
Laptop Buying Guide ©

by

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The ABC's
to find the
right computer



Making Computer Shopping Easier and Simpler

Friends and neighbors often ask me for help in finding the best deal on a laptop. Every Sunday they are overwhelmed with advertisements and simply don't know what is or isn't a good deal. When they go shopping salespeople will often attempt to talk them into buying more than they need and spending a lot more money. With this guide I will share my recommendations on what you need for a good, basic laptop. It is not intended to address the special needs of gamers, graphic designers or programmers but will do well for the average person or household.

How to Use This guide

This guide takes each major feature available in a Laptop and provides you with a clear explanation of what it is and my recommendations of a good choice for each. To best use this guide, take any advertisement for a Laptop and review the features available against the recommendations in this guide to determine whether it is a good deal or if they are trying to sell you more than you need. Depending on the deals available, you should be able to find a good laptop for as little as **\$500-\$600**.

Brand Name: Dell, Gateway, Toshiba, Compaq, HP, etc.

My Recommendation: brands are more a personal preference issue than anything else. The main difference comes in the warranty... you should get at least a 1 year warranty automatically. See the [Extended Warranties section](#) for more on warranties.

Processor: the "brains" of the computers.... brand isn't as important as **speed** and **cache**. Speed is shown in GHz (giga-hertz). Cache, shown in either KB or MB (kilo-bytes or mega-bytes) is special memory for use by the Processor to further speed it up. In both cases, bigger numbers means faster.

My Recommendation: a **speed** of 1.5 GHz with **cache** of 1mb (or 1024kb) is good. Remember, bigger is better but I would not pay extra for more than this.

■ Here are some of the choices you will see in the ads:

- AMD Turion™ 64 X2 Dual-Core
 - TL-50: 1.6GHz **speed/512kb cache**
 - TL-52: 1.6GHz **speed/1mb cache**
 - TL-53: 1.7GHz **speed/512kb cache**
 - TL-56: 1.83GHz **speed/1mb cache**
 - TL-58: 1.9GHz **speed/1mb cache**
 - TL-64: 2.2GHz **speed/1mb cache**
- AMD Turion™ 64 Mobile Technology
 - MK-36: 2GHz **speed/512kb cache**
- Intel® Centrino® Mobile Technology
 - 725A: 1.6GHz/2mb **cache**
 - 735: 1.7 GHz/2mb **cache**
 - 740: 1.73 GHz/2mb **cache**
 - 750: 1.86 GHz/2mb **cache**
 - 760: 2.0 GHz/2mb **cache**
- Intel® Celeron® M processor
 - 370: 1.5GHz **speed/1mb cache**
 - 380: 1.6GHz **speed/1mb cache**
 - 430: 1.73GHz **speed/1mb cache**
 - 450: 2.0GHz **speed/1mb cache**
 - 520: 1.6GHz **speed/1mb cache**
- Intel® Centrino® Duo Mobile Tech
Intel® Core 2 Duo Processor
 - T2250: 1.73GHz **speed/2mb cache**
 - T2350: 1.83GHz **speed/2mb cache**
 - T2450: 2.00GHz **speed/2mb cache**
 - T5200: 1.60GHz **speed/2mb cache**
 - T5250: 1.50GHz **speed/2mb cache**
 - T5300: 1.73GHz **speed/2mb cache**
 - T5500: 1.66GHz **speed/2mb cache**
 - T5600: 1.83GHz **speed/2mb cache**
 - T7100: 2.00GHz **speed/2mb cache**
 - T7200: 2.33GHz **speed/4mb cache**
 - T7300: 2.20GHz **speed/4mb cache**
- Intel® Pentium® Dual Core Processor
 - T2060: 1.60GHz **speed/1mb cache**
 - T2080: 1.73GHz **speed/1mb cache**
 - T2130: 1.86GHz **speed/1mb cache**

Hard Drive: this is where all you save or store all your files, documents, pictures, etc. It is also where all the programs (like MS Office, Excel, Windows, Anti-virus) are kept. You'll see sizes ranging from 60GB (giga-bytes) to 220GB. For most people the smaller drives are big enough.

