

What Laptop Should I Buy?

Whilst we can't give specific advice about what make and model of laptop you should buy, here are some things to think about before you go into a store (or online) to make a purchase.

Do I really need a laptop?

Tablets are well suited for browsing the internet, viewing photos and sending and receiving emails. If you don't get on with the on-screen keyboard of a tablet you can always attach a Bluetooth keyboard which you may find easier to use. Tablets are not so good for writing long documents, working with spreadsheets or editing images or video and if you want to do any of those activities a laptop will be a better option.

What Operating System shall I buy?

The Operating System (or OS) is the main user interface between you and the computer. There are three main options; Apple, Google or Windows/Microsoft. Generally speaking if you are already familiar with one of these OS from a previous computer or if you have a smart phone that is an iPhone (i.e. Apple) or Android (better to opt for Windows/Microsoft) then it's best to stick with what you know but here are some of the pros and cons of each OS.

- Apple – Apple computers are only made by Apple which tends to make them more expensive than other types of laptop. The Apple OS is perhaps a bit easier to use than Windows and you can buy Microsoft Office to run on an Apple laptop.
- Google – best known for its search engine, Google now offer a complete OS and their own suite of software applications. Most applications require an internet connection to run which means that they need a less powerful processor and 'Chromebooks' as these laptops are known are therefore cheaper than other laptops. They are a bit limited in what they can do so if you are thinking of going down this route, make sure you can run the applications that you need and that you have a good internet connection.
- Windows – There are many companies offering Windows laptops which makes them cheaper than Apple, but still more expensive than Chromebooks. This also means there is more choice of processors, memory, screen size etc. and you may find it easier to get help with a Windows laptop as they are so universal. If buying a Windows laptop ensure it is Windows 11, not Windows 10 as that is nearing the end of its supported life. Windows 10 laptops will still work, but will not have security patches available after the middle of 2025.

What size screen?

Note that screen measurements are always the diagonal distance from corner to corner. Generally speaking the larger the screen, the larger (and heavier) the laptop and also the more expensive the laptop becomes. Obviously you want to balance cost, portability (if that is important to you) with the ability to read the screen comfortably. The most common screen size is 15-16" but 14-15" is also very useable. You can get touchscreens which enable you to interact directly with the screen and make the laptop feel more like a tablet. A touchscreen will however add significantly to the cost.

What processor and how much memory?

Things can get very technical in this area so we'll keep it simple. Don't buy the cheapest laptop you can find as this is the area that is most likely to be compromised. Unless you really need a super-powerful computer don't buy the most expensive laptop. Anything in between will probably be fine unless you have very specific requirements.

What size disk drive?

The hard drive is used to store all the data for applications, documents you create and things like photos and music. Most laptops now come with an SSD (solid state disk) drive as standard – these are faster, quieter and less liable to break, but more expensive than the older HDD/SATA drives.

This is one area of the laptop where size matters and it's always better to have too much hard disk capacity than too little. 256Gb is the minimum you should go for, 512Gb or more is better if you can afford it.

Other things to think about

Battery life – if you are just intending to use the laptop at home then battery capacity probably isn't important as you can easily plug the laptop in to charge, but if you intend to use the laptop 'on the go' you might want to check the quoted battery life.

Peripherals – most modern peripherals (printers, keyboards, mice, cameras, loudspeakers) will connect wirelessly to a laptop but if you have older or specialist peripherals check that the laptop has the right type of connections (USB, HDMI, SD cards, audio output) to work with your existing equipment. Note that all laptops have internal loudspeakers which are adequate for listening to when seated and working on the keyboard, but if you want to play music from the laptop, you may need external speakers.

Webcams – most, but not all, laptops come with a built in webcam and microphone which are very useful for video-conferencing (e.g. Zoom or Teams). You can plug in separate cameras and microphones if you wish but it's much more convenient to have them built in. Of course you can also use a smartphone or tablet for video-conferencing so you may not need this facility in your laptop.

Software - There is usually no ongoing charge for the Operating System, but applications like Microsoft Office 365, and anti-virus have a cost. Some laptops will come with a free 90 day trial of Office 365, or other applications, but to keep using the applications after that time you will have to pay either an annual subscription or a one-off charge. Sometimes software can be purchased as a 'bundle' with the laptop which can offer a saving.

Warranty and support – most laptops come with a one year guarantee although these usually mean returning your laptop to a service centre. Some retailers offer longer guarantees and if buying from a physical shop you should be able to return the laptop to the shop. Also think about whether you are likely to need help with the laptop – again some physical retailers offer this in store, otherwise you are likely to be on the phone to a call centre somewhere for a while.

Hope you found this document useful in making a decision about whether and what to buy.