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1

Choose a Computer

This chapter discusses the differences between computers – Mainframe and PC, laptop and desktop, Apple Mac and Windows, to help you choose your system.

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Hot tip

In this book we will be looking at personal computers suitable for the home and small business, and at the software programs that these use. We'll also take a look at some of the devices that can be attached.

What is a Computer?

Computers are essentially machines which accept sets of instructions (known as programs) and perform computations based on those instructions. The first computers were very large and demanded huge amounts of power. They were used for specialised calculations such as trajectories (astronomical or military), code breaking or weather forecasting.



As they developed, computers were made smaller, less power-hungry and less expensive. This led to the introduction of personal computers, intended to support the requirements of individuals and small groups, not just business and government.

Hot tip

This shows three of the early personal computers manufactured by IBM, Apple and Compaq.



Although these machines may look old-fashioned, they included all the essential elements that you'll find in every computer, in one form or another:

- | | | |
|--------------------|------|---------------------------------|
| ● Input | e.g. | keyboard and mouse |
| ● Processing | | manipulation and computation |
| ● Output | | display and print |
| ● Storage | | data and programs |
| ● Operating System | | to manage the data and programs |
| ● Communications | | links to other computers |

...cont'd

These original computers illustrate the two main classes of personal computer – Apple Mac and IBM compatible. They also demonstrate the three main styles:

Desktop Computers

These are mains powered and have several individual components – display, keyboard and system unit (containing the processor, memory and storage elements). Literally desktop to begin with, the system unit is often effectively turned on its side to become a tower unit which is placed beneath the desk.



Laptop Computers

These are designed to be carried, and contain all of the components (including battery power) in one physical box. Some models emphasize lightness and ultra-portability, others offer the full function of a desktop computer in a space saving format.



All-in-One Computers

These machines are really a hybrid of the desktop and laptop machines, incorporating the components that are usually found in the system unit into the housing for the display unit. This provides a compact and usually very stylish design, but these systems are not particularly portable and they will need access to mains power.



Hot tip



The distinguishing factor between these is the operating system. IBM-compatibles run Microsoft Windows, while Apple Mac computers run the proprietary Mac OS.

Don't forget



This is a tower format IBM-compatible personal computer, the Dell Precision 390.

Hot tip



These examples of laptop and all-in-one personal computers are from Apple, and show the Macbook and the iMac. There are also many IBM-compatible laptop and all-in-one computers.

Don't forget



The original Mac OS was designed to use the Power PC processor. Mac OS X added support for the Intel Processor (as used by IBM compatible PCs). Mac OS X versions are named after big cats.

- V10.0 Cheetah
- V10.1 Puma
- V10.2 Jaguar
- V10.3 Panther
- V10.4 Tiger
- V10.5 Leopard



Hot tip



Applications must be specifically written for the Mac OS. Windows applications won't run, though major applications are available in both operating environments.

Operating Systems

The operating system on the personal computer is software that manages the computer memory, storage and devices, and provides an interface to access those resources. It processes data and user input, allocating and managing tasks and services for the user and the programs running on the system. It supports communication between computers and networks, and manages the files on the computer disk drives.

There are two predominant operating systems for personal computers, reflecting the two predominant types of personal computer:

Mac OS

This is a graphical operating system developed and marketed by Apple and pre-loaded on Apple Macintosh computers. The current version is Mac OS X which is based on the Unix operating system used by larger scale computers.



