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Laptop buying guide

Here at PCMag, we've spent over four decades testing thousands of laptops, with our analysts and editors boasting more than a century of collective experience. We test over 100 models annually to identify the best laptop overall, as well as ranking winners in various categories like gaming, work, budget, Chromebooks, and MacBooks. Our rigorous benchmark tests evaluate CPU and graphics performance, while we also assess design, usability, connectivity, and value. Currently, our top recommendation for most people is the Asus Zenbook 14 OLED Touch, a top-value ultraportable that lasts nearly 20 hours on a charge. We have many more tested and vetted recommendations to share with you. Read on to see all our picks, compare their specs, and get practical buying advice for finding the best laptop for your needs. Table of Contents... Our current top pick is the Asus Zenbook 14 OLED Touch, which offers excellent value for its price. We'll cover other recommendations below, but first, let's discuss the factors to consider when choosing a laptop: types of laptops, processor, graphics chip, storage and memory, connectivity, ideal weight and size, screen type, and more. Given text here Asus Zenbook 14 OLED Touch (UM3406) Review AI-ready AMD Ryzen 7 8840HS CPU and 16GB of memory provide reliable productivity for basic computing tasks and competitive performance in creative apps. The laptop's integrated graphics lead in visual tests, making it a well-rounded ultraportable. Battery life: The Zenbook outperforms most Windows laptops with 19 hours and 56 minutes of battery power in our video rundown test. Its price makes it competitive with Apple's MacBook Air models. Value for money: At under \$1,000, the Zenbook offers impressive performance and battery life at an aggressive price point. This ultraportable laptop is suitable for general home users and frequent travelers alike. The Dell Precision 5690 is a top-tier workstation that offers exceptional performance, reliability, and mobility. Its powerful Intel Core Ultra processors and Nvidia RTX 5000 Ada GPU make it an ideal choice for professionals who require high-performance capabilities for demanding applications. Acer Aspire 3 Review: A Budget-Friendly Option for Basic Tasks The Acer Aspire 3 is a budget-friendly laptop that offers relatively few compromises at its price. With a list price under \$400, this 15-inch laptop provides a decent keyboard, reliable performance, and lengthy battery life. General-purpose laptops are available at various price points. They offer everyday functionality, such as web browsing and casual gaming, with moderate specs and features. Prices start from \$300 and can go up to \$1,000. Ultraportable laptops are slim and lightweight, suitable for commutes or travel, but often lack advanced graphics capabilities. Most Windows ultraportables cost between \$700 and \$1,000. 2-in-1 laptops combine laptop and tablet functionality, with two subcategories: convertibles and detachables. They offer touch screens and vary in price from budget to high-end models. Gaming laptops feature discrete graphics processors for smooth gameplay, with prices ranging from \$700 to over \$5,000. Business laptops cater to different needs, including security features and specialized hardware. Mobile workstations focus on professional-grade GPUs and dedicated drivers. Chromebooks run exclusively on Google's ChromeOS and offer minimal local storage. MacBooks serve various audiences, from everyday users to professionals in advanced computing fields. Laptop Buying Considerations: A Comprehensive Guide Before making a purchase, consider the following key factors: * Brands: While each brand has its strengths, buying based on brand alone can lead to missed opportunities for better alternatives at various price points. * Battery Life: Expect mainstream and thin-and-light laptops to last longer than gaming laptops and workstations. However, usage patterns and component specifications play a significant role in determining actual battery life. * Price: Budget Windows laptops start at under \$500, while Chromebooks are available between \$400-\$600. Mainstream ultraportables range from \$700-\$1,200, with gaming laptops costing up to \$4,000 or more. Apple's MacBooks begin at \$999. * Size and Weight: Consider the frequency of use when assessing weight and size. Gaming machines typically weigh between 4-6 pounds, while mainstream laptops range from 3-5 pounds. Ultraportables weigh less than 3 pounds. * Displays: Look for IPS panels or premium options like OLEDs or mini LEDs. A minimum screen resolution of 1080p is recommended, with 120Hz or 144Hz refresh rates suitable for gaming models. Avoid TFT screens except in the cheapest laptops. * Processing Power: Intel and AMD chips come in various classes, with budget machines typically featuring "3" class processors, mainstream laptops having "5" class, and high-end power models sporting "7" or "9" class. Benchmark tests provide a more comprehensive understanding of relative performance. * Graphics Power: Integrated