

10 things to look out for when buying a Laptop

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This article explains all the factors you need to consider before making a purchase, including size and portability, processor, installed memory and hard drive capacity.

1. Portable form factor



Ultrabooks

excel for frequent fliers who need just the essentials while on the road. Screen sizes are small - usually 10 or 12 inches - and their keyboards petite. Also, to make these machines so small, features such as internal optical drives, large and fast hard drives, and extra ports are frequently absent.

Mainstream laptops are like budget desktops: They're good for general tasks but won't win any contests for their performance or features. Though they don't qualify as thin or

light, they still offer some portability. With 14-inch or larger screens, a standard selection of ports, and big keyboards, they're suitable for everyday use.

If you want desktop power, you need a desktop replacement. With screen sizes of 15 to 17 inches, travel weights as heavy as six kilos, and average battery life of less than three hours, these behemoths are not for people on the go. They can accommodate a wide range of performance parts, however, and are just right for power users of all kinds.

2. The processor and you

When it comes to processors, go with the fastest you can afford, regardless of the notebook's form factor. You have a lot of options, so here are the basics.

Intel's Pentium M CPU line offers speed while enabling great battery life. These chips, combined with Intel's wireless LAN electronics and either the 915 Express or 855 chipset, make up Intel's Centrino mobile technology. The biggest downside is price - Pentium Ms are still costly.

AMD's mobile processors are more affordable than Intel's, but they generally lag behind Intel's on our MobileMark tests. AMD's Turion 64 processors may change that, however. AMD says the chips will offer optimisations for high performance, wireless capability, and long battery life.

3. Screen sizes

Wide-screen notebooks, which have an aspect ratio of 16:9, offer larger, sharper, and all-around better images than their 4:3 standard-screen cousins. They're great for allowing you to have two documents or Web pages open side-by-side. A spacious 17-inch wide-screen laptop is a nice luxury if you're not planning on traveling with it.

4. Memory memiors

Having enough memory is vital to system performance, and lots of RAM lets you run more applications simultaneously. Sufficient RAM is also necessary for graphics work, image editing, and video editing, and crucial for 3D gaming. This is especially true in notebooks, because notebook graphics processors frequently have little or no memory of their own and share the main system RAM.

5. Typing and mousing

As notebooks shrink in size, so do their keyboards. If possible, try some simple typing exercises before you buy. Pay particular attention to the spacebar, Shift, Ctrl, and Backspace/Delete keys. Be sure all are in a good location for your hand size and typing style.

Computing today relies a lot on mousing. With a notebook, all you get is a touch pad or pointing stick. Test the notebook's input device for comfort and responsiveness. Some touch pads include extra features, such as a dedicated area for scrolling.

6. Vying for video RAM

If you're not planning on doing much graphics work or playing 3D games, shared memory should be fine. But if you have a choice, aim for a graphics chipset that shares at least 64MB of system memory.

7. A slot for all reasons

Like a PCI slot in a desktop, a PC Card (or PCMCIA) slot in a notebook provides expansion opportunities. Additional USB and FireWire ports, wired and wireless modems, and wireless LAN radios are all available in PC Card form. PC Cards and slots come in three sizes: Type I, II, and III. Type I cards are normally used for memory, Type II for input/output devices, and Type III for mass storage and firewalls.

8. Get connected

Ports, especially USB and FireWire, are necessities, but on notebooks they're usually in short supply. At a minimum, look for two USB ports, and if you have any legacy devices, such as parallel printers, look for those ports, too. If you'd like to use a digital camcorder or iPod with your notebook, make sure the notebook has a FireWire (IEEE 1394) port. Connecting a monitor will require a VGA port. And if you want to output video to a television, find a notebook with an S-Video out.

9. Go wireless

Integrated wireless networking (Wi-Fi) has become an indispensable feature. Most notebooks ship with a choice of 802.11b or 802.11b/g. Capable of data throughput of 11Mbps, 802.11b is fine for ordinary use. Public hotspots typically use 802.11b or 802.11g.

10. Power on the go

Lithium-ion batteries have all but replaced nickel-cadmiums because they're lighter, have a higher energy density, and don't suffer from recharge-inhibiting memory effect.

Also look out for battery capacity (measured in milliamp hours, or mAh), and the number of cells. Typical batteries have a mAh rating between 2,000mAh and 6,000mAh; higher is better. Cells are the actual compartments where power is produced and can range from four to 12; the more the better.

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