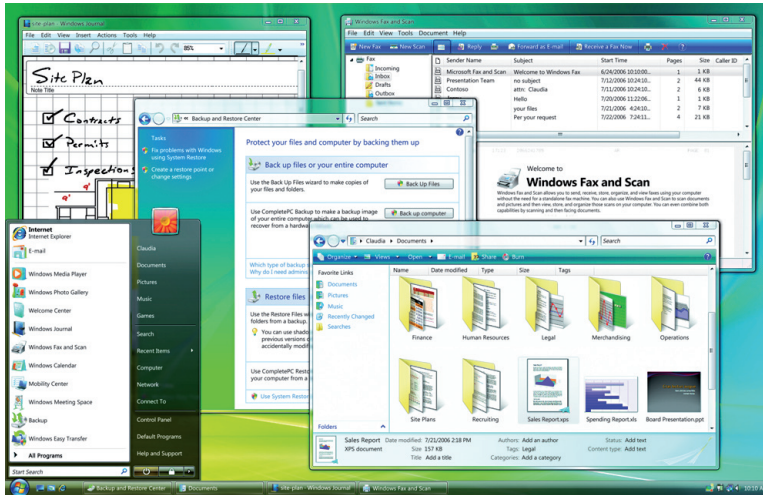
There are numerous applications and utilities supplied with Mac OS X. Other applications are available from Apple, Adobe, Microsoft and other suppliers.



...cont'd

Windows

This runs on all IBM-compatible computers which account for over 90% of all personal computers, and it is by far the most commonly used operating system.



Don't forget



The Ultimate edition of Windows Vista contains all the features from the home and business editions, plus some additional features: the Ultimate Extras.

The current version is Windows Vista, which is provided in a number of editions designed to suit particular types of user. For home and small office users there are three editions:

- Windows Vista Home Basic
- Windows Vista Home Premium
- Windows Vista Ultimate

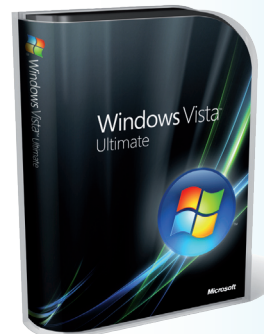
Two editions are provided for businesses and large organizations:

- Windows Vista Business
- Windows Vista Enterprise

There is an edition that is designed for beginning users on low powered PCs, in the emerging technology markets:

- Windows Vista Starter

This is shipped on lower-cost computers sold by original equipment manufacturers (OEMs) and Microsoft OEM distributors in 139 countries. However, this edition is not available in the developed technology markets such as the United States, the European Union, Australia, or Japan.



Beware



There are Home Basic N and Business N editions for Europe that ship without the Windows Media Player.

Don't forget

This is a subject that's sure to raise many strong opinions. Just saying "PC versus Mac" will create a huge debate about the scope of the term PC, with many insisting on the more explicit "IBM compatible PC" terminology.

Hot tip

The book uses Windows Vista and Microsoft Office 2007 for the illustrations and examples, but highlights differences with the Mac environments when appropriate.

PC Versus Mac

The best system for you depends on your particular requirements and circumstances, so there's no definitive answer. However these are some of the factors you may wish to take into account while deciding between a Mac and an IBM compatible PC.

Design and Appearance

The PC is usually a fairly bland box of equipment, with some honorable exceptions such as Sony's VAIO laptops.



The Mac is generally considered to be the epitome of elegance and design. There are some issues that might disconcert PC users – the lack of right mouse button on Mac laptops and the keyboard differences. These will be part of the learning curve.

Range of Options

PC system specifications are flexible and low end machines are likely to be cheaper, since there are competing brands, multiple suppliers and a variety of prices and quality levels. There's also a large choice of applications, since the majority of software is programmed for Windows systems.

With the Mac there are limited choices of specification and you are essentially buying everything from the one company.

Specialized Systems

For some users the single manufacturer approach becomes a strength, for example in niche areas such as the media industry. Publishing, film editing, photo editing and audio recording software products were developed first for the Mac (though these suites are now released on PC as well).

Robust Systems

The Mac features an operating system that is claimed to be simpler, more streamlined and more stable than Microsoft Windows. It is also more secure – perhaps because, as a minority product, it just doesn't get targeted as much by the malicious software threats that are endemic to Windows.