graphics from AMD or Intel are common in mainstream laptops, while discrete GPUs with Nvidia's RTX series or AMD's Radeon RX are found in gaming laptops and workstations. Higher GPU series numbers indicate faster performance, but reviews provide a more nuanced evaluation. * Memory and Storage: These factors play a crucial role in determining overall laptop performance. When shopping for a laptop, consider a minimum of 8GB of RAM, with 16GB being ideal, although more than 16GB is typically only necessary for professionals, workstation users, or heavy multitaskers. For storage, a 512GB SSD is a good starting point, but opt for at least 1TB in gaming laptops due to the large space requirements of games. In terms of ports, look for a mix that matches your peripherals, including both USB Type-A and Type-C, as well as a full-size HDMI output. Wi-Fi 6 support should suffice for most users, while Wi-Fi 6E is a premium feature and Wi-Fi 7 is the latest technology. All modern laptops also support Bluetooth. The choice of operating system depends on personal preference, with Windows 11 being the default for most buyers, macOS preferred by Apple users, and ChromeOS ideal for low-cost Chromebooks that focus on web-based work and cloud storage. Refurbished models can be a great deal, but ensure you have a good return policy in case you're not satisfied. When choosing a laptop brand, it's best to assess each model individually rather than relying on the brand's reputation, as different brands excel in different areas. For example, Apple is known for its creative professional-focused MacBooks, while Lenovo is renowned for its class-leading keyboards and business machines. Other top laptop brands include HP, MSI, Acer, and Asus, which dominate the midrange and budget sectors with value-minded systems. The longest-lasting laptops can vary depending on usage, but many can last a full workday away from an outlet, with some exceptions such as gaming laptops or those with 4K displays, which may deplete faster. Ultimately, the key to finding the right laptop is to consider your specific needs and preferences, rather than relying solely on brand reputation or general specifications. To compare laptops' battery life, PC Labs conducts thorough testing. They play a locally stored video file continuously at medium brightness, evaluating how well each machine adapts its power usage to the task. This assessment allows you to gauge potential performance among various models. While our test provides valuable insights, it's essential to consider that real-world use may vary significantly from this simulated scenario. Therefore, when comparing battery life, focus on relative differences rather than absolute values. Currently, the HP OmniBook X AI and Apple MacBook Pro 14 (M3 model) hold top spots in terms of endurance, lasting an impressive 30 hours under our testing conditions. If budget is a concern, you don't necessarily need cutting-edge features or robust components. Basic yet fully-featured laptops can be found for under \$500, especially during shopping holidays like Prime Day and Black Friday. However, these models may struggle with demanding tasks, such as multitasking or running resource-intensive programs. For more detailed performance comparisons, refer to our reviews. Spending closer to \$1,000 unlocks features like slim designs, 4K displays, powerful processors, and long-lasting batteries. Some high-end laptops even offer these features for under \$800 from brands like Acer, Asus, and HP. That being said, in this price range, you'll need to prioritize your needs, as it's unlikely that you can afford both a beautiful 4K display and ample storage at the same time. For those with more substantial budgets (over \$2,000), you have greater flexibility in choosing combinations of features. Nevertheless, even the most advanced laptops must adhere to physical limitations, such as generating heat and requiring cooling mechanisms that take up space. Business laptops, designed for IT management and security, often come at a higher cost due to additional features like premium warranties, enterprise-specific silicon, fingerprint or face-recognition login capabilities, and rugged build quality. When selecting an ideal laptop, consider one with dimensions no thicker than half an inch and weighing 3 pounds or less. This ultraportable design typically offers the best balance between portability and usability for most users. Most laptops have screens between 11-18 inches, with smaller sizes suitable for tablets and larger ones for gaming. A 14-inch screen is common, but some models offer bigger displays. Conventional clamshell designs or 2-in-1 models are available in various sizes. Smaller screens like 11-12 inches can be lighter than most 13-inch ultraportables, but they lack tablet effectiveness and have subpar typing experiences. Larger screens at 17-18 inches appeal to hardcore gamers, while some productivity machines or workstations use them for larger displays. Gaming laptops with 17-18 inch screens can mimic desktop experience, but are often heavy and expensive. The best laptop