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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.

- 8** What is a Computer?
- 10** Operating Systems
- 12** PC Versus Mac
- 14** Choosing a Laptop
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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 that 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 specialized 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 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.



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 Inspiron 580.

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.



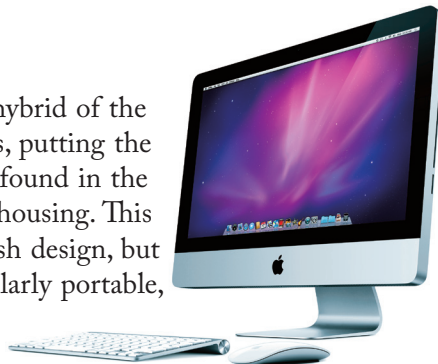
Hot tip



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

All-in-One Computers

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



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
- V10.6 Snow Leopard
- V10.7 Lion



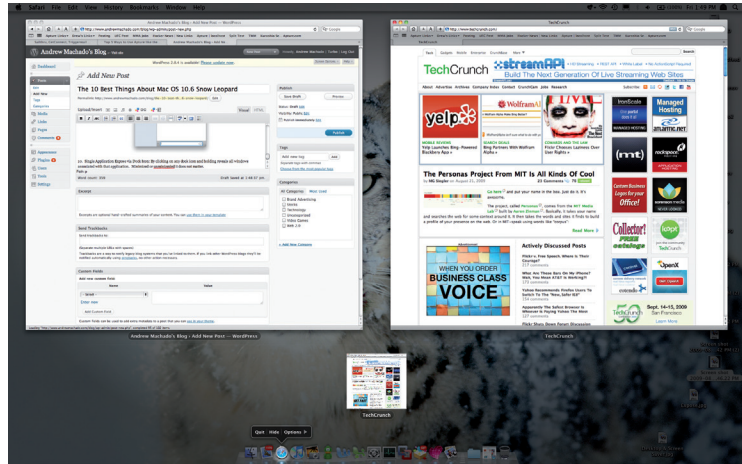
Operating Systems

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.



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.

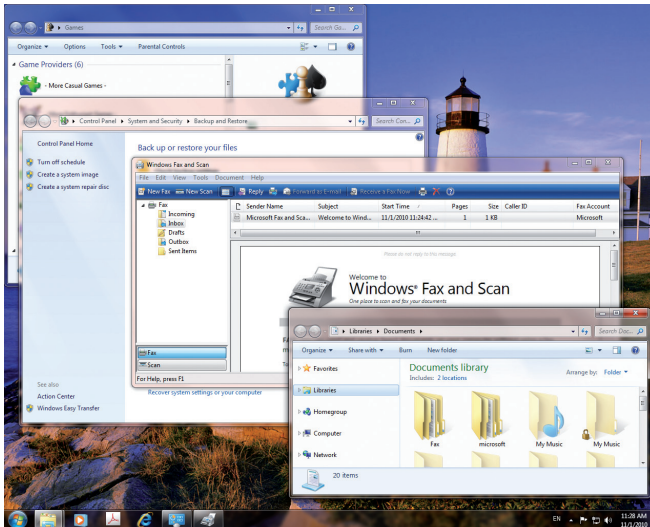
There are numerous applications and utilities supplied with Mac OS X. Other applications are available from Apple, Adobe, Microsoft and other suppliers.



...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.



The current version is Windows 7, 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 7 Starter
- Windows 7 Home Premium
- Windows 7 Ultimate

Two editions are provided for businesses and large organizations:

- Windows 7 Professional
- Windows 7 Enterprise

There is an edition that is designed for the users of personal computers in emerging technology markets:

- Windows 7 Home Basic

This edition is not available for PCs in the developed technology markets, such as the United States, European Union and Japan.

See page 26 for features of the main editions of Windows 7.

Beware



Starter Edition is for pre-installation only and has a number of restrictions, including no support for Aero and no Personalization.

Don't forget



Whichever edition of Windows 7 is installed on your computer, you will be able to upgrade it to a higher edition, with the Windows Anytime Upgrade feature.



