your movie.
- Adding a bass reinforcement loudspeaker, or 'sub-woofer' as it is often called, will add an extra dimension again. These speakers reproduce the lowest frequencies of a movie's audio track and are responsible for the bass 'rumbles' that you feel at the cinema during, for example, explosions or crashes.

Most DVD players have "set up" menus which allow you to tell the player how many external loudspeakers you have - this helps the player to correctly 'allocate' the audio signal on the DVD disc to the right loudspeakers.

The audio track on most current DVD discs is encoded in Dolby DTS Surround - this can be decoded by a compatible DVD player into 6 distinct channels: two front, two rear, one centre and one bass reinforcement. This is referred to as 5.1 channel decoding (the .1 relating to the bass reinforcement segment of the audio signal). A typical 5.1 set-up therefore looks like this:



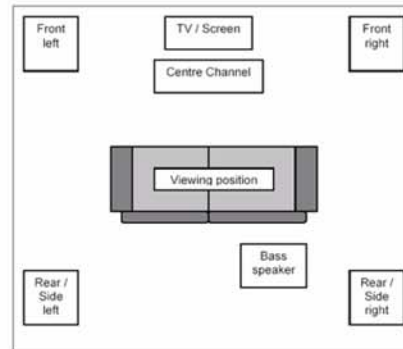
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A typical 5.1 Channel configuration

The industry standard for home cinema is currently 5.1 channel sound. However, a new 7.1 format is likely to emerge in the future. This 7.1 format, when available, will require an additional two loudspeakers placed at either side of the viewing position.

Many manufacturers produce home cinema loudspeaker packages comprising all 6 speakers required for a 5.1 configuration. Alternatively, you may prefer to buy speakers over time. As a general rule, however, it is worth choosing speaker models from the same manufacturer to ensure consistency of tone

Q: Will I need to buy an external amplifier or amplifiers?

A: Whilst not always essential, additional amplification will help to improve the quality of sound from your home cinema system. One or more amplifiers will amplify the audio signal from the DVD player before it arrives at the loudspeakers - this means that more of the signal will be outputted by the loudspeakers (some of a signal's energy is invariably lost through the act of having to 'drive' the loudspeakers) and the sound quality will therefore be higher.

Q: Can you give me any tips regarding placing my system in a room?

A: This is a difficult question - there are many opinions on to how to configure your system to get the best possible sound, and on the topic of loudspeaker placement and positioning in particular. However, when setting up your system there are a few general principles that we would recommend following:

- Try to ensure that your television or screen is not positioned close to any light sources, e.g. floor standing lamps. These can cause reflection on the screen which can detract from the image.
- If your system includes two front speakers and a centre channel speaker, try to keep all three speakers the same distance away from your viewing position and at the same height.

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- Ensure that the front and centre speakers are magnetically shielded so that they do not interfere with / distort the image on your screen if they are placed close to it.
- If possible, the centre speaker should be placed below your screen, rather than on top of it.
- Rear speakers should also be at the same height as the front speakers and situated the same distance away from the viewing position if possible.
- The bass reinforcement loudspeaker can be positioned to the side of, or behind the viewing position since the bass signal is 'non-directional'. Close to a side wall or behind the viewing seat are good positions if possible.

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