

Laptop Buying Guide

Purchasing a notebook computer can be a frustrating experience. It requires that you not only accurately assess your current needs, but also what your needs will be in a few years. In our opinion, your current needs trump those of your future self, and by knowing the ins and outs of today's technology, you're more likely to be satisfied with your purchase — and better off in the future. Let's run down the important aspects of today's Laptop.

Screen Size

In our opinion this is the single most important specification to take into consideration. It has a ripple effect on every other aspect of a notebook, including its size, weight, and battery life. Ultimately, it goes to the very core of the notebook's purpose in life. Screen sizes generally range in size from 12 inches in your ultra-portable or ultra-mobile personal computer system, up to 17 inches. The larger the screen size, the larger (and thus heavier) the system will be.

Ultra-portable

If you have ever traveled with a notebook, you know how a heavy notebook can be a pain. Thus, if you are going to be moving the notebook around a lot, you want an ultra-portable, which typically have screen sizes of either 12.1 inches or 13.3 inches and weigh 3 pounds or less, give or take a pound.

Semi-portable

If you might take your notebook with you occasionally, but will most likely keep it on your desk and plugged in most of the time, your best bet is a mid-size 15.4-inch notebook. These notebooks are middle-of-the-road in every regard, including price, weight, battery life, and performance.

Desktop Replacement

Ah yes, the Ferraris of notebooks: just as expensive and about as practical. Desktop replacement notebooks ignore all the typical considerations for a notebook including size, weight, battery life, cost, thermal output, and portability. While these notebooks offer performance similar to — and possibly even better than — a decent desktop, they are heavy, run super hot, and have a poor battery life. These notebooks have massive screens that are either 17 inches, or in some cases 19 or 20 inches. It should be noted that the term "desktop replacement" is not synonymous with "gaming notebook," though desktop replacements typically have far greater gaming power than smaller notebooks.

Widescreen or Standard?

The majority of today's notebooks include a widescreen display that has an aspect ratio of 16:10 — like a movie screen. This is notably different from the older 4:3 ratio that was square, like an old TV set. Though it's up to you to decide which format you prefer, the standard aspect ratio notebooks are becoming more difficult to find due to the benefits of a widescreen display. Not only are widescreen displays better for watching movies, they allow manufacturers to increase screen real estate by just making the notebook a smidge wider rather than taller, which is preferable to most people.

Glossy or Matte?

Like the widescreen debate above, the debate over whether to go with a notebook that has a glossy or matte finish on its display is quickly becoming moot because glossy is the new hotness. Though glossy displays are a nightmare under bright light due to the glare they produce, in medium-to-low light conditions they make images and text much more crisp and rich-looking.

Wireless Draft-N

Wireless Internet technology has been advancing over the years and is currently on the cusp of the next major revision, dubbed 80211.N. This will succeed the current standard, 80211.G, and promises major improvements in both range and speed. We reviewed an N router awhile back and its performance simply blew us away compared to wireless G. Just as we would tell someone who is in the market for a wireless router to go with a Draft-N router, we'll tell you to look for a notebook that supports the new N standard. Once it's fully implemented, it will likely be the standard for quite some time. The only caveats are that it requires an N router, and it only improves performance across a network. In other words, your download speeds won't improve using N, but file transfer speeds across a network will be much faster. It's also supposed to offer drastically improved range compared to G, but in our tests we saw no improvement in signal strength.

Conclusion

There are other factors to consider aside from what we've laid out here, including a vendor's reputation, tech support and warranty coverage. But those factors vary wildly from vendor to vendor, so we recommend you figure out what you want in a notebook first, and then decide. Once you've selected a notebook that fits your needs, drop by the store and ask for opinions. The sales staff will be more than happy to share their insights with you regarding specific notebook needs.