

Gift Guide: Plenty of laptops, even on budgets

December 2 2013, by Bree Fowler



In this , Tuesday, Oct. 8, 2013 file photo, the HP Chromebook 11 is displayed at a Google event in New York. The new \$279 laptop, based on Google's Internet-centric Chrome operating system, borrows many of the high-end features found in a model that costs about \$1,000 more. (AP Photo/Mark Lennihan)

There's no shortage of laptop computers to pick from this holiday season, even for shoppers on tight budgets. A Chromebook optimized to run Google's Internet services can be bought for as little as \$200, while a few hundred dollars more gets you a laptop that's not so dependent on

having a continuous online connection.

Although smartphones and [tablet computers](#) get much of the attention these days, laptops are still more desirable for people who do a lot of typing or other heavy-duty tasks such as photo editing.

For most people, price tops the list of factors to consider when choosing a new laptop. You also have to consider processing speeds, storage and battery needs and figure out how much weight the person you're shopping for will be willing to cart around.

And then there's the operating system.

Are you shopping for someone who prefers Windows 8? If that's the case, you'll probably want to spring for a touch-screen model. You might even consider a two-in-one, which can switch back and forth between a laptop and a tablet. There are also Windows tablets with attachable keyboards to make them perform much like laptops.

Choices are more limited for fans of Macs or Google's Chrome system, but the choices that are available are good ones.

This gift guide covers budget and mid-priced laptops with starting prices of less than \$1,000. If you're willing to spend more, you can get laptops that are lighter and more powerful. We'll cover those later. Keep in mind that you can often shop around for prices that beat the manufacturers' suggested prices.

GOOGLE CHROMEBOOKS

The nicest things about these laptops are their small size and low price.

But they also offer little functionality.

Instead of Windows or Mac OS, the computers run Google's Chrome OS software. That gives you access to services such as Gmail, Google Maps and Google Docs, along with Google's players for music and video. You can download other apps from Google and other companies, but there aren't a lot to choose from.

And while some functions work offline, the computers are really meant for online use. Forget about a fancy processor. Storage capacity is minimal, too. Most of the processing and storage is done over the Internet.

Chromebooks work best as a secondary laptop to take on trips or as a gift for students to do homework. My husband commented that one might also be good for his aging parents, whose computer skills are limited and their needs mostly involve email and Web surfing.

There are a handful of Chromebooks from such computer makers as Samsung Electronics Co. and Hewlett-Packard Co.

Acer Inc. has one of the cheapest I found—a C720, which starts at \$200. There's nothing fancy about it. It has an 11.6-inch (29-centimeter) display, measured diagonally, and weighs 2.8 pounds (1.2 kilograms). Like many other laptops, there are two USB ports and an HDMI port. The computer has 16 gigabytes of internal storage, though you get 100 gigabytes of free online storage through Google Drive for two years.

HP makes a sleeker, lighter model, the \$279 Chromebook 11. Unfortunately, sales were halted after some users reported overheating chargers. It's worth a look if it comes back—fixed—before the holidays. A 14-inch (35-centimeter) version is still available, starting at \$299.

MID-PRICED LAPTOPS



This undated image provided by Dell shows the Dell Inc.'s Inspiron 14 7000, The laptop starts at \$850. (AP Photo/Dell)

— Dell Inc.'s Inspiron 14 7000, starts at \$850:

Made of forged aluminum, these laptops are durable. The 14-inch version is considerably thinner than past models, at just over a half-inch. But it's not particularly light, starting at 4.4 pounds (2 kilograms). That weight is typical for these mid-priced laptops, mostly because they use traditional hard drives rather than solid-state memory found in pricier laptops called ultrabooks. Windows 8 runs well on the Inspiron's high-definition touch screen. Options with larger screens and faster processors are available.

— Lenovo Group Ltd.'s Flex 14, starts at \$569:

This 14-inch Windows laptop lacks the grace, styling and processing power found on other Lenovo products, but that's not surprising for a laptop at this price. It's encased in black plastic, which makes it feel cheap and bulky—something that's also common for something this inexpensive.

What makes the Flex stand out is its ability to, well, flex. You can bend its screen almost all the way back, turning the keyboard into a base. That makes it easy to watch videos in bed or use the computer's touch-screen functions without the keyboard getting in the way.

— Toshiba Satellite Click, sold exclusively through Best Buy or Toshiba's website, currently for \$600:

This attempt to combine the best of a laptop and a tablet has mixed results.

You can tell that Toshiba put a lot of effort into designing the magnetic hinge that connects the tablet portion with its keyboard base. The keyboard snaps in and out easily. But the 13.3-inch (33-centimeter) device feels heavy and bulky even when you're just holding the tablet portion, which weighs 2.8 pounds (1.27 kilograms). The keyboard adds two pounds (0.9 kilograms), making it the heaviest of the six reviewed. It's more for watching a movie in bed, not for taking on the train.

Like the other laptops at this price range, the Satellite Click comes with a touch screen and runs Windows 8. There's a battery in both the tablet and keyboard portions.

— MacBook Air, starts at \$999:

This one barely makes the \$1,000 cutoff. And this price gives you the 11.6-inch (29.4-centimeter) version, making it more expensive than Windows computers with larger screens. A 13.3-inch (33.8-centimeter) model costs \$100 more.

The Air uses solid-state storage rather than traditional hard drives, meaning it stores less than the Inspiron, Flex or Satellite Click.

But that keeps the Air light, at 2.4 pounds (1.09 kilograms) for the 11-inch (28-centimeter) version and 3 pounds for the larger one. The weight puts the Air in the same class as Windows ultrabooks costing hundreds of dollars more. The big differences: The Air's display has a lower resolution than leading ultrabooks, and it lacks a [touch screen](#), something Apple opposes in laptops.

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Citation: Gift Guide: Plenty of laptops, even on budgets (2013, December 2) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-12-gift-plenty-laptops.html>

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