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 version 7 and Microsoft Office 2010 for the illustrations and the examples, but highlights differences with other 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 when 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 a 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, in niche areas such as the media industry for example. Publishing, film editing, photo editing and audio recording software products were developed for the Mac first (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 for the Windows machines first. 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 like 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



You can also select your choices for screen size, processor, price band, memory size, speed, storage, video type, or optical drive options, to further control the range of laptops presented.

Refine Your Search

- ☒ Laptop Screen Size
- ☒ Processor
- ☒ Price
- ☒ Memory
- ☒ How fast does it need to be?
- ☒ How much storage do you need?
- ☒ Video Card Type
- ☒ Laptop Weight
- ☒ Optical Drive

1

Ultra Light (< 5lbs)

Refine Your Search

☒ Laptop Screen Size

- ☐ 10.1"
- ☐ 11" - 14"
- ☐ 15" - 16"
- ☐ 17" +

☒ Laptop Weight

- ☒ < 5 lbs. (Ultra Light)
- ☐ 5 - 7 lbs. (Light)
- ☐ > 7 lbs. (Desktop Replacement)



The Inspiron Mini 1018 model is 10.5 by 7.8 ins by 1.0 to 1.3 ins (being slightly wedge shaped), starts off at 2.2 lbs, and features a 160GB disk drive. The screen size is 10.1 ins.

2

Light (5 - 7lbs)

Refine Your Search

☒ Laptop Screen Size

- ☐ 10.1"
- ☐ 11" - 14"
- ☐ 15" - 16"
- ☐ 17" +

☒ Laptop Weight

- ☐ < 5 lbs. (Ultra Light)
- ☒ 5 - 7 lbs. (Light)
- ☐ > 7 lbs. (Desktop Replacement)



With a larger 17.3 ins screen, the Inspiron 17R is 16.5 by 10.9 ins by 1.4 ins and weighs 6.72 lbs or more.

The XPS 14 (with a 14 ins screen and 5.72 lbs) and the Inspiron 15 (15.6 ins screen and 5.8 lbs) provide alternative choices for mid range laptops.

There are various options, for each model, such as case colors, more powerful processors, extra system memory and enhanced graphics.

...cont'd

3 Desktop Replacement (> 7lbs)

Refine Your Search

☒ Laptop Screen Size

☐ 10.1"

☐ 11" - 14"

☐ 15" - 16"

☐ 17" +

☒ Laptop Weight

☐ < 5 lbs. (Ultra Light)

☐ 5 - 7 lbs. (Light)

☒ > 7 lbs. (Desktop Replacement)



For desktop replacements, the XPS 17 (17.3 ins screen and from 7.94 lbs) is available in a variety of configurations, including 1 TB (1000 GB) hard drive, 8 GB memory and a Blu-ray drive.

The Alienware M15x, which has a 15.6 ins screen and a starting weight of 9 lbs, includes advanced graphics and a high power quad core processor. This allows it to act as a very robust replacement for a desktop gaming computer.



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.

The Windows 7 Starter edition may be included with mini or netbook computers, while laptop computers usually have the fuller function Windows 7 Home Premium edition.

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 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 4 GB 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 available:

1

Select basic specifications, for a PC such as the Inspiron 560, for email, Internet surfing and documents



2

Choose higher specifications, for a PC like the Aurira ALX, for multitasking, playing music, watching videos, running graphics programs or playing games



Refine Your Search

Processor

- ☒ Intel Celeron
- ☐ Intel Core 2 Duo
- ☐ Intel Core i3
- ☐ Intel Core i5
- ☐ Intel Core i7
- ☐ AMD

Desktop Monitor Size

- ☐ No Monitor
- ☐ 19" - 20" (Medium)
- ☐ Over 20" (Large)

Memory

- ☐ More than 4GB
- ☐ 4GB
- ☐ 3GB
- ☒ 2GB

How much storage do you need?

Video Card Type

- ☐ Integrated Graphics
- ☐ Dedicated Video Card

Price

Optical Drive

- ☐ CD/DVD+RW
- ☐ Blu-Ray Disc

Form Factor

- ☐ All-in-one
- ☒ Mini Tower
- ☐ Slim Tower
- ☐ Performance and Gaming

How fast does it need to be?

