

# Best Speaker Cables Aren't Always Most Expensive

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If, as some suggest, buyers of a sound system should allocate at least 10 percent to speaker cables, here are a few recommendations for systems from \$5,000 to \$500 and downward.

Monster M2.2S

Manufacturer: Monster Cable

Price: \$450 for 6-foot pair with spade termination

Type: multiple-gauge wire networks

Information: [www.monstercable.com](http://www.monstercable.com); 415-840-2000

Comment: Monster Cable and its self-styled "Head Monster," Noel Lee, are credited with starting the premium-speaker-cable business more than 20 years ago. If you're not using lamp cord or cheap "zip" cord, you're probably using Monster.

The M2.2S is Monster's challenge to some of the absurdly priced audiophile cables - \$450 sounds like a bargain compared with someone else's ungodly \$15,000 special edition. It's a testosterone-heavy design, with a bulky, garden-hose thickness and rugged, silver-plated "Monster Network Terminator" network. Monster won't say what's in that network, which separates the garden hose from the two lengths of speaker cable that attach to the back of the loudspeaker. (Most such networks have some sort of capacitor designed to optimize impedance and lower noise.) These are the most striking cables in this survey.

The Sound: Decent soundstage (the way the music spreads across the room on an imaginary stage), average depth, good midrange smoothness with just a hint of edginess in the upper frequencies. Doesn't draw attention to itself, like other cables. A nice, inoffensive cable that does the job of many costlier competitors. I've been using a pair of these, purchased secondhand, for the past year.

Analysis Plus Oval Nine

Manufacturer: Analysis Plus Inc.

Price: \$285 for 6-foot pair

Type: flexible, braided oxygen-free copper in hollow-oval design

Information: [www.analysisplus.com](http://www.analysisplus.com); 810-659-6448

Comment: Not long ago, Analysis Plus was exclusively in the analysis business. It designed electromagnetic shields for anti-lock-brake sensors for Ford, did electromagnetic interference design for Motorola and even designed piezoelectric dental tooth cleaners.

It also tested and analyzed cables for some top cable manufacturers, including Monster. Analysis Plus told Monster it could build an inexpensive cable for audiophiles that would embarrass far more expensive models. Monster passed, so Analysis Plus started making its own. These hollow-core Oval cables - each cable takes an hour to make by hand and the spade termination that connects to the speaker post is milled from a solid block of copper - have attracted considerable attention in the performance-for-the-price department.

The Sound: This survey would have been completed weeks ago were it not for the extensive break-in required by the Oval Nines. It took a staggering 300 hours of musical signal coursing through these cables before they sounded fully mature. The lesson: Don't give up on these cables.

Soundstage was comparable to the Monster's, but depth was something else again. Music pushed way, way out into the room. Midrange wasn't overly sweet.

Given the price of top audio cables, the Oval Nine is an excellent value. Analysis Plus Oval 12, a scaled-down version of the Oval Nine, must qualify as a best buy at \$145 for a 6-foot-pair.

Top to bottom, the best cable in this group.

Kimber 8TC

Manufacturer: Kimber Kable

Price: \$216 for 6-foot pair with spade termination; about \$12 a foot for bare wire

Type: Eight blue and eight black braided copper conductors, various diameters

Information: [www.kimber.com](http://www.kimber.com); 801-621-5530

Comment: Kimber could be the underground Monster - the most popular cable manufacturer among audio fanatics looking for value in the high-end stratosphere.

The Sound: A longtime favorite. Kimber's 8TC combines excellent bass with a smooth midrange and slightly rolled-off highs that translates into an alluring immediacy without a hint of fatigue. A great solution for speakers, or CD collections, that might sound a bit bright. Another excellent buy frequently available in the used marketplace (I bought a 3-foot pair of bare 8TC for \$25 at [www.audiogon.com](http://www.audiogon.com)). A similar cable called 4TC with four copper wires instead of the 8TC's eight is available for about \$7 a foot. Same sound, less substantial bass.

StraightWire Rhythm II

Manufacturer: Straight Wire

Price: \$3 a foot

Type: Four 32-gauge OFHC (Oxygen-Free High Conductivity) strands in a "quad twist."

Information: [www.straightwire.com](http://www.straightwire.com); 954-925-2470

The Sound: Muddier bass, not quite the 3-D presentation of 8TC. Laid-back; a little thin up top. Greater presence, more bass weight than standard speaker wire. A good choice for a home

theater. With four individual wires wrapped in a single jacket, it can be used to biwire speakers that have two sets of speaker points. In this setup, the top set goes to the tweeter and the bottom set to the woofer. This can result in a cleaner sound, but I would not recommend using such thin wire in a biwire configuration if you're using long cable lengths. Better to twist together the two "red" wires and the two "black" wires.

RadioShack Solid-Core Speaker Wire

Manufacturer: Radio Shack

Price: \$4.99 for 30-foot spool

Type: 18-gauge stranded wire (catalog No. 278-1602)

Information: [www.radioshack.com](http://www.radioshack.com)

Comment: A little less of everything. It lacks the 8TC's immediacy in the midrange, is much lighter in the bass and a little muted in the higher frequencies. Depth nowhere near as good. But a nice balance anyway. Great choice for a minisystem or small home theater.