

So many laptops, too many choices



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With prices of laptop computers falling faster than desktop computer prices, and with wireless networking now in higher demand, computer users are making the switch to laptops. And even the most basic laptops now have more than enough power for the average computer user.

It is clear that potential buyers of laptops are often confused about the choices offered. Scour the net for advice, and some sites will mention keyboard feel as the chief criterion. Others will suggest screens are paramount. Others expandability. Some will dictate ruggedness. The underlying difficulty faced by buyers is that each has a different *need*. Unlike most desktops, which require only one or two basic criteria, laptops must be supremely versatile. Manufacturers have realised this, which is why they produce so many varieties.

So how does one make a choice? From the outset, it is important to determine type of laptop use, and to match needs with function. Home users, business users, students, travellers and power users all have different needs. For example, home users won't move the laptop much, but might give it some rough handling. Travellers might want a greater range of connectivity options, and students might look for longer battery life.

How is it built?

Construction strength is vital for most users. Broadly speaking, all laptops are light enough to carry short distances. Some are easy to carry by virtue of non-slip surfaces, or rounded edges, or even a carry handle. But all must be strong, have a solid hinge, a properly closable and lockable clamshell, and have no rough edges, dangly bits or protrusions that can be lost or broken. CD trays that break off, port covers that go missing, external dongles needed to connect to other devices, and screens that begin to detach from the base are all concerns of long-time laptop users.

Student users and travellers require battle-hardened tools, and many laptops are not built for such extremes. Physically picking up the laptop in two hands, and attempting to twist the chassis, and again whilst opening the screen, will give an indication of how robust it is likely to be. Don't ignore the power 'brick' either: few laptops run with an integrated transformer, so a robust transformer is essential. No matter what, the machine has to last at least three years of tough use. Bear in mind that since all the components are unified, upgrade paths are minimal, at best (apart from memory, and hard disk space).

Keyboards *are* important: there are the good, the bad and the downright ugly. Make sure that you try them out before purchasing. Trackpads or other mouse-alternatives should be carefully considered too. Left-handers should take particular note, since the placement of the pointing device (mouse substitute) is not always aligned with your

preferred set-up. For those who are not touch typists, look for high legibility of keyboard characters (especially with fashionable but impractical metallic surfaces): backlit keys can be pricey, but worthwhile in low light conditions.

What can I see?

The screen is equally important: and, again, the choice here can make a world of difference. If possible, line up all potential choices side-by-side, and view the same material. Try to open a web page that you spend a lot of time looking at and see how it compares. Is there enough screen space? Is the type legible? Are the colours displayed to your satisfaction? If possible, compare in a well-lit showroom, to see if the screen is capable of producing enough contrast and colour (darker showrooms make all displays look good). To test how quickly the screen reacts to changes, run a movie or DVD. If possible, take a USB flash disk with content pre-loaded with screens, text material and movies, and ask to plug in the disk and view the content.

Look at where the ports are located. Is this going to suit the way that you use the machine? If you're going to be using a tray-table in economy class on flights around the country, be aware that ports and cables running out of the back of a laptop are a bad idea (there won't be room!).

Specifications

I have not mentioned battery life, built-in software, or hardware specifications. The difficulty with all these is that each manufacturer will have a sales pitch to convince you to buy on the basis of what they can offer. However, battery life is at best optimistic, and will depend on how you use the machine (turn off wireless, bluetooth, turn the screen lighting down to barely visible, and don't spin the hard disk, and you'll get the manufacturer's claimed battery life between charges). Memory and hard disk space can make a difference (more is better, and it is generally better to make those choices at the time of purchase), but won't affect the decision-making process, since all of these options cost much the same. Software *can* make a difference and, in many instances, will tip the scale to one machine over another — if only because adding software can affect the overall cost to the buyer. Some manufacturers (such as Apple) effectively give software away.

Overall, the market is very competitive, which is why prices are falling so rapidly. There are laptops for almost every purpose, and whilst this might appear to make choosing a machine simple, the most difficult choice is to decide what kind of user you intend to be — both now and in three years' time. Making the wrong choice of laptop will not make the purchase a brick, but there is less room to upgrade or modify your purchase sometime later. Buy wisely to begin with, and you'll have a machine that is flexible, portable, robust and suitable for your needs. ■