



Tips on Buying a new computer for College

You'll spend a bit of money on a new computer setup. It is worth thinking about and planning this purchase out. It could save you hundreds of dollars and a lot of grief over your collegiate years. Take some time and think about your needs and then plan your purchase before calling a sales rep or logging into a website to make your order. When you already know what you want, it is easier to say "no" to upgrades that will be pointless for you.

The biggest mistake most people make when buying a computer is that they view a computer as an investment. It is quite the opposite. The computer is a consumable, losing almost all of its value within four or five years. The best thing to do when planning a new computer purchase is to figure out exactly what you'll be using it for and your priorities in ergonomics (visual appeal, noise levels, ease of use, etc.). Don't let sales people upgrade things for you that you'll never use. They can be pretty persuasive. If, in two years, you find yourself wishing that you would have purchased that extra hard drive for more storage space, don't worry! That same hard drive will be about half the price in two years.

Another mistake people often make is getting the "bargain bin" computer. These are almost never a good value. These desktops and notebooks are typically obsolete before they make it to the store. That is why they are selling them for \$300 or \$400. You'll find yourself wanting to upgrade every year. Spending a bit more on a better quality computer will save money in the long run since it will last longer and need upgraded less.

Shop around. Visit websites like techbargains.com and dealnews.com to find good, up to the minute sales, deals, and coupons. You'll almost always save by ordering direct from the manufacturer or online (as opposed to getting something from Best Buy, Circuit City, or Staples). Compare and consider buying direct from these companies: ASUS, HP/Compaq, Dell, Sony, Lenovo, Toshiba, and Apple. Amazon.com and newegg.com are good places to compare prices. Though they are web retailers/discounters, and not direct sellers, they often have competitive prices.

Good features to consider:

- A dual or quad-core processor—Intel Core i5 processors are great new chip line. They are extremely fast, can execute multiple instructions at once, and can power parts of themselves down when they are not in-use, saving power and lowering noise. These are almost always worth the extra cost over a bottom-of-the-barrel Celeron or Turion processor. Core 2 Duo and Core 2 Quad chips are good, but the i5 doesn't cost a lot more and gives a lot of advantages over this previous generation chip line. Core i3 chips are pretty much on a similar performance level as Core 2 Duo chips. Core i7 processors are VERY fast, but that speed comes at a high price. Unless you know for sure you'll need all of the power, stick with a Core i5.
- DVD-/RW drive (great for backups and video projects).
- Larger, 22" LCD monitor (is more ergonomic for your eyes, requires less scrolling).
- 2-8 Gigabytes of RAM (Never get less than 2 Gigabytes). 4-6 Gigabytes is typically a nice sweet-spot for price/performance.

- 80 Gigabytes of hard drive space will suffice if you mostly will use the computer for word processing and office-type tasks.
- 120-320 Gigabytes of hard drive space if you have a medium sized music collection and will be using a few short video files.
- 500 Gigabytes-2TB of hard drive space if you have a large music collection and will be dealing with many or large video files (notebook drives do not cheaply come this big—consider an external drive for a notebook that will be doing these tasks).
- You'll need a good video card from ATI or nVidia if you plan on much video editing or gaming. Windows' Aero Glass interface also runs much better when you have a dedicated video card with 256 Megabytes or more of RAM on it. Be wary of the performance of a video card if you pay less than \$50 for it. "On-board" graphics are good for basic tasks like word processing, playing music, or playing 2-D flash-type games. Forget about playing 3-D games on "on-board" graphics chips.

Upgrades not typically worthwhile:

- An add-in sound cards - These don't do much better than the on-board sound chips and they cost a lot more.
- An add-in video card that costs less than \$50 - This will just add cost without helping the graphics much.
- Extra-large widescreen monitors. The 32" displays typically have similar pixel counts to a 21" or 22" display. They have larger pixels but can't really display more information. In fact, if you are sitting close to a 32" monitor, it will probably look worse than sitting the same distance from a 22" monitor.
- TV Tuner cards. These typically require an external antenna or a cable TV attachment. At Grace, antenna reception is poor and there are no cable connections in the dorm rooms.
- Refurbished computers or computer components - Computers do wear out. Typical lifespan is considered 4 to 5 years. If you get a refurb that is 2 years old, the components may only last another couple of years.

Netbooks - mini-notebooks

- Netbooks are a popular class of mini-notebook. The good ones are based on the Intel Atom chipset, weigh less than 3 pounds, and have screens in size from 8.9" to 12".
- Netbooks are acceptable (though not recommended) options if you are very price sensitive, want something ultra portable, can deal with a smaller keyboard and screen, and won't do much beyond accessing web sites, web-based applications, and basic office-type productivity.
- These come with either a version of Linux (**not** supported on the Grace network) or Windows XP (make sure you get this OS if you want to use it at Grace).
- If you decide a netbook is right for you be sure to get at least 1GB RAM, an 8.9" or bigger screen, Windows XP, and an 80GB (or larger) Hard Drive. Be aware of a netbook's limitations.

Additional Tips:

- Don't forget a good, high-capacity USB thumb drive. They are invaluable for transporting data around campus. Get one from web sites like meritline.com or supermediastore.com that specialize in flash memory devices—you'll pay about half of what you would pay at Staples or Wal-Mart. As of early summer 2010, you can get a 4GB USB flash drive for about \$12 shipped, 8GB for about \$17 shipped, and 16GB for about \$30 shipped. For comparison, a 4GB drive holds almost as much as a DVD-R. USB thumb drives are more durable, have

faster read and write times, and are much more re-usable than other removable storage media.

- If you get a macbook or macbook pro, be sure to get the optional mini DisplayPort to VGA adapter dongle (it is \$29 at the apple store). You will need this if you plan on using your Apple notebook with one of our classroom projectors (many classes involve the student presenting to the class).
- If you plan on using your computer as a stereo system, get a good set of external speakers. A \$80-\$120 set of speakers can make all the difference. And unlike the computer, they don't wear out or devalue as quickly—you should be able to use them over the life of several computers—and with mp3 players like iPods.
- If you'll be doing any video projects, get a digital camcorder. We have found that the Flip Ultra is a very good video camera at a good price (and exceptionally easy to use). You can usually find good deals on them at amazon.com. You can choose between standard and HD models. Be aware that HD video takes up significantly more room on a hard drive than standard video.
- If you buy software, make sure you're getting an educational or student discount price. Almost all software companies offer some kind of discount for students. Grace College has teamed up with e-academy to offer discounts on Microsoft and Adobe software. You can get more information on this program by logging into the grace portal (portal.grace.edu) then going to the Campus Life tab and clicking on the OIT link.

Make a list of your priorities. Check out different models on websites. Which one will fit best on your desk? Will you be taking your notebook to class? If so make sure it is portable and has adequate battery life (a 17" screen on a notebook makes it very heavy and unwieldy). See which models have what features available. Often, different models will have different upgrade prices for the same components. So a "bargain" model may charge more for a DVD-/RW upgrade than a midline model. It is good to check these things out and know exactly what you want when you order. Know exactly which model and which components you want on that model. Don't let the sales person talk you into any upgrades you aren't planning on. Ask if they offer student or educational discounts.