

Buying advice:

CD-RW and DVD writers

If you're in the market for a new CD-RW or DVD drive *Buying advice* will help you avoid the pitfalls and choose the right model for your needs and budget



CD-RW drives

Burning CDs is one of the most convenient and popular backup options available. But while many of the drives themselves may look the same, there are a host of factors to consider when choosing a drive.

- **Internal or external?** Internal drives are generally cheaper and faster than external devices. Most internal models feature EIDE connections, though some offer faster SCSI interfaces. Internal drives can be picked up for between £90 and £130.

If your PC has no space in its case for an internal drive, or you need multiple CD-RW drives, then there's a range of external models to choose from. An increasing number of external drives also feature the high-speed USB 2.0 interface.

External drives give you more options, but are generally more expensive – expect to pay between £150 and £250 for an external CD burner. Some drives are designed to be portable, being smaller than the average model and featuring shock absorbers to protect against knocks.

- **Speed rate** CD-RW drives will all have speed ratings printed on the box. These give you a guide to how fast the drive performs and provide the rates at which the drive reads

and writes to a CD-R and rewrites to a CD-RW. We print these in the order read/write/rewrite – for example, 40-/24-/12-speed – but different manufacturers show them in their own order. As a rule, the read rate is the highest number and the rewrite rate is the lowest. These will give you a useful guide to performance, but they should not be regarded as the gospel truth. As you can see from our chart on page 108, lower-rated drives can sometimes perform better than higher-rated ones.

- **Buffer underruns** Check that your CD-RW drive comes with technology to prevent buffer underruns. These occur when a PC cannot transfer data to the drive fast enough to keep up with the writing process. This can result in an unusable CD-R disc.

DVD writers

If you're looking to dive into the world of recordable DVD, you need to consider which format is most suitable. Although it would be simple if there was only one writable and one rewritable standard, each DVD format has its advantages and disadvantages. The important thing is to look at what you want to write, how often, and whether low media costs or rewritability is an issue.



- **DVD-R** A write-once standard with a 4.7GB capacity that offers the best compatibility with DVD-ROM drives and consumer DVD players. DVD-R is recognised by the DVD Forum, a consortium of companies that designed the original DVD standard.

Although you can only write to the media once, it tends to be the cheapest. Branded discs are available for around £7.50, with unbranded media for around £3.

- **DVD-RW** This is the rewritable standard and is also recognised by the DVD Forum. DVD-RW discs offer the flexibility of reuse – you can rewrite a disc up to 1,000 times, although they aren't as compatible as DVD-R. Each disc can store up to 4.7GB of data.

- **DVD-RAM** DVD-RAM is a rewritable standard best suited to data use, and is also recognised by the DVD Forum. The discs offer a good lifecycle (100,000 uses), although you lose out on compatibility as the discs are housed in a caddy. A single-sided disc can store 4.7GB, while a double-sided one has a 9.4GB capacity.

- **DVD+RW** DVD+RW is a rewritable standard not endorsed by the DVD Forum. It offers the same 4.7GB capacity as the other formats with 1,000 rewrites, but has no write-once standard so media costs are higher. This standard offers decent compatibility, but still not as good as DVD-R.

As the market is quite young, the emphasis tends to be on the ability to create DVDs, rather than the time taken. Writing a full 4.7GB can take some time – up to an hour in some cases. Over time, however, write speeds should increase. ■