

BIKE-BUYING FAQs

Q · DO YOU GET WHAT YOU PAY FOR?

↳ Up to a point, yes. More expensive bikes have better quality components and lighter frames and forks made out of carbon fibre or titanium, which will make them quicker and slicker to ride. But if you're not bothered about going particularly fast and never anticipate having to lug your bike up stairs or over railway bridges, you'll be wasting your money on a top-notch machine. Light doesn't always equal best – if your route to work is strewn with potholes, you'll want something sturdy to cope with it, and the heavier it is, the less nickable it is too.

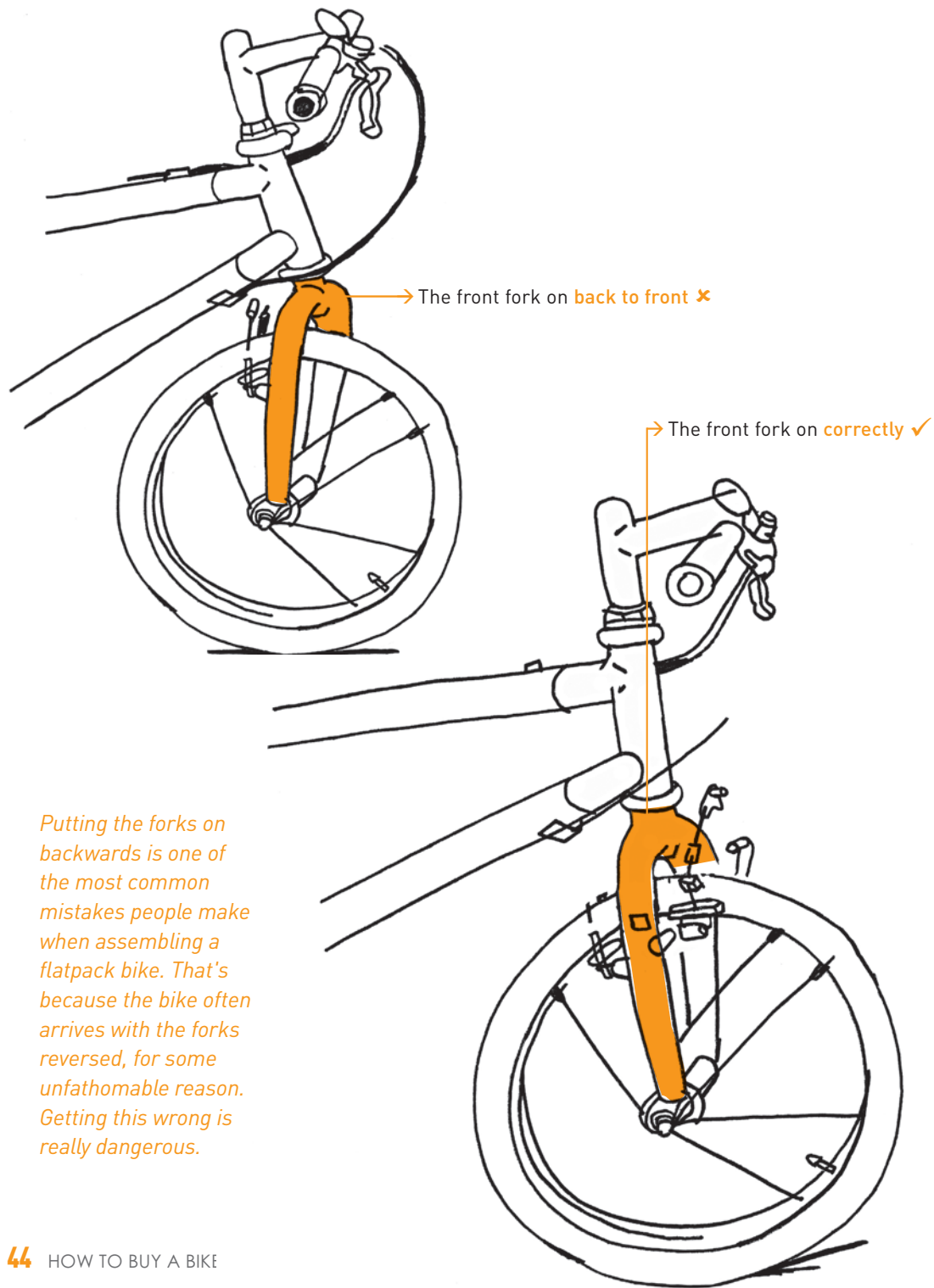
Sometimes, you pay extra simply because the bike looks cool. The style over substance problem tends to plague the fixed-gear and Dutch bike market most. That said, there is no point buying a really cheap new bike. Buy cheap, buy twice – as I discovered road testing 'Britain's cheapest bike'.

Test riding Britain's cheapest bike

In 2009, the supermarket Asda began selling what it called 'Britain's cheapest bike'. For just £70, customers could walk away with a brand-new adult's bike. I decided to get hold of one – an eighteen-speed British Eagle mountain bike in a girlish purple shade.

My first outing on the Purple Eagle ended on a sour note when the handlebars started turning in an entirely unhelpful way every time I rounded a corner. The headset – the bit which attaches the handlebars to the frame – was horribly loose, and I had no tools on me to fix it. Herein lies the first problem with buying what bike snobs refer to as a BSO (bike-shaped object): you have to build it yourself. The Eagle comes in bits, meaning you have to attach the pedals, front wheel, handlebars and saddle to the frame. Are you sure you know how to put it together? If not, you can either take it to your local bike dealer and hope they won't laugh you out of the shop when you ask them to do it for you (and if they oblige, you'll pay at least £20 for it), or risk getting it wrong.