Gaming

If your main interest is gaming, a Windows PC is recommended. There's a much larger selection of games, hardware can be

...cont'd

optimized for gaming performance, and new titles will always appear first for the Windows machines. There is no native DirectX support in Mac OS (although there are emulators).

Peer Support

If you don't already have experience with computers, you could well allow your choice to be influenced by your family, friends and potential computer teachers and follow their lead.

Office Functions

Both systems can be used for functions such as Internet browsing, document manipulation, scheduling and multimedia playback, and they both support Office functions such as word processing, spreadsheets and presentations. However, if you need to exchange documents with other users, check what they are using, to avoid compatibility problems. You'll find Windows is the most common system in use for Office applications.

Take Both Systems

If you really cannot make up your mind, and cost is not the issue, you can run either operating system on a Mac OS X machine, using the Boot Camp utility to dual boot the system, or using a virtual machine product. This will run a range of operating systems, including OS X, Vista and older operating systems such as XP. This approach involves extra software license costs and either the reduced performance due to virtualization or the need to reboot between systems when you require a different application.



In Summary

Macs and PCs perform the same basic computer operations but there are differences in menu items offered, functions are found in different places and the keys and keystrokes used to perform particular operations are different. If you want to work with others, it will be most helpful if you all use the same operating environment, which is most likely to be the PC and Windows.

Don't forget



If you have serious computer enthusiasts among your friends, you may find that they are using one of the Linux operating systems, open software that is distributed without charge. Linux and open software applications are not directly compatible with Mac OS or Windows, but they can be run on PC or Mac systems, via dual boot or virtualization.

Don't forget



Windows also supports dual boot and virtual machine operations. However, Apple does not provide a stand-alone version of the Mac OS X operating system so this cannot be installed on an IBM compatible PC.

Choosing a Laptop

If you need to travel with your PC or need to minimize the space it takes up, you'll be looking for a laptop computer. The primary factor will be the weight – the more mobile you need to be, the lighter the laptop you'll want.

Dell for example, group their laptops into three ranges by weight, and this in turn dictates the monitor sizes offered.

Don't forget



Small size doesn't equate to low cost. If price is the main factor, choose a mid-size Inspiron, or its equivalent from your supplier of choice.

1

Ultra Light (< 5lbs)X

Narrow Your Selection	
Product Category	
Laptop Screen Size	
<input type="checkbox"/>	13.3"
<input type="checkbox"/>	14.1"
<input type="checkbox"/>	15.4"
<input type="checkbox"/>	17"
<input type="checkbox"/>	20.1"
Laptop Weight Clear	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	< 5 lbs. (Ultra Light)
<input type="checkbox"/>	5 - 7 lbs. (Light)
<input type="checkbox"/>	> 7 lbs. (Desktop Replacement)



The XPS M1330 model is 12.5 by 9.4 ins by 0.9 to 1.3 ins (being slightly wedge shaped), starts off at less than 4lbs, and features a weight-saving solid state disk drive. The screen size is 13.3 ins.

2

Light (5 - 7lbs)

Narrow Your Selection	
Product Category	
Laptop Screen Size	
<input type="checkbox"/>	13.3"
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	14.1"
<input type="checkbox"/>	15.4"
<input type="checkbox"/>	17"
<input type="checkbox"/>	20.1"
Laptop Weight Clear	
<input type="checkbox"/>	< 5 lbs. (Ultra Light)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	5 - 7 lbs. (Light)
<input type="checkbox"/>	> 7 lbs. (Desktop Replacement)



For a larger 15.4 ins screen, the XPS M1530 is 14.1 by 10.4 ins by 0.9 to 1.4 ins and weighs 6.8lbs or more.



The Inspiron 1420 (with a 14.1 ins screen) and Inspiron 1520 (15.4 ins screen) can be configured to provide more economical solutions, but there are plenty of options such as case colors, more powerful processors, extra system memory and enhanced graphics.