screen quality has improved over the past decade, offering crisper text, sharper images, and better colors. Most laptops have at least "full HD" resolutions, which vary in quality depending on technology used. IPS panels maintain image color even when viewed off-center, while TFT technology is inferior and fading out due to its poor viewing angles. Higher resolutions like 1440p, 1600p, and 4K offer crisper text and details. Some laptops use OLED or mini LED backlighting technology for better colors and HDR content. How often a screen redraws content is measured in hertz (Hz), which represents how many times per second it happens. A standard rate for this measure is 60 Hz, but some laptops can go up to 120 Hz or higher, like 144 Hz and even 360 Hz. Unless you're a professional gamer who needs extremely high frame rates, don't worry about going beyond 144 Hz. Before buying a laptop with a high-refresh screen, make sure its graphics chip (GPU) is strong enough to handle it. If your laptop's refresh rate is lower than 60 frames per second (FPS), a higher-refresh screen won't provide many benefits. Some laptops have touch screens, but they're not common in gaming laptops and are absent from Apple MacBooks. When choosing a laptop, consider the processor, as most ultraportables use Intel Core or AMD Ryzen CPUs. Higher CPU model numbers indicate more cores, faster clock speeds, and sometimes multithreading. Budget laptops typically use fewer-core processors like Ryzen 3 or Core i3/Pentium chips, while high-end models have workstation-class CPUs with many cores. Newer Intel-based laptops often use Core Ultra processors, which focus on AI processing. Most modern laptops consume less power than their desktop counterparts, but gaming laptops and mobile workstations may require more powerful CPUs with higher wattage consumption. Thin laptops usually have integrated graphics chips indicated by "H" and power-user machines have separate "H" chips. Some newer AI-equipped models use Qualcomm's Snapdragon X Elite and Plus family CPUs, which run an Arm-based version of Windows. When choosing a laptop's graphics chip, most users will find that the one built into the CPU is sufficient for everyday tasks. However, gamers should consider purchasing a separate discrete GPU with dedicated resources. Even budget GPUs offer better performance than integrated chips when playing 3D games. A high-end gamer might opt for Nvidia's latest GeForce RTX GPUs. The right level of GPU depends on desired frame rates and gaming preferences. Laptop reviews often compare graphics performance using demanding benchmarks. In terms of storage, modern laptops use solid-state drives (SSDs), which are faster than traditional hard drives and more resistant to physical damage. However, not all SSDs are created equal; those that support the PCI Express NVMe standard are preferable. The minimum recommended storage space is 256GB, but seeking at least 512GB for multimedia storage or gaming is advised. High-end laptops may offer even larger SSDs, but adding too much storage can increase the overall cost. squeak by with 8GB of RAM, but consider 16GB or more for heavy multitaskers and PC gamers, as it reduces slowdown risks while browsing resource-intensive websites. For AI tasks, at least 16GB is necessary. Content creators or high-end gamers may need more. Avoid anything less than 8GB of RAM, even for Chromebooks. When it comes to connectivity, look for the latest Wi-Fi standard (Wi-Fi 6 or 802.11ax) and steer clear of older versions like Wi-Fi 5 (802.11ac). For serious gamers, consider a laptop with a Killer Networks setup. Business users and gamers may also want dedicated Ethernet access. For USB ports, aim for laptops with both Type-A and Type-C ports to ensure compatibility with your existing peripherals. A mix of both is ideal. Don't forget HDMI or DisplayPort connectors for video output, especially if you plan to connect to a TV or monitor. Photographers will appreciate built-in SD or microSD card readers. Finally, consider the security features: look for Kensington-cable style or Noble-lock style notches for fastening physical locking cables. When buying refurbished laptops, opt for those sold directly by manufacturers and be cautious of resellers' grading systems. Don't rely on luck when buying a refurbished laptop - check the fine print and consider a longer warranty if needed. Most laptops come with a standard one-year warranty, but this might not cover accidents like spills or drops. Fortunately, your credit card company may provide additional coverage, including extending the manufacturer's warranty. If not, some top laptop brands offer extended warranties for accidental damage, costing around \$100-\$300. Our advice is to spend that money on backup drives instead if it exceeds 15% of the laptop's price. While peace of mind comes at a cost, knowing you're protected against costly repairs can be priceless. When shopping for a new laptop, take your time and look beyond specs - research and compare different models to find the best fit for your needs.

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