

Tech Talk

Navigating the world of technology one gadget at a time
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Netbook Computers

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What is a netbook computer and why should I care?

A netbook computer is a tiny and inexpensive notebook computer. In many ways, it is the antithesis of the pricey, massive and unwieldy 17-inch entertainment notebooks which have been popular in recent years. If economy and portability are key for you, a netbook computer might be attractive.

I've heard that netbooks are underpowered. Shouldn't I spend more and get a standard laptop computer ?

It's certainly true that netbook computers are less powerful than traditional laptops, but you might be surprised at how well they zip through everyday tasks like email, word processing and browsing the Internet. Don't skimp on memory when buying a netbook – speed often improves with increased RAM (random access memory), especially on netbooks running versions of Microsoft Windows.



Netbooks are designed from the ground up to be extremely portable.

Who needs a netbook?

You might be a good candidate for a netbook if you meet one or more of these criteria:

- You've got a large notebook computer which rarely leaves your office because it's too heavy to lug around. In this instance, a netbook could be a great second laptop computer.

- It's time for your teenage daughter to get her first computer. Netbooks often cost under \$400, making them a popular budget choice for students.
- You like to work on your computer while flying, but there are two major problems: your laptop's battery dies well before you reach your destination, and your screen is too tall to adjust to a comfortable viewing angle because of the reclined seat in front of you. A few netbook computers have battery life in excess of five hours, and virtually all of them can adjust to a comfortable angle on an airplane tray.
- You're frustrated at how slow your current laptop is to start up in the morning. Some netbooks have solid-state drives (SSDs) which can be significantly faster at boot up time.

How much do netbooks cost?

You can expect to spend between \$350 and \$650 for a new netbook computer. If you opt for a refurbished or sale model, you may be able to find one for as little as \$250.

Can I watch movies on a netbook computer?

This can be a little tricky. While the Intel Atom processor found in many netbooks is more than powerful enough to display DVD movies, these devices lack built-in DVD drives on which to play them. This omission keeps cost, weight and size to a minimum but makes it difficult to find video to watch.

Some people download programs to convert DVD movies into files playable on netbooks (this process is called ripping). See netbookreview.darrenyates.com.au/?p=229 for an overview. Please note: ripping DVDs may be illegal even if you own a copy of the DVD you're trying to convert.

What about the tiny screens?

The screen size of most netbooks is between 9" and 12" on the diagonal. This is more than adequate for most tasks, but it may require a lot of vertical scrolling on some websites. Some find this bothersome.



A Dell Mini 9 sitting next to a 14" Compaq notebook highlights the contrast in size.

In a computer this small is the keyboard usable?

An extended typing session on any netbook can be a little uncomfortable, as the keys are reduced in size in the interest of portability. Many people only use these computers to browse the Internet, type emails and listen to music. If these are the types of activities for which you need use a netbook, a small keyboard may be just fine. If a good keyboard is important to you, those found on Hewlett Packard netbooks are thought by some to be the best available.



The Dell Mini 9's keyboard is tiny compared to a full-sized desktop keyboard.

Which operating system (OS) do netbooks use?

Windows XP, despite growing a little long-in-the-tooth, is preinstalled on many netbooks, as it is more sprightly and responsive than Windows Vista with modest hardware. Windows 7, Microsoft's next operating system is said by some beta testers to perform pretty well on netbooks too. Look for it to be an option on some models in early 2010.

As a lower-cost alternative to Windows, some netbooks feature the open source Linux operating system in its Ubuntu variant. This often shaves \$50 or so off of the price, as manufacturers don't have to pay hefty licensing fees to Microsoft for the OS.

One recent version of Ubuntu is called Ubuntu Netbook Remix (UNR) 9.04. This little gem of an operating system is optimized for the small screens found on netbook computers. For more information on UNR, visit www.canonical.com/projects/ubuntu/unr. Note: you can install UNR on a netbook regardless of whether it comes preinstalled with Windows or Linux.

Some brave souls have even installed the Macintosh OS X on their netbooks to create hacked Macintoshes, or *hackintoshes*. Perform a *google.com* search for **hackintosh netbook** to learn more.

Not all netbook computers work well as *hackintoshes*, but one that gets high marks is the Dell Mini 9 (the Dell 10" and 12" models do not). Performing this installation is not for the computer novice or faint of heart. You'll need a retail copy of OS X (10.5.4) and either an external bootable USB DVD drive or a couple of USB thumb drives. For explicit instructions on installing OS X on the Mini 9, search *google.com* for **install Mac OS X DellEFI Method** which will direct you to a step-by-step guide on the *mydellmini.com* forum.

Note: installing the Macintosh operating system on anything but official Apple hardware likely violates the user agreement of the OS X software.

Parting Thoughts

Having a WiFi-enabled computer you can take with you everywhere is liberating, especially if you're addicted to email or Facebook. While a netbook isn't likely to be your family's only computer, it can make a great adjunct to a larger desktop or laptop model. Being able to say goodbye to sore shoulders at the airport or school may make a netbook worth the small admission fee.



Ubuntu Netbook Remix offers a minimalist and easy-to-use interface to your netbook.

If you have questions, comments or suggestions, you can visit me at the Reference Desk, contact me via email (moetting@hinsdalelibrary.info), or call me at 630-986-1976x225.

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