SIGNING up to a broadband plan was once as painful and complicated as choosing a mobile phone plan. Intense competition has cut prices and led to simpler plans that are much easier to compare.

There are more than 230 internet service providers in Australia, ranging from suburban corner shops to national telcos.

The best service is not necessarily the cheapest. Some ISPs will try to cram too many users as possible into bandwidth they have bought wholesale from Telstra. Conversely, a big name or an expensive plan does not guarantee good service.

There are cheap deals that provide good network performance, so it pays to do your homework.

Moving from dial-up to broadband means buying a DSL or cable modem. Cut-price ISPs will sometimes throw in a DSL modem for free to sweeten a six-month minimum deal.

However, these no-cost modems invariably connect only through the USB port, which is less efficient than an ethernet connection. ISPs that prioritise performance refuse to sell USB modems at all.

Many households will have more than one computer and it is worth buying a modem with ports for four computers. This is simpler than buying a separate router and creating a home network yourself.

It is possible to buy a modem separately but as there are so many models ISPs will recommend one or two brands over the rest.

Going with the recommended modem means you will get the best help-desk support. If your modem isn't on the preferred list it may be painful troubleshooting for yourself. Sites such as ozcableguy.com are helpful for tips and hints on setting up a broadband connection.

Plans usually have a monthly rate. This may be as cheap as $19.95 monthly, and is kept as low as possible to lure customers.

The figure can be deceptive. Unlike dial-up, ISPs charge for the amount of data you receive in the form of web pages, emails, videos, files, and so on.

A monthly rate buys a base limit, which can be as little as 200MB. Anything over is charged at rates around 15c a megabyte.

The base amount may seem a lot for a dial-up user, but if you develop an appetite for music files watch out for a ballooning bill.
Most ISPs obligingly cap excess download charges when the total bill reaches three times the monthly rate.

Some deals offer all-you-can-eat plans for a fixed monthly fee.

Examining the fine print reveals that once you reach your monthly allocation the speed of the connection drops as low as 56Kbps.

This brake on excessive downloading is removed when the amount of received data drops below the pre-paid amount within a calendar month. Shaping may be inconvenient, but at least it avoids a nasty surprise when the bill arrives.

Independent broadband news website www.whirlpool.net.au <http://www.whirlpool.net.au> has an extensive list of ISPs and what they offer.

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