

Personal Computer Buyer's Guide

- 1) **Determine what application software products you will use on your computer.** Knowing what **software applications** you plan to use will help you decide on the type of computer to buy, as well as to define the memory, storage, and other requirements. Certain software products, for example, can run only on Macintosh computers, while others run only on a PC with the Windows operating system. Further, some software products require more memory and disk space than others, as well as additional input/output devices.

When you purchase a computer, it may come bundled with several software products (although not all will). At the very least, you probably will want software for word processing and a browser to access the World Wide Web. If you need additional applications, such as spreadsheet, database, or presentation graphics, consider purchasing a software suite that offers reduced pricing on several applications.

Before selecting a specific package, be sure the software contains the features necessary for the tasks you want to perform. Many Web sites and magazines provide reviews of software products. These sites also frequently have articles that rate computers and software on cost, performance, and support.

- 2) **Before buying a computer, do some research.** Talk to friends, coworkers, and instructors about prospective computer systems. What type of computer did they buy? Why? Would they recommend their computer and the company from which they bought it? You also should visit Web sites or read reviews in magazines. As you conduct your **research**, consider the following important criteria:
 - a) Speed of the processor
 - b) Size and types of memory (RAM) and storage (hard disk, floppy disk, CD-ROM, DVD-ROM, Zip® drive)
 - c) Input/output devices included with the system (e.g., mouse, keyboard, monitor, printer, sound card, video card)
 - d) Communications devices included with the system (modem, network interface card)
 - e) Any software included with the system
 - f) Overall system cost
- 3) **Look for free software.** Many system vendors include **free software** with their systems. Some sellers even let you choose which software you want. Remember, however, that free software has value only if you would have purchased the software even if it had not come with the computer.
- 4) **If you are buying a new computer, you have several purchasing options: buying from your school bookstore, a local computer dealer, a local large retail store; or ordering by mail via telephone or the World Wide Web.** Each **purchasing option** has certain advantages. Many college bookstores, for example, sign exclusive pricing agreements with computer manufacturers and, thus, can offer student discounts. Local

dealers and local large retail stores, however, more easily can provide hands-on support. Mail-order companies that sell computers by telephone or online via the Web often provide the lowest prices but extend less personal service. Some major mail-order companies, however, have started to provide next-business-day, onsite services. A credit card usually is required to buy from a mail-order company. Figure 1 shows a Web page for a popular mail-order company.

The screenshot shows the Dell Home Systems website. The main content area features a 'Special Offer -- FREE Printer' for a Dell Dimension L Series system. Below this is a table of recommended systems:

Dimension L Series Model	NEW L400c	NEW L466c	NEW L500c
Go to Dell Online Store	ADD TO CART Click Here to Purchase this Recommended System	ADD TO CART Click Here to Purchase this Recommended System	ADD TO CART Click Here to Purchase this Recommended System
Customize	CUSTOMIZE & PRICE Click Here to Custom	CUSTOMIZE & PRICE Click Here to Custom	CUSTOMIZE & PRICE Click Here to Custom

Figure 1: Some mail-order companies, such as Dell Computer Corporation, sell computers online.

- 5) **If you are buying a used computer, stick with name brands.** Although brand-name equipment can cost more, most **brand-name computers** have longer, more comprehensive warranties, are better supported, and have more authorized centers for repair services. As with new computers, you can purchase a used computer from local computer dealers, local large retail stores, or mail order via the telephone or the Web. Classified ads and used computer brokers offer additional outlets for purchasing used computers.
- 6) **Use a worksheet to compare computers, services, and other considerations.** You can use a separate sheet of paper to take notes on each vendor's computer and then summarize the information on a **worksheet**, such as the one shown in Figure 2. Most companies advertise a price for a base computer that includes components housed in the system unit (processor, RAM, sound card, video card), disk drives (floppy disk,

hard disk, CD-ROM, and DVD-ROM), a keyboard, mouse, monitor, printer, speakers, and modem. Be aware, however, that some advertisements list prices for computers with only some of these components. Monitors, printers, and modems, for example, often are not included in a base computer price. Depending on how you plan to use the computer, you may want to invest in additional or more powerful components. When you are comparing the prices of computers, make sure you are comparing identical or similar configurations.