The second problem was the flimsy grip-shift gears, which are operated by twisting the end of the handlebars. Every time I went over a speed bump I changed gear; even on the flat, there was always an irritating clicking sound which spoiled every ride. The problems didn't end there. The pedals and brakes were plastic, rather than metal, and so sure to wear out within weeks. And despite being a ladies' bike, it came with a torturously uncomfortable men's saddle. The front wheel wasn't even properly round. When I wheeled it into my local bike shop, the owner groaned – 'We see these a couple of times a week, and so often the repairs cost more than the bike,' he said, adding that he gave me 'four to six weeks' before the bike was too jiggered to ride.



Putting the forks on backwards is one of the most common mistakes people make when assembling a flatpack bike. That's because the bike often arrives with the forks reversed, for some unfathomable reason. Getting this wrong is really dangerous.

Q · DO I NEED GEARS?

↳ When I was growing up, my friends and I all believed the more gears our bikes boasted the better – ‘Yours has only got eighteen? Mine has twenty-four’ went our conversations, until somebody claimed to have a billion trillion gears. But most people don’t need all that many. For general pootling about, three are often enough; perhaps seven at a push. I have twenty-four on my road bike and regularly use only about eight of them. Although single speed bikes have experienced a bit of a renaissance of late, gears remain a handy thing for a bike to have. If you live near a big hill, it’s good to have a low gear to get to the summit and a high one to race down it and along the flats. There are two common gear systems:

Hub gears

Most often used on Dutch bikes and folding bikes or other machines with no more than eight gears, hub gears are encased within the hub of the bicycle’s rear wheel. Gears are changed by a cable, which is tightened or loosened by a lever or twist grip on the handlebars. They need less maintenance than derailleurs because the mechanism is sealed in the hub, and you can change gear even if you’re not pedalling – this is useful if you find yourself sitting at traffic lights in too high a gear to pedal off. The other advantage is that hub gears can be covered with a chain guard, protecting your clothes from oil and grease, and the chain won’t come off. But if something goes wrong, they’re a nightmare to mend, and you usually get a low gear ratio, which means you don’t have a wide range of gears to play with when switching between hills and fast, flat stretches. NB: sometimes hub gears are called Sturmey Archers, the brand name of one of the first widely manufactured types. A particularly flashy kind of hub gear is made by the German manufacturer Rohloff, which offers fourteen gears.

Derailleur gears

Commonly used on bikes with more than three gears, the derailleur system consists of a rear derailleur and front derailleur controlled by levers or twist grips on the handlebars. The rear mech (short for ‘mechanism’, but always referred to as a ‘mech’) shifts the chain between sprockets/cogs on the back wheel; the front mech shifts between two or three chain rings attached to the crank arm, which is what your pedals are stuck on to. The big plus with derailleurs is that you get a wide range of gears, which means you are equally well disposed to climbing hills as bombing it along the flats. They are also relatively easy to tinker with.

Q. WHAT SORT OF BRAKES DO I NEED?

- Any will do. Unless you're going to get a bike built to your specification, you'll likely have to live with whatever sort of brakes your bike comes with, which are probably one of these three types:

Calliper brakes

Common on road bikes, hybrids, Dutch bikes and folders, calliper brakes work by squeezing a lever on the handlebars. This forces the arms of the callipers to move together and make the brake pads squeeze the rim of the tyre. They are light and easy to maintain, but aren't so good in the rain.

Disc brakes

Originally used on motorbikes, disc brakes are used most often on mountain bikes ridden off-road, though you occasionally see them on other bicycles. Disc brakes consist of a metal disc attached to the wheel hub that rotates with the wheel. They work well in wet or muddy conditions and usually require less maintenance than rim brakes. The downer with these is that their design and positioning sometimes preclude the use of many types of luggage racks. They are also quite expensive.

Coaster brakes

Common on Dutch bikes, these are operated by pedalling backwards. Because the mechanism is not open to the elements, they perform well in rain or snow – but if something does go wrong, they're a pain to fix. They take some getting used to as well.

Q. WHAT'S THE POINT OF A CROSSBAR?

- A crossbar, the tube which runs horizontally between the seat post and the handlebar stem on most bikes, is primarily there for engineering purposes: it makes the frame structurally more sound. Traditional ladies' bikes tend not to have a crossbar, but instead have a 'step-through' frame, designed back in the day so that the whole world didn't catch a glimpse of a woman's bloomers when she climbed aboard. It also facilitates that jaunty move you see postmen doing in films, where they ride with both feet on one side of the bike so they can hop on and off quickly.

There is no law decreeing that women should not ride bikes with crossbars, or that men may not benefit from a step-through frame. Anyone with back or hip problems will find it much easier to get on a bike without a crossbar. Unisex Dutch bikes tend not to have crossbars, and neither do folding bikes.

Q. SHOULD WOMEN BUY WOMEN'S BIKES?

- Not necessarily. Everyone should buy a bike that fits them and suits their purposes. Ladies' bikes tend to have slightly different proportioned frames to take into account the fact women often have relatively longer torsos and shorter legs than men. They may also have a downward sloping crossbar, or no crossbar at all, and a special, wider saddle made to accommodate a womanly rear.

Q. DO I NEED SUSPENSION?

- Only if you're planning on doing some serious off-roading. Suspension is used primarily on mountain bikes, but you occasionally see it implemented on road or hybrid bikes. It is unnecessary for urban riding, however many potholes or speed bumps you encounter on your commute.