My Recommendation: 60GB or 80GB hard drive is big enough. If you pay for more, you probably won't use it unless you do LOTs of pictures or game software on your computer.

Memory: also called RAM, is used to run Windows and everything else on your computer. The hard drive stores them but you use memory when you run them. This is one feature where more does make a noticeable difference. The more programs you run, the more memory you want.

My Recommendation: if all you do is surf the internet, send emails, write some letters or do some spreadsheets, then 1 GB (1024mb) would be good enough. If you use your computer for music, fancy games, picture editing as well as internet and email, then I'd want 2 GB (2048mb) but I wouldn't pay extra for more.

CD and DVD drives: most laptops offer the ability to burn/create CDs & DVDs. Lower priced laptops may only burn CDs and play DVDs. "Dual layer" is an extra feature that records on both sides of a DVD. "LightScribe" means it can burn labels right on the CD/DVD itself.

■ **What it means:**

- CD+/-R = play only CDs
- CD-RW or CD burner = create/play CDs
- DVD or DVD-R = play only both CDs & DVDs,
- DVD+/-RW or DVD burner = create/play DVDs
- CD-RW/DVD = create(burn)/play CDs, play only DVDs
- CD-RW/DVD+/-RW or CD/DVD burner = create/play both CDs and DVDs

My Recommendation: unless you need to copy DVD movies (it takes special software), then the "CD-RW/DVD" is good enough. Today, many laptops offer more but I would not pay extra to get it.

Screen size: don't be fooled... unless it says "widescreen" then the size shown is measured corner-to-corner. "Widescreen" is the side-to-side measurement. Screen quality is very good on almost all laptops, so don't be worried about comparing 'Ultrabright', 'XBRITE-ECO', 'XGA', 'BrightView' or other types.

My Recommendation: 15" corner-to-corner would be very good. Bigger is better... 'widescreen' is nice, but I would not pay extra for bigger.

Media Reader: lets you take pictures and such off of your Digital Camera or PDA so you can print, email or edit them. You may see "3-in-1", "5-in-1", "9-in-1" or "15-in-1". These numbers indicate how many different kinds of camera or PDA memory card types they can work with.

My Recommendation: Digital Camera's and PDAs already let you plug them into your computer to do the same thing. I would not pay extra for this.

Internet Access: LAN, WLAN or Ethernet is the part used to plug a wire into the office network or the Cable or DSL high speed hookup at home. WIFI or "wireless" lets you get onto a network or the internet without a wire. Places like Barnes & Noble will let you do this for free. "Dial up" or "modem" lets you use your telephone line to get to something like AOL.

■ **Wireless:** "integrated" means built-in... no special parts to plug in. Look for "802.11g wireless". This should be included at no extra cost.

- **Ethernet:** sometimes referred to as “10/100 Base-T”. This should come in your laptop at no extra cost, but they’ll charge you extra for the wire (cable) to plug it in. Don’t buy a cable unless you know you’ll be plugging the laptop into a network, Cable or DSL hookup.
- **Modem:** “56KB” refers to how fast you can get the internet to work. Modems do not go faster than this. This is a standard feature that should not cost extra.

My Recommendation: laptops should have all three because you never know where you’ll be and which one you’ll need to get to the internet.

USB: these are a special type of plug-in slot in the computer that has become the standard for connecting just about everything to your computer. Printers, digital cameras, ipods, MP3 players, jump drives... all of these need the USB plug in.

My Recommendation: you need to have at least two of these USB plugs. I would not pay extra to get a laptop that has more because you can buy an inexpensive part to plug into the laptop to give you more.

Floppy Drive: many laptop manufacturers have stopped including a floppy drive. If the laptop you are interested in does not come with this drive, you can buy an external drive for \$40 or less.

Extended Warranty: most laptops will come with at least a 1 year warranty. Paying for an extended warranty is a matter of personal preference which I consider to be of little value unless the laptop is for a student or someone who will be doing a lot of travel. This is a ‘peace of mind’ item that each person should decide for themselves.

Other Features: all other features such as battery life and video cards tend to be about equal when comparing laptops in this price range. You shouldn’t need to buy extra capabilities for any of these.



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