Computer System Cost Comparison Worksheet						
Most dealers list their prices for computer systems with the following components (instead of listing individual component costs). To compare systems, enter the overall system price at the top, and enter 0 for components included in the system cost. For any additional components not covered in the system price, enter the price in the appropriate cells.						
Items to Purchase	Desired System	Local Dealer #1	Local Dealer #2	Online Dealer #1	Online Dealer #2	Comments
Price						
System Price	< \$2,500					
Processor	Pentium III at 400 MHz					
RAM	128 MB					
Cache	512 KB L2					
Hard Disk	10 GB					
Video Card	8 MB					
Monitor	17 Inch					
DVD/CD-ROM	5x DVD w/ Decoder Card					
Floppy Drive	3.5 Inch					
Printer	Color Inkjet					
Modem	56 K					
Sound Card	16-bit					
Speakers	Stereo					
Pointing Device	IntelliMouse					
Surge Protector	Yes					
Backup	100 MB Zip					
Operating System	Windows 98					
Application Software	Office Small Business Edition					
Keyboard	Standard					
Warranty	3-year Onsite Service					
Total Cost		\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	\$ -	

Figure 2: A worksheet is an effective tool for summarizing and comparing the prices and components of different computer vendors.

- 7) **Be aware of hidden costs.** Before purchasing, be sure to consider any **additional costs** associated with buying a computer, such as another telephone line, an uninterruptible power supply (UPS), computer furniture, floppy disks and paper, or computer training classes you may want to take. Depending on where you buy your computer, the seller may be willing to include some or all of these in the computer purchase price.
- 8) **Consider more than just price.** The lowest cost system may not be the **best buy**. Consider such intangibles as the vendor's time in business, regard for quality, and reputation for support. If you need to upgrade your computer often, you may want to consider a leasing arrangement, in which you pay monthly lease fees but upgrade or add on to your computer as your equipment needs change. If you are a replacement

- buyer, ask if the vendor will buy your old computer; an increasing number of companies are taking trade-ins. No matter what type of buyer you are, insist on a 30-day, no-questions-asked return policy on your computer.
- 9) **Select an Internet service provider (ISP) or online service.** You can access the Internet in one of two ways: via an ISP or an online service. Both provide Internet access for a monthly fee that ranges from \$5 to \$20. Local ISPs offer **Internet access** through local telephone numbers to users in a limited geographic region. National ISPs provide access for users nationwide (including mobile users), through local and toll-free telephone numbers. Because of their size, national ISPs offer more services and generally have a larger technical support staff than local ISPs. Online services furnish Internet access as well as members-only features for users nationwide. Before you choose an Internet service provider or online service, compare such features as the number of access hours, monthly fees, available services (e-mail, Web page hosting, chat), and reliability.
 - 10) **Buy a computer compatible with the ones you use elsewhere.** If you use a personal computer at work or in some other capacity, make sure the computer you buy is **compatible**. For example, if you use a PC at work, you may not want to purchase a Macintosh for home use. Having a computer compatible with the ones at work or school will allow you to transfer files and spend time at home on work- or school-related projects.
 - 11) **Consider purchasing an onsite service agreement.** If you use your computer for business or are unable to be without your computer, consider purchasing an **onsite service agreement** through a local dealer or third-party company. Most onsite service agreements state that a technician will come to your home, work, or school within 24 hours. If your computer includes onsite service only for the first year, think about extending the service for two or three years when you buy the computer.
 - 12) **Use a credit card to purchase your computer.** Many **credit cards** now offer purchase protection and extended warranty benefits that cover you in case of loss of or damage to purchased goods. Paying by credit card also gives you time to install and use the computer before you have to pay for it. Finally, if you are dissatisfied with the computer and are unable to reach an agreement with the seller, paying by credit card gives you certain rights regarding withholding payment until the dispute is resolved. Check your credit card agreement for specific details.
 - 13) **Avoid buying the smallest system available. Computer technology** changes rapidly, meaning a computer that seems powerful enough today may not serve your computing needs in a few years. In fact, studies show that many users regret they did not buy a more powerful computer. Plan to buy a computer that will last you for two to three years. You can help delay obsolescence by purchasing the fastest processor, most memory, and largest hard drive you can afford. If you must buy a smaller computer, be sure you can upgrade it with additional memory and auxiliary devices as your computer requirements grow.

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