**Here are the things that I look for in a commercial food:**

**No generic fats or proteins** (e.g., animal fat or meat meal) -- instead, look for named sources such as beef fat, chicken fat or lamb meal (the generic term indicates a mixture coming from a number of sources, a sign of a very poor quality food). I don't consider poultry fat as bad as animal fat, but chicken fat is better. Never feed a food that uses the generic ingredients "meat meal", "meat and bone meal", or "animal fat".

**Human grade ingredients** (USDA approved). This item is somewhat controversial, as dog foods by law cannot be labeled human grade, but I look for companies that use human grade meats (not meats that were rejected by the human food industry). For even higher quality, look for hormone- and antibiotic-free meats, especially those that are free-range or pasture-raised (note that all poultry is hormone-free, as it is against regulations to give hormones to poultry).

**Avoid foods that use corn gluten meal**, a cheap waste product from the human food industry that provides incomplete protein for dogs. I consider this ingredient to be one of the hallmarks of poor quality foods. **Wheat gluten meal**, one of the ingredients that caused illness and death due to contamination in the recent Menu Foods recall, is similar -- a cheap source of poor quality protein used primarily by the lower-quality foods. **Rice protein concentrate**, which was also involved in the pet food recalls, is a little better quality than the other two, but still provides incomplete plant protein rather than the more desirable animal protein. **Soy protein** has the same problem.

**No meat by-products or digest** (meal is OK). There is some disagreement whether whole meat is preferable to meal. Meal has been rendered, but it is also dried, so if a meal is listed as the first ingredient, there is greater likelihood that the food contains more meat than grains. When whole meats such as chicken, lamb, turkey, etc. are listed as the first ingredient, there may actually be much less meat due to the weight of the moisture in the meat. Both whole meats and meals are considered acceptable as long as they are identified and not generic (e.g., **not** "meat meal" or "meat and bone meal"). By-products may be OK if the company specifies that they are human-grade organs such as liver and kidney, but otherwise they usually signify parts not considered fit for human consumption.

**No BHA, BHT or Ethoxyquin** (artificial preservatives), another sign of a low quality food. Ethoxyquin is banned from use in foods for human consumption except for the use of very small quantities as a color preservative for spices. Note that [ethoxyquin](http://www.cbc.ca/consumers/market/mp30/ethoxyquin.html) is used to preserve [fish meal](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fish_meal), which will not be disclosed on the dog food label since it is added before the fish meal reaches the manufacturing plant. In general, unless the manufacturer provides a statement on their web site that the fish meal in their food does not contain ethoxyquin, you can assume that is does. Contact the manufacturer if you are unsure.

Keep in mind that natural preservatives are not as powerful as these chemical preservatives are, however. It's best if the foods have an expiration date that is no longer than six months from the date of manufacture. Protecting food from light, heat and air will help keep fats from becoming rancid.

**No artificial colors, no sugars and sweeteners** (such as corn syrup, sucrose, ammoniated glycyrrhizin), **no propylene glycol** (added to some chewy foods to keep them moist, toxic in large amounts).

**As few grains as possible** (a whole-meat source should be one of the first two ingredients, preferably two of the top three) -- watch for splitting, such as listing ground yellow corn and corn gluten meal as separate ingredients which together might add up to more than the first ingredient. Note that canned foods often have fewer grains than dry.

**Added** **taurine**. Taurine was added to cat foods in the 70's when cats began going blind and dying due to taurine deficiency. Taurine is thought not to be an "essential" amino acid in dogs because they can convert carnitine to taurine. However, links are now being found between problems such as **dilated cardiomyopathy** and taurine deficiencies. Some dog food companies have begun adding taurine to their foods, and this is probably a good idea. Taurine is affected by heat, so there would not usually be enough natural taurine in processed dog foods, though foods that have a lot of meat will have more natural taurine.

**Meets AAFCO Specifications.** Although I do not consider AAFCO to know everything there is to know about nutrition, if a food specifies that it meets AAFCO specifications, it should be a complete diet. It is fine to use foods that do not meet AAFCO specifications as part of the diet, but you cannot rely on these foods as the sole source of nutrition without adding other foods and supplements to the diet.

There is some question as to whether it's best to look for foods that have done feeding trials rather than just relying on a nutritional analysis to meet AAFCO guidelines. I think that the feeding trials done for adult maintenance foods are pretty much meaningless. The number of dogs included is so small (8), the feeding trial so short (26 weeks), and the qualifications they have to meet so limited (not too much weight loss or other physical signs of deficiency) that even foods with some pretty glaring problems would likely pass. In this case, a nutritional analysis might be more likely to show many problems with food than a feeding trail would.   
  
The same trials done for food approved for all life stages, however, are far more pertinent. Nutrient deficiencies (or excesses) are much more likely to show up with puppies or pregnant and lactating bitches. For them, six months is a long time. Therefore, I think that feeding trials done on foods approved for all life stages are more reliable than nutritional analysis alone.

**High Protein, Moderate Fat**. Most dogs do best on a diet that is high in protein with moderate amounts of fat. Look for foods where the percentage of protein is about twice that of fat. Dogs that are very active may need more fat, while some dogs with digestive problems do better on low-fat diets.

**Some Of The Foods I Would Recommend:**

* **Canidae**
* **Innova**
* **Wellness**
* **Taste Of The Wild**
* **Orijen**
* **Acana**

The pups are currently a bit spoiled and will not eat their kibble dry. I currently mix in 1 can of high quality canned puppy food (I am using Authority), 1 tsp Missing Link, about 1/2 lb raw hamburger, ground turkey or ground chicken into 4 cups of kibble and then add enough water to cover the mixture. I let it sit until the water is soaked up...they love it! I also keep dry kibble available at all times, along with fresh water. Split that into several meals, if they don't eat it all in one sitting, that's OK, just save it in the fridge for later. I have been free feeding these puppies from the moment they could eat, unless they are getting fat, I would highly recommend that you continue this as it discourages gorging, over eating, and food aggression. To wean them from the wet mixture, start adding a little dry food to it at each feeding and gradually increase the amount of dry food content. It shouldn't take long for them to catch on. It's ok to keep them on the wet mix if you want, but only if they aren't getting fat. Also, keep in mind that a dog will not willingly starve itself! Even if he/she goes through a finicky stage and refuses to eat a food, don't panic! Give them a few days to adjust, they will get hungry and eat. Free fed puppies will appear to be lazy eaters, so you may not notice they are eating much until it is time to refill the bowl. I like to keep a one day supply available so that I can be assured that they are eating enough every day. Keep an eye on their weight, if you feel that your puppy has a sudden loss of weight, shows disinterest in food, and acts lethargic you should take your puppy to the vet.