

Review: Microsoft Surface Pro finally has laptop feel

October 21 2015, by Anick Jesdanun



With the new Surface Pro 4, typing on a Microsoft tablet finally feels like typing on a regular laptop.

Although Microsoft has tried hard to sell the Surface as a laptop replacement, its keyboard has felt flimsy—something to tolerate when a real laptop isn't available. The keyboard attaches magnetically and has to be thin enough to fold over like a book cover. Consequently, it has felt

like typing on cardboard over my lap.

Microsoft says the Pro 4 keyboard cover is 20 percent stiffer, so it no longer feels like cardboard. Each key is slightly taller, too, giving it a more natural feel. More room on the cover is devoted to the keys and the touchpad rather than dead space. Microsoft keeps the cover's weight and thickness about the same as before by turning to different materials.

All this translates to a keyboard that's enjoyable rather than tolerable. I made it my primary computer for two weeks, including travels through upstate New York and Ontario, Canada. The Pro 4 felt comfortable whether I was in a hotel bed, a friend's living room or the tasting room of a winery.

BEYOND THE KEYBOARD

Now that Windows 10 is available, the Pro 4 is the first Surface I can wholeheartedly recommend. The cardboard-like keyboard wasn't my only gripe. Windows 8 felt like using two machines at once, with the system constantly kicking you to the one you didn't want. Microsoft's free Windows 10 update in July addresses the bulk of my frustrations.

I also like the addition of a magnet on the left side to attach an included stylus. The stylus still came off a few times during my travels, so I stowed it in my backpack after a few days and didn't have it handy when needed. Samsung's Note devices have built-in holes for their stylus, although in avoiding that approach, Microsoft was able to make the stylus larger and more like a regular pen.

The stylus might be useful for note-taking, though I prefer just typing notes and reminders. Artists might appreciate having it for drawing and

sketching. The Surface is pressure-sensitive and responds differently whether you press hard or lightly. But it won't let you shade from an angle like a pencil, which the Apple Pencil stylus for the upcoming iPad Pro will let you do.

Meanwhile, you can enable facial recognition on the Pro 4 to bypass a sign-in password. The feature wasn't available for testing yet, however. A premium keyboard cover offers a fingerprint reader.



This Tuesday, Oct. 6, 2015, image provided by Microsoft shows the Surface Pro 4 at a Windows 10 Devices Event, in New York. With the new Surface Pro 4, typing on a Microsoft tablet finally feels like typing on a regular laptop. (Mark Von Holden/Microsoft via AP)

PRICES AND COMPARISONS

The Pro 4 starts shipping next Monday in the U.S. and Canada. It starts at \$899 and comes with the stylus, though it's unrealistic to have without the \$130 keyboard cover. The base model comes with just 128 gigabytes of storage, which is barely enough for moderate and heavy users.

Configurations with double that storage start at \$1,299, or \$1,429 with the keyboard. The high-end model with 512 gigabytes costs \$2,329 with the cover. The premium, fingerprint keyboard cover is \$30 more.

Apple's entry-level iPads are much cheaper, but Microsoft is going after customers of the MacBook Air (which starts at \$899) and the iPad Pro (which starts at \$799, plus \$169 for a physical keyboard and \$99 for the Apple Pencil).

I have been using Macs since 1987 and have invested a lot in software and accessories, so I don't see myself abandoning my Mac laptop for the Surface. But the Surface could appeal to those already familiar with Windows and want compatibility with what they have at work.

Battery life isn't as good compared with the MacBook Air. While the 13-inch Air has given me nine to 11 hours of general use, it's closer to six or seven on the Surface. Among other things, the resolution on the Surface's 12.3-inch display is sharper, meaning there are more pixels to light up. The Surface also has a touch screen, while Mac laptops do not.

The iPad Pro isn't out for a few more weeks, so the jury is still out on how it compares. The pencil shading is one feature that stands out in my limited hands-on time with the Pro.

THE SURFACE BOOK

Although Microsoft designed the Pro 4 as a tablet for professionals, it might not be powerful enough for some tasks. Microsoft built the new Surface Book laptop for graphic artists, science researchers and others with data-intensive tasks.

My time with the Surface Book was brief, not enough to make a recommendation. Although I'm impressed with what I'm seeing, the price tag of \$1,499 to \$3,199 will keep it out of reach of many people. Then again, most people will be fine with the Pro 4's performance, especially with a keyboard that now feels like a laptop.

CHEAPER OPTIONS

The price of last year's Pro 3 drops to \$699. The good news: The new keyboard works with it and feels as comfortable on the lap.

For a budget option, consider the Surface 3 (without the Pro in the name). The screen is smaller, and the kickstand doesn't have as much flexibility. But it's a good machine—for as low as \$499. In fact, the Pro models might be overkill for many students and casual users.

Unlike the Pro, the stylus is sold separately for \$50. The Surface 3 is the only model with an option for cellular connectivity, for \$100 more, not including the data plan.

Surface 3 now comes with Windows 10, but you get the older, cardboard-like keyboard.

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