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HOW DO I...

## Choose a PC for school

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It's back-to-school time, so getting the right laptop computer is on a lot of people's to-do lists. Here, we concentrate on Windows-based PCs in the \$800-to-\$1,000 range (we'll talk about Macs next week, as they fall into a different price range. The cheapest Apple laptop -- a Macbook -- starts at \$1,000 before you add important upgrades.)

You can spend less than a grand and get great quality laptops; \$700 can get you a decent setup. Just about any laptop will do for getting facts off the Internet and compiling an A-plus class report, but most students -- whether they're in grade school or graduate school -- want more out of their computers. Don't expect to speed through demanding tasks such as editing video or playing big-name video games for less than \$1,000.

And here's a dollar-saving tip if you buy computer equipment online: Look for coupons from sites such as dealcatcher.com and 4computercoupons.com. These are Web-only coupons -- you can't take them into a store -- but they apply at checkout if you buy online from a manufacturer such as Dell or from an stores such as circuitcity.com and newegg.com.

To get the most for your money, figure out how your student is likely to use the computer. (Note: Avid computer gamers will need to spend more than our \$1,000 limit):



### The light user:

- The junior high schooler who likes to play games and chat with other tweens at hangouts such as clubpenguin.com.
- The person who listens to Internet radio while regularly checking out his or her MySpace

program  
from  
**DEPAUL  
UNIVERSITY**  
SCHOOL OF COMPUTER SCIENCE,  
TELECOMMUNICATIONS AND  
INFORMATION SYSTEMS  
*Institute for Professional Development*

or Facebook pages, constantly sending instant messages to friends and occasionally watching music videos at launch.yahoo.com and at YouTube.

For these users, the laptop's most demanding job will be handling some short videos, so a multitasking workhorse is a good choice. For example, check out the **Toshiba Satellite A135 series** (above), which covers the basics and a little bit more. Expect to pay around \$800.



### The heavy user:

- The person whose laptop will also be the dorm room TV, stereo, DVD player.

Full-screen video capability and versatility are the focus here, so you'll have to step up a bit in price. Examples include the **Hewlett-Packard dv6000 series**, which comes with an optional TV tuner to record shows. Expect to pay around \$900 for a nicely loaded version. Also, look at the new **Dell Inspiron notebooks** (above), which when ordered online come with free upgrades to a 160 gigabyte hard drive and 2 gigabytes of memory, starting at \$749.

If you're bewildered by choices -- And who isn't? -- here is a checklist of upgrades worth the extra money:

- Choose a dual-core processor; your computer will be able to handle more jobs simultaneously without slowing. Not every software package needs dual-core power today, but down the line, it'll come in handy.
- Software. Budget \$150 for Microsoft Office Home and Student 2007. Many computers come with the word processor Microsoft Works, but it's not as powerful as Microsoft Word, which is included in Office (along with popular programs Excel and PowerPoint).
- Extra memory. Get at least 1 gigabyte of RAM so that your computer has lots of short-term memory to get through tasks faster. It's even better to spring for 2 gigabytes of memory, especially if you're getting a computer that runs Microsoft's Vista operating system. If you can afford only 1 gigabyte of memory right now, keep your options open by choosing a computer with expandable RAM so you can add more memory later. Read the computer's description online or in-store and look for "Memory is expandable to 2 gigabytes" or "Memory is expandable to 2048 megabytes."
- More hard drive space. An 80 gigabyte hard drive is the smallest you should consider. Bigger is better because space fills up fast with music and video, and you want to leave room for homework. If you plan to push your computer to the limits and edit video, get at least 160 gigabytes of hard drive storage. You'll need space for your projects.
- Light weight. Keep the laptop under 8 pounds. It might not seem like it, but that's plenty of weight to be hauling from one end of campus to the other. This usually means the maximum screen size should be 15.4

inches, measured diagonally. Sure, 17-inch screens are wonderful for watching DVDs or video sites such as Joost, but those monsters wreak havoc on one's back when toting them around. Make sure the display can handle a resolution of at least 1280x720, for true widescreen viewing.

- Get the best graphics card you can afford. Otherwise, that nice display you've spent money on will go to waste. Gamers prefer ATI Radeon and Nvidia cards because software has been tested to work with them, and those companies provide quick software fixes when their cards don't work with newer programs.
- Look for a computer with a PC Express slot, so you can add a fast Wireless N Wi-Fi adapter later. Wireless technology is changing, and most computers' Wi-Fi components will be considered slow in a couple of years. A PC Express slot lets you add the newer Wireless N adapter when you're ready to upgrade your home network down the line. Wireless N technology is faster and covers a wider range than current Wireless G technology. But the rules for how Wireless N will work haven't even been made official yet -- and won't be until probably early next year. It may seem like gobbledygook, but just understand this: You don't need it yet -- your campus wireless network isn't ready to take advantage of Wireless N. With a PC Express slot, you'll be ready to adapt to changing wireless technology.
- Operating system. Many vendors limit your choice of operating system to Windows Vista. If you get a choice, pick a Windows XP machine over a Windows Vista computer. That seems odd because Windows XP will no longer be available after January 2008; and yes, Microsoft won't answer your Windows XP questions after 2014; and yup, Windows is older than Vista. But here's why it matters: XP demands less of your computer than Vista does, and that's worth more than Vista's bells and whistles. Even Microsoft acknowledges that it will be selling more XP machines this year than it thought.

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*NEXT WEEK: What you need to know about Macs.*

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