

## How to Buy a New Computer (March 2013)



So, you have put it off as long as you can, but you can't stand it anymore. Either your current computer is showing its age, has finally given up the ghost, or you are ready to jump into something new and powerful.

The good news is that you have more choices than ever before. The bad news is that you have more choices than ever before.

But no need to worry: I'm here to help.

The first thing to do is to establish a clear perspective on what you will be doing with your computer. Ask yourself these questions:

- Do you want to take your computer with you wherever you go?
- Will you be doing heavy-duty activities such as playing graphically rich video games, editing videos and pictures, running many applications at the same time?
- Will you be doing only lightweight activities such as web browsing, reading email, and playing music?
- Will you need to store lots of data, such as large picture, music or video libraries?
- Are you comfortable using a touch screen or do you require a real keyboard?
- Will you be creating a lot of new content as opposed to viewing existing content?
- Are you comfortable with a relatively small screen or do you need a large monitor?
- How much are you willing to spend?
- Do you have a bias toward either Mac or Windows, likely because of what you are already comfortable with?

- Do you have existing software or peripherals that must operate with your new computer?

Now that you have a clear sense of your requirements and budget, let's focus on the type of computer you need.

- An iPad or similar device is for you if you are looking for a small, light, portable, functional, user-friendly device and you are comfortable with a touch screen and you are not creating a lot of new content and are mostly performing lightweight activities.
- A netbook is for you if you are comfortable with Windows (including willingness to learn Windows 8) or a MacBook Air if you prefer Mac (and are willing to spend more money), and you are looking for portability, battery life, a full operating system, and are comfortable with a smaller keyboard and screen. This is a good choice if your activities are more than lightweight, but not heavy-duty. Netbooks will be slower than laptops (unless it has a Solid State Drive as in the MacBook Air.)
- A full laptop is for you if you are doing some heavy-duty work, but still want to remain portable and have a larger screen. Again, you have a choice between either a Windows 8 computer or a Mac computer (e.g., MacBook Pro).
- A desktop or all-in-one computer is for you if you want a huge screen, lots of local storage, expandability, and will be doing some form of heavy-duty work. All-in-ones (originally introduced by Apple with their iMac but now available from a variety of Windows-based manufacturers) is a nice choice if your space is limited and you want fewer cables, but is less expandable than a full desktop computer. Unlike laptops, it is still easy to order Windows 7 with these computers. Another choice in this category is mini computers (such as the Mac Mini) that take up less space at the expense of expandability.
- A custom-built desktop computer is for you if you have heavy-duty requirements such as gaming or CAD and need to have a real screamer of a computer.

Of course, within each type of computer there are still many choices. Here are some basic recommendations:

- For an iPad or similar device, you must decide on size, storage, and connectivity. Unless you have a large music or video library, for most of you 16GB should provide plenty of storage and just wi-fi should be adequate. However, if you frequently travel and want easy network access from airports, offices, and hotels, you will likely want to get an iPad with cellular support, which will require a monthly fee.
- For netbooks, basic choices include screen size, typically in the 8 to 11 inch range, and hard disk size, typically in the 160GB to 320GB range. Memory is usually 1 or 2GB. Some netbooks now have as an option a solid-state drive (very fast, more expensive, and less storage). With the MacBook Air, the choices are all higher end, but for considerably more money.

- For laptops and desktops, here are the options you should choose:
  - Windows OS: Windows 7 or 8, 64 bit, or Mac OS X
  - RAM: at least 4GB
  - Hard drive (HDD): at least 500GB, 7200 RPM. Solid State Drives (SSD) or hybrid drives (such as the Apple Fusion drive) are increasingly becoming an option.
  - CPU: Intel (generally faster than AMD); the Core i3 is common in budget and midrange laptops, Core i5 in larger laptops, Core i7 both dual-core and quad-core available in more expensive computers. The faster the CPU, the higher the cost.
  - Optical drive: this is starting to disappear from lightweight laptops, but if you get one, make sure it can burn DVDs as well as CDs
  - Graphics card: unless you plan on playing serious PC games on your computer, whatever the default capability is should be fine.
  - Wireless: most computers now come with support for 802.11n, the fastest wireless option and compatible with virtually any Wi-Fi signal or router.
  - Other ports: increasingly, at least one or more USB 3.0 ports are beginning to appear. These are up to 10x faster than the previous USB 2.0 and support both USB 3.0 and USB 2.0 devices (such as external hard drives). HDMI video is also beginning to appear for attached HD devices such as a HD monitor. On Macs, you have Thunderbolt, their recently introduced high-performance technology for high-resolution displays and high-performance data devices.

One other consideration is if you want a fundamentally smaller device but require a larger monitor and easier input. With almost any of the above choices, you have the option of attaching an external monitor, keyboard, and mouse.

In terms of brands, my personal preferred vendors are Lenovo, Toshiba, or Dell for laptops, Dell for desktops, and if you prefer Mac OS X, any of the Apple products.

If you are going to go with Windows 8, you should strongly consider a touchscreen monitor to get the most out of your Windows 8 choice.

*As always, I hope you have found this information useful. If you do not wish to receive these emails in the future, let me know.*

*This newsletter, as well as all past newsletters, can be found on my web site (<http://steve.gimnicher.com>).*