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 like a TV tuner, networking device, web camera, printer and scanner.

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, CD/DVD re-writer, six USB ports, a 7 in 1 media card reader, audio input/output, network ports and TV input.



There's a standard model and a performance model, and each of these can be configured with the optional multitouch display. This allows you to toggle between windows with the swipe of a finger. You can also zoom in and out of photos and websites, and take advantage of touch-optimized applications. TouchCam lets you edit and upload photos and video directly to Facebook or YouTube. StickyNotes lets you write a note or type a message. Cyberlink YouPaint and other touch games are provided to entertain younger users.

Hot tip



This incorporates a 23 ins 1080P HD wide screen monitor with integrated 2 MB webcam, microphone and stereo speakers.

Don't forget



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

Hot tip



Dell Stage, available on touch screen systems only, helps you organize your music, photos and videos, share photos on Facebook, and even listen to your favorite radio station, all at your fingertips.

Hot tip

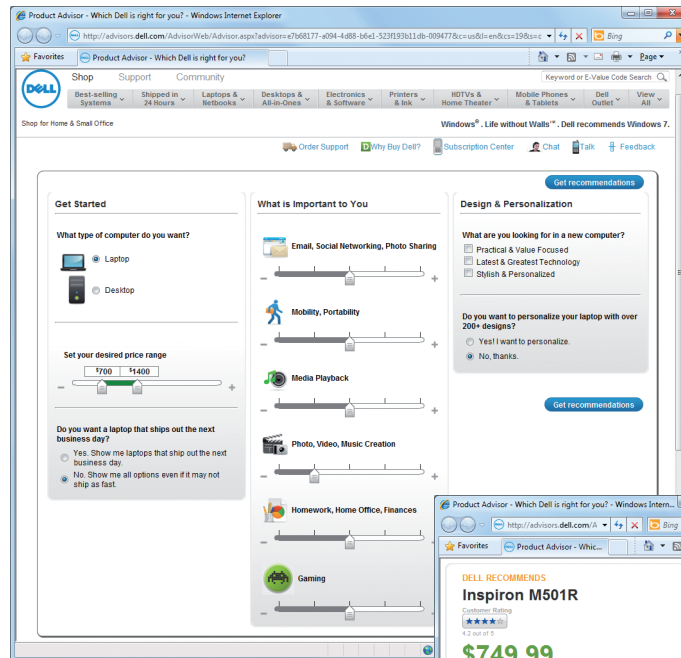
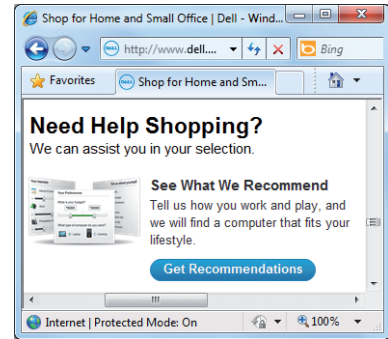


We've used Dell to show how you can zero in on the computer that best fits your requirements, but all the suppliers are equally keen to help you find your way through the range of alternatives.

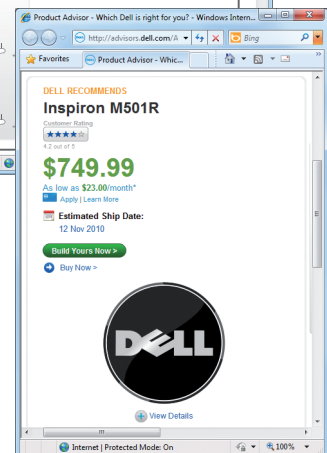
Help with Selecting

For more specific help in choosing your computer:

- 1 Visit www.dell.com, and click For Home
- 2 Scroll down to the Need Help Shopping section and click Get Recommendations
- 3 You can define the system in terms of what is important to you, and specify the computer type and price range



- 4 Click Get recommendations to see the system that best meets your needs



Don't forget



Dell will also suggest some alternative, higher powered solutions that may also suit.

MORE POWER

XPS 15

\$949.99

BEST PERFORMANCE

XPS 17

\$1,049.99

