

Buying advice: CD drives & DVD writers

Whether you're in the market for a CD drive or want to embrace new technology and opt for a DVD writer, don't hit the shops until you've checked out our Buying advice, the definitive guide to the features and technology that you should be looking for

It's no surprise that virtually all new PCs come with some sort of CD-R/RW drive. Combine the ability to copy 650MB-700MB of data to a CD (capable of being read on any computer) with the low price of media, and you have backup technology that is ideal for the content-heavy 21st century.

Of course, 650MB isn't enough memory to please everyone, and in this video-hungry age the lure of DVD has proven too much to resist. A DVD writer allows you to store up to 4.7GB of data on one disc, and you may not even need to have a PC handy to view the results – recorded in the right format, media can be used on a standalone DVD player connected to a television. The price of DVD technology is currently fairly steep. While a CD-RW drive will set you back a mere £60-£100, you should expect a DVD writer to cost closer to £300.

CD drives

Most drives have both CD-R and CD-RW facilities. Writing to CD-R is faster, with recording rates going up to 40- to 48-speed. The media is also extremely cheap (ranging from 40p to about £1 for a disc) and can be read on virtually all PCs. Technically, though, you can only write data once to a CD-R, so you won't be able to erase everything and start again.

↓ External drives, like the Sony DRX-120L, offer the dual convenience of portability and easy installation



For that, you need CD-RW. Rewriteable rates are lower (about 12- to 16-speed), the media will cost you twice as much and you'll experience more problems with incompatible discs. CD-RW manufacturers are trying particularly hard to cure the incompatibility problems, and drives that conform to the Mount Rainier (CD-MRW) standard are likely to be compatible with a much wider range of models.

Drives have to deal with a large amount of data at once, but sometimes the strain will prove too much and the device will make errors while writing CDs. Look for a large data buffer (at least 2MB) and you'll be able to keep these errors at bay. Many drives also have specific technology built in to take care of buffer underruns, so keep an eye out for names like JustLink, FlextraLink and ExacLink.

CD-R/RW drives should come with a software bundle. Look out for a well-known package like Ahead Software's Nero or Easy CD Creator. Packet-writing programs are often included with the software – these let you move files around on a CD-RW as though it was a floppy disk.

DVD writers

DVD writers have been around for some time now, but the market hasn't caught fire yet due to the conflicting standards. The various terms – for example, DVD-RW, DVD+RW and DVD-RAM – confuse newcomers, and for the average user there's too much risk that a drive bought now will become obsolete in a few months. DVD-R and DVD-RW have traditionally been the popular choices, although the newer DVD+R and DVD+RW standards are quickly taking over. Speeds with +R/+RW are moving up all the time, and the best drives currently offer 2.4- or 2.5-speed writing. The process is lengthy, though, so you should expect it to take between 17 and 20 minutes to burn around 3GB of data.



➤ The Teac CD-W540EK includes software that monitors the blank disc to determine the best writing speed

Make sure that your software can support DVD writing. For instance, Ahead Software's Nero 5.5.8 supports DVD writers, while version 5.0 can only write to CD-R and CD-RWs. Other packages well worth checking out are DVD authoring programs – for example, NeoDVD – and videocapture and editing titles – for example, WinProducer.

Internal or external?

Whether you're buying a CD drive or DVD writer, you'll have to decide whether you want an internal or external device. If you choose the former, bear in mind that you will need a free 5.25in bay in which to mount the drive. It also means that you will have to open up your PC to fit it, so take a look at our top drives to see which are the easiest to install. The benefits of internal models are lower cost, extra desk space and, on occasions, higher performance.

However, if you hate the idea of opening up your PC, have no room for a new drive or want to move the drive between different PCs, an external unit will be better. It gives you the choice of two main connection options – USB or FireWire. USB drives are common and should be easy to set up. FireWire offers more performance, although you will need to add an interface card to your PC if you don't already have FireWire. Some sound cards – for example, the Creative Audigy – will already have the appropriate port, so check before you buy. ■