Hot tip



Whichever laptop you choose, you may have a choice of integrated graphics, which shares main memory, or a dedicated video card which has its own memory – much preferred for graphics intensive applications.

...cont'd

3 Desktop Replacement (> 7lbs)

Narrow Your Selection	
Product Category	
Laptop Screen Size	
<input type="checkbox"/>	13.3"
<input type="checkbox"/>	14.1"
<input type="checkbox"/>	15.4"
<input type="checkbox"/>	17"
<input type="checkbox"/>	20.1"
Laptop Weight Clear	
<input type="checkbox"/>	< 5 lbs. (Ultra Light)
<input type="checkbox"/>	5 - 7 lbs. (Light)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	> 7 lbs. (Desktop Replacement)



For desktop replacements, the more affordable option is the Inspiron 1720 while the XPS M1730 provides the high performance choice. Both feature 17 ins screens, and both can be configured with dual hard drives.



The ultimate desktop replacement is the briefcase style XPS M2010 with its 20 ins screen and its substantial weight of 18.3lbs.

Other Factors

Battery life may range from 2 or 3 hours for the higher powered machines to 7 or more for the lower powered. Supplementary batteries may be available to increase the usable time between recharges.

Most machines will offer a rewritable DVD drive, or perhaps a combination DVD/CD-RW drive, but you are unlikely to find a floppy drive. However, you can usually purchase an add-on USB drive if you still need access to floppy disks.

Don't forget



The larger laptops forgo some aspects of portability in favor of screen size and configuration options such as Blu-Ray disc drives and dedicated graphics memory.

Hot tip



Some models of laptop include a second drive bay which as an alternative can be used for an additional battery.

Don't forget

You'll usually be able to choose between budget and high-end ranges, in Dell's case Inspiron and XPS for home and home office users.

Hot tip

For all but the most basic requirements, choose 2GB memory and a dedicated graphics card with 256MB or more memory installed.

Desktop Computers

If you don't need a portable computer, you'll find that the desktop options give you much more choice of monitors, processors, graphics, memory, hard drive and optical drives.

To illustrate the options:

1

Select a basic computer such as the Inspiron 530, for email, Internet surfing and documents



2

Choose a higher specification machine such as the XPS 420 for multitasking, playing music, watching videos, running graphics programs or playing games



You can adjust the configuration for the selected model by choosing alternative components such as monitor, graphics card or hard disk. You can also include add-on items such as a TV tuner, networking device, web camera, printer and scanner.

Narrow Your Selection	
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Product Category	<input type="checkbox"/> XPS <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Inspiron
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Desktop Monitor Size	<input type="checkbox"/> No Monitor <input type="checkbox"/> 19" - 20" (Medium) <input type="checkbox"/> Over 20" (Large)
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Price	<input type="checkbox"/> Less than \$400 <input type="checkbox"/> \$400-\$800 <input type="checkbox"/> \$800-\$1200 <input type="checkbox"/> More than \$1200
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Processor	<input type="checkbox"/> AMD <input type="checkbox"/> Intel Core 2 Extreme <input type="checkbox"/> Intel Core 2 Quad <input type="checkbox"/> Intel Core 2 Duo <input type="checkbox"/> Intel Pentium Dual-Core <input type="checkbox"/> Intel Celeron
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Operating System	<input type="checkbox"/> Windows Vista <input type="checkbox"/> Windows XP
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Graphics	<input type="checkbox"/> Integrated <input type="checkbox"/> Dedicated Graphics - 128 MB <input type="checkbox"/> Dedicated Graphics - 256 MB <input type="checkbox"/> Dedicated Graphics - 512 MB <input type="checkbox"/> Dedicated Graphics - 768 MB
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Memory	<input type="checkbox"/> 1GB <input type="checkbox"/> 2GB <input type="checkbox"/> 3GB <input type="checkbox"/> 4GB
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Hard Drive	<input type="checkbox"/> 160GB <input type="checkbox"/> 250GB <input type="checkbox"/> 320GB <input type="checkbox"/> 500GB <input type="checkbox"/> 750GB
<input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Optical Drive	<input type="checkbox"/> CD-RW / DVD-ROM <input type="checkbox"/> CD/DVD+RW <input type="checkbox"/> DVD+/-RW and CD-RW Combo <input type="checkbox"/> DVD-ROM Drive & DVD+/-RW Combo <input type="checkbox"/> Blu-Ray Disc
Collapse All Clear All	

