

# LEATHER FURNITURE BACK TO THE BASICS

by Pat Sullivan, Owner - Choice Leather Furniture

Over the years, I've written many articles pointing out the various things you need to know in order to make an informed decision when buying furniture - most particularly leather furniture. But for this article let's go back to the "Basics".

So, what are the "Basics" in buying leather furniture?

Glad you asked!

One very important Basic in leather is understanding leather "Grading". Why, because it's very important and it's also very confusing.

The Grade (quality) of the leather has a huge impact on the price of a sofa (or chair or whatever the leather is covering).

Leather comes in an infinite number of quality levels - which makes sense when you consider leather is natural and no two cows are exactly the same. Consider a South Texas cow - out in the elements all their life, getting bit by all sorts of bugs, rubbing up against bushes, trees, barbed wire, etc. Their hide is usually in bad shape.

Compare that to a cow that comes from Scandinavia (or other cold climates), they spend most of their life in a barn - getting fed grain (and getting fatter). Their hide is larger and as close to pristine as you'll find. It's between these two extreme examples you will find most of the leathers being put on furniture.

Grading is a method manufacturer's use to price different leathers. For example, leather called "full aniline" or "pure aniline" (a third name is "naked leather") are the best of the best and will be assigned the highest grade by the manufacturer. The "hand" (feel) of these leathers is like butter and consequently the most expensive (but they're not for everyone, keep reading.....).

The leather from the South Texas cow will be a very low grade - it will have extensive artificial corrections including faux graining (embossing) in order to make it acceptable for furniture. It will have lots of pigment (paint) and a heavy sealer coating of polyurethane (protection). The hand will be the worst - it may even feel like vinyl. But it's not vinyl - its top grain leather. Top grain only means the outer surface of the hide - the part where the hair used to be. So, just because it's called "top" does NOT mean "best". The best leathers are top grain but not all top grain leathers are the best. Got that?

**Important Point:** just because one leather costs more or has a higher grade than another doesn't make it the best for your home and your lifestyle. Most active families will not be happy with the performance of full/pure/naked aniline leathers when used in their gathering areas - like the family room with the TV.

Now, here's where leather Grading gets confusing - there is no such thing as "Standardized Grading" by manufacturers of leather furniture. Some manufacturers use numbers to denote a grade (quality level) others use letters, some use names. If you compare one maker's numbers against another's - it will only get you in trouble. I know one manufacturer that starts their grade levels at "5" as their lowest grade and goes to "50" (highest) moving in five unit increments (ie: 5, 10, 15, etc.). Then another manufacturer grades "1" (lowest) thru "5" (highest). So a "5" from the first manufacturer is their lowest or entry level grade of leather and a "5" from the other is their most expensive leather. You can't compare one manufacturer's grading system to another because there's no standardization.

Here's the best advice I can give anyone trying to make sense of leather grading - break all leathers into 3 categories using the anachronism P.A.N.:

"P" = Painted, Pigmented or Protected

"A" = Aniline

"N" = Nubuk

The "P" category is the entry (lowest) level for top grain leather. After tanning, this leather has so many imperfections that it requires paint (or pigment - they're the same thing) to cover the imperfections. Any time paint is used to color leather a protective sealer coat must be (cont.)

applied (protected). These will be your least expensive leathers and the easiest to take care of - but they will have the least desirable "hand" (see the example of the South Texas cow above).

Good question to ask a salesperson,

"Does this leather have any paint used in its coloring".

The "A" or Aniline category is a better leather that does not require painting to cover imperfections - it has been dyed all the way through the hide with a vegetable oil dye. Many "P" grade leathers are aniline dyed but they still require paint to cover all the imperfections - the "A" category has no paint.

This category can be "Full" or "Pure" Aniline (see above) - the softest, most supple hide available (most expensive too). The drawback is they are also the most porous and can stain easily.

A more user friendly "A" category leather is a "Semi" Aniline or Aniline "Plus" (they mean the same thing). This is leather with no paint used in coloring (allowing all the natural "beauty marks" in the hide to show) but after dyeing, it is coated with a protective product that makes it less porous and much easier to live with. This protective coating is NOT polyurethane - making for a softer leather. These represent the best of both worlds - a leather that has a nice hand but will have much greater resistance to stains. They also cost less than most pure/full anilines but are more than leathers in the "P" category.

Good question to ask a salesperson,

"Does this leather have a surface protection? Most do.

Finally, Category "N" - this is Nubuk leather. Nubuk is leather that has been brushed with a device that cuts into the top grain leaving a nap or suede like feel. While Nubuk leathers have a great hand, they are very difficult to maintain and most manufacturers have gotten away from offering Nubuk due to numerous consumer problems.

Good question to ask a salesperson,

"Can you show me something that's not Nubuk?"

Each grade of leather needs to be fully understood in order to get the correct leather for your specific home and lifestyle. This may be difficult when shopping "Big Box" stores where the sales people don't understand leather well enough to correctly recommend the right leather for your home and your lifestyle (for instance- pets are okay with leather, but only if it's the right leather). Find a store that specializes in leather furniture to get the right answers.

Last, there's no grade for Bonded, Blended or BiCast Leather - the reason there is no grade is that they are NOT leather. Everywhere you sit is vinyl and it's not unusual in a short time the vinyl will start peeling, (reminds me of what happens when you get a bad sunburn!!). Stay away from this stuff - buy either real leather or fabric.

I've always said there are only 2 things that make up the price on any piece of upholstered furniture -

1. What You See

2. What You Don't See

Today we discussed "What You See" - next issue we'll discuss "What You Don't See" - the Internal Construction (framework assembly, support system and cushioning). Can't wait? Call or email me.

For additional information visit the Leather Learning Center on our website at

[www.choiceleatherleather.com](http://www.choiceleatherleather.com)

Until then, Best wishes and

*"Thanks for shopping locally with family owned businesses!"*