A Primer for Investing in Bonds

Bonds belong in your investment plan for a number of good reasons

For a variety of reasons, Americans are increasingly making bonds an important part of their investments. Bonds are basically IOUs, but they’re more complex than this popular abbreviation suggests. One way to learn about investing in bonds is with the booklet A Primer for Investing in Bonds. Here’s a sample of information in the booklet:

A bond is basically a loan issued by a corporation or government entity. The issuer pays the bondholder a specified amount of interest for a specified time, usually several years, and then repays the bondholder the face amount of the bond.

Bonds may belong in your investment plan for a number of good reasons:

- Bonds can provide a predictable stream of relatively high income.
- Bonds offer an opportunity to spread your risk.
- Bonds can generate profits from capital gains.
- Bonds can provide valuable tax advantages.

Note that the word “safety” doesn’t appear on this list.

How Do Bonds Work, Anyway?

Bonds are IOUs issued by corporations (both domestic and foreign), state and city governments and their agencies, the federal government and its agencies and foreign governments. They are issued for periods as short as a few months to as long as 30 years, occasionally even longer.

When you buy a bond, you become a creditor of the issuer; that means the issuer owes you the amount shown on the face of the bond, plus interest. (Bonds typically have a face value of $1,000 or $5,000, although some come in larger denominations.) You get a fixed amount of interest on a regular schedule—every six months, in most cases—until the bond matures after a specified number of years. At that time you are paid the bond’s face value. If the issuer goes broke, bondholders have first claim on the issuer’s assets, ahead of stockholders.

After bonds are issued, they can be freely bought and sold by individuals and institutional investors in what’s called the secondary market, which works something like a stock exchange.

Many different types of entities issue bonds. Among them:

- Corporations. They may issue secured bonds, which are backed by a lien on part of a corporation’s plant, equipment or other assets. Or they may issue debentures, which are unsecured bonds, backed only by the general ability of the corporation to pay its bills.
- Municipal bonds are issued by state or city governments, or their agencies. Interest paid on municipal bonds is generally exempt from federal income taxes and usually income taxes of the issuing state as well. General obligation bonds are backed by the full taxing authority of the government that issues the bonds. Revenue bonds are backed only by the receipts from a specific source of revenue, such as a bridge or highway toll.
- U.S. Treasury debt obligations are backed by the full faith and credit of the federal government. Interest from Treasuries is exempt from federal and local income taxes but not from federal income tax.
- Agency securities are issued by various U.S. government-sponsored organizations, such as the Tennessee Valley Authority. Although not technically backed by the U.S. Treasury, they are widely considered to be moral investments for a number of reasons: agencies are considered safer than corporations, and their bonds are reasonably priced.

The Investor Protection Trust (IPT) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to investor education. More than half of all Americans are now invested in the securities markets, making investor education and protection vitally important. Since 1993 the Investor Protection Trust has worked with the States and at the national level to provide the independent, objective investor education needed by all Americans to make informed investment decisions. For additional information, visit www.investorprotection.org.

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About the Investor Protection Institute

The Investor Protection Institute (IPI) is an independent nonprofit organization that advances investor protection by conducting and supporting unbiased research and groundbreaking education programs. IPI carries out its mission through investor education, protection and research programs delivered at the national and grassroots level in collaboration with state securities regulators and other strategic partners. IPI is dedicated to providing innovative investor protection programs that will make a meaningful difference in the financial lives of Americans in all walks of life and at all levels of sophistication about financial matters. For additional information, visit www.IPIInvest.org.

State securities regulators have protected investors from fraud for more than 100 years. Securities markets are global, but securities are sold locally by professionals who are licensed in every state where they conduct business. State securities regulators work within your state government to protect investors and help maintain the integrity of the securities industry.

Your state securities regulator can:

- Verify that a broker-dealer or investment adviser is properly licensed;
- Provide information about prior run-ins with regulators that led to disciplinary or enforcement actions; serious complaints that may have been lodged against them; their educational background and previous work history;
- Provide a website, telephone number or address where you can file a complaint; and
- Provide noncommercial investor education and protection materials.

For contact information for your state securities regulator, visit the North American Securities Administrators Association (NASAA) website at www.nasaa.org and click on “Contact Your Regulator.”

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How Much Does a Bond Really Pay?
When a new bond is issued, the interest rate it pays is called the coupon rate, which is the fixed annual payment expressed as a percentage of the bond’s face value. A 5% coupon bond pays $50 a year interest on each $1,000 of face value, a 6% coupon bond pays $60 and so forth. One of the most important things you need to know about bonds is that as interest rates rise, bond prices fall; as interest rates fall, bond prices rise. Because of this relationship, the actual yield you earn on your investment depends not only on the coupon rate, which is the fixed annual payment expressed as a percentage of the bond’s face value, but also on the market price of the bond. A 5% coupon bond that sells at a price below its face value has a higher yield than one that sells at a price above its face value. When you sell your bond, you'll receive $1,000 plus any accrued interest. This is less if you paid more than $1,000 for the bond and more if you paid less. So the vocabulary of the bond market needs more than one definition for yield:

Current yield is the annual interest payment calculated as a percentage of the bond’s current market price.

Yield to maturity includes the current yield and the capital gain or loss you can expect if you hold the bond to maturity.

How to Reduce the Risks in Bonds
Inflation and rising interest rates are two of the biggest risks bondholders face. Inflation erodes the value of those fixed payments to bondholders. If investors see inflation accelerating, they are likely to demand higher interest rates to lend money. How can you reduce these risks?

- Don’t buy long-term bonds when interest rates are low or rising.
- Stick to short- and intermediate-term issues.
- Acquire bonds with different maturity dates to diversify your holdings.

Default risk. Another risk is the chance that the issuer won’t be able to pay off bondholders. To guard against this risk:

- Check the rating of any bond you consider purchasing. Ask a broker for the rating or check online at sites such as www.standardandpoors.com or www.moodys.com.
- Spread your bond holdings across several different issuers, whether corporate or municipal.

Going the Mutual Fund Route
Many investors may prefer owning bonds through managed vehicles, such as mutual funds. Funds are convenient. They let you spread your risk and provide professional management. But they have their drawbacks. If you invest in a fund, for example, you don’t know in real time which bonds you own (most funds report their holdings quarterly). You’ll have to pay management fees and, perhaps, sales charges. And, except in rare instances, a fund doesn’t mature. So when you sell your shares, you may get more money than you paid, or the same amount, or possibly even less.

More Information. To read the full-length A Primer for Investing in Bonds booklet, visit www.investorprotection.org or contact your State Securities Regulator’s office.