All-in-One

To get the space-saving benefits of laptops and the flexible configuration options of the desktop, choose an all-in-one design such as the Dell XPS One.



There's just a monitor on a stand, a wireless keyboard and mouse and a remote control. Everything else is included in the monitor,



e.g. hard disk, a slot loading CD/DVD re-writer, six USB ports, an 8 in 1 media card reader, audio input/output and TV input.



Hot tip



This incorporates a 20 ins HD (high definition) wide screen monitor with integrated camera and microphone and 10 Watt stereo speakers.

Don't forget



There's a set of touch sensitive buttons on the lower right of the monitor, controlled by a proximity sensor so they only appear when you want to use them.

Don't forget



There is built-in wireless networking, with RF, IR, WiFi and Bluetooth, plus Gigabyte Ethernet.

Hot tip



We've used Dell to show how you can zero in on the computer that best fits your requirements, but all the suppliers are equally keen to help you find your way through the range of alternatives.

Don't forget

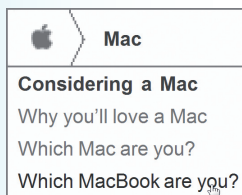


HP offers similar help for choosing desktop computers for home use, and there are also buying guides for the business and large enterprise users.

Hot tip



Apple provide similar assistance to help you choose your Mac or MacBook.

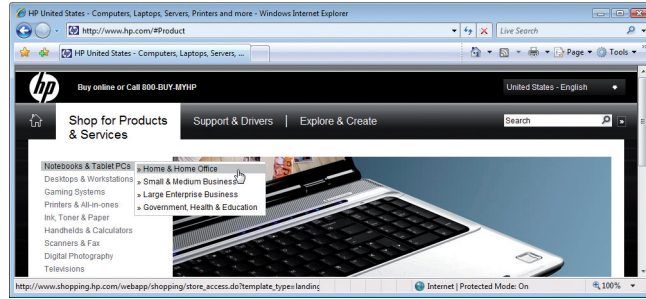


Help with Selecting

To see how HP provides help for choosing your computer:

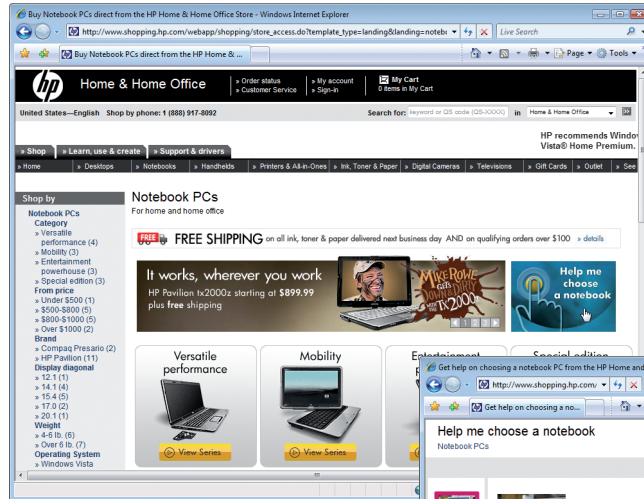
1

Visit www.hp.com, select Products & Services, then pick the product type and area, e.g. notebooks for home use



2

You can filter the systems by category, price, brand, display, size, weight and other factors, to select your preference



3

For more specific advice, click Help me choose a notebook, then select appropriate answers from any of the panels, to see the recommendations

