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Cool for school 2008 guide to laptops

8 TOP PICKS

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Things have changed a lot in the past 12 months since our 2007 back-to-school guide to laptops costing \$1,000 or less. A new class of mini-laptops—less-than-\$500 machines small enough to fit on a sheet of paper—has taken off. Microsoft recently ended sales and support for Windows XP, while Apple last fall updated the Mac operating system. And the solid-state hard drive is gaining steam as an alternative to the heavier, hotter and power-gulping hard drive we know and love.

But one thing hasn't changed in the past year: It's a pain to sift through all the specs and models to find a computer for you or your student.

Ta-da! Behold our 2008 back-to-school guide to laptops.



BEFORE YOU BUY

- Find out if the student's school or academic major spell out computer requirements. At some schools, disciplines such as architecture specify MacBook Pro computers, for example.
- If you have a choice of batteries for your laptop, spring for a six-cell battery, which has become an option on many computers, even low-cost ones. While a three-cell battery can provide up to three hours of use, a six-cell can go up to five hours between charges.
- Budget extra money to install as much memory as the computer can handle (at least 2 gigabytes). That's the quickest way to improve a computer's performance.
- Think how the student will use the computer. Weight and screen size matter. For note-taking, surfing the Web and maximum portability between classes, steer toward the smaller, less expensive laptops. For editing audio or video, running big spreadsheets or other demanding assignments, you'll want a larger screen and bigger hard drive, which makes for a heavier backpack if your student has to lug the computer around campus.

LOOKING FOR A DEAL?

- Don't pay full price. Look for online coupons from sites such as dealcatcher.com and 4computercoupons.com, which can be used at checkout if you're buying from stores such as circuitcity .com and newegg.com. Mac buyers can save hundreds buying a refurbished model with Apple's one-year warranty (store.apple.com; click on "Refurbished Mac" near the bottom of the page).
- If you can wait till October, prices usually come down on older models after the back-to-school sales rush is over.
- Go to the computer-maker's Web site and customize the computer you want to buy. Choosing your own setup online can be more confusing and frustrating than buying a preconfigured model in a store, but it lets you save money by choosing lower-priced options (for example, a smaller, less expensive hard drive; meanwhile you can save up to buy a big external hard drive).
- Go with a hard disk drive, not the slightly more expensive solid-state drive. Solid-state drives are lighter than hard disk drives; don't undergo the wear and tear of hard disk drives; and don't require a noisy fan to keep cool. But the original notion that solid-state drives would last longer than hard disk drives isn't proving to be true, at least with early components. Computer engineers are working on the problem, but for now, I would get a hard disk drive.

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Acer Aspire 4720

This \$600 number has a crisp 14-inch screen that's not too small and offers adequate video playback performance, if you don't push it too hard. If you can spare an extra \$80, definitely double the memory to 2 gigabytes to take greater advantage of the Intel Core 2 Duo processor. (www.acer.com)

Asus Eee PC 900

The king of the mini-laptops, the \$650 EeePC 900 has a 9-inch screen that will have you scrolling a bit to see a full Web page, but the performance is a step up from last year's EeePC that defined this category. (usa.asus.com)

Dell Studio 15

For about \$850, you can get a sharp 15-inch screen with a DVD writer, 3 gigabytes of memory and a long-lasting battery. It's a budget computer that doesn't feel budget. (dell.com)

Fujitsu LifeBook A6210

The 15-inch screen isn't the sharpest, but it comes with a DVD writer and 3 gigabytes of memory,

for about \$900. You'll get used to the slightly cramped keyboard but praise its durability. (fujitsu.com/us)

HP Mini-Note

Hewlett-Packard's \$750 entry in the mini-laptop game is an established favorite. (hp.com)

MacBook, MacBook Pro, MacBook Air

You'll spend more for a Mac (at least \$1,100), but they come loaded with hardware and software that cost extra on other machines, so you're ready to go right out of the box. Plus, they have an undeniable cool factor, and if you want, you can buy the Vista operating system from a store and install it on your computer to give you Mac-and-Windows flexibility.

(apple.com)

MSI Wind

A newcomer to the mini-laptop game, the \$500 MSI Wind has a 10-inch screen that, like many displays in this price range, seems washed out in bright sun. With its bigger screen, more comfortable keyboard and comparable performance, the Wind challenges the Asus Eee PC 900. (www.msimobile.com)

Toshiba Satellite A300

The \$900 A300 carries on the Toshiba Satellite tradition of providing all-around value. It's heavier than many of the computers on this list, but with a 320 gigabyte hard drive and 4 gigabytes of memory standard, it is a winner. (toshiba.com)

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