



Our standalone hardware and software reviews are more comprehensive than ever, providing you with a bigger and better view of the latest offerings on the market. We've tested and rated more products in more detail while allowing room for shorter reviews of those desirable add-on devices – MP3 players, notebook expansion cards, DVD drives and so on.

Products we review start their testing cycle here in the standalones section where they're rated on individual performance, features and value for money. We single out the outstanding products to receive our stamp of approval – a *PC Advisor* Gold award. The award winners may well go on to appear in our Top 10 charts next month where they are pitted against similar products. Here they can earn further laurels in the form of our Best Buy and Recommended awards.

Our changes are aimed at making it easier for you to decide which PC, peripheral or component is ideal for your needs. Because you want a product that won't be obsolete in six months' time, you can see how your chosen hardware rates on its own merits here in our standalone section, and then check out how it fares against the competition in the charts over the following months.



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Scoring and testing explained

Each review rates a product according to a set criterion for its type. The score is broken down at the end of the review to show how we reached our final verdict. Ratings range from 1 to 10 and fall into the following classifications:

1 to 3 – poor 4 to 6 – average
6 to 8 – good 8 to 10 – excellent

How we rate hardware

- **Features** This score rates the specification of a product by current standards. For example, a 2.6GHz PC with 512MB of RAM and a 120GB hard drive would score highly.
- **Build quality** This rating denotes how well the product is made and the quality of the components.

- **Value for money** The price of a product will often be the deciding factor between a good review and a bad review. This is not to say that cheaper products will always win out, but the better the price/performance and features ratio the higher the score.

How we rate software

- **Ease of use** Rates how easy software is to install and use.
- **Features** Indicates how much the package contains. An office suite that only came with a spreadsheet would score poorly.
- **Value for money** Lots of features, good performance and a low price tag will result in a good score.

PC Advisor Gold award

Outstanding Hardware products receive a *PC Advisor* Gold award. This may indicate that the product will enter our charts next month but *PC Advisor* Gold also honours excellence in a product that is not covered in our existing charts.



Prices

All prices are quoted by the manufacturer or distributor and exclude VAT. Prices are only intended as a guide, and you may see products on sale for less or more than our quoted price. *PC Advisor's* recommendations are for guidance only and are not a guarantee of suitability. The publisher takes no responsibility for purchasers' decisions.

This month: processors speed up... again

Processor speed hikes come with such increasing regularity that it's pleasing to see Intel's latest chip bring something new to the party. Offering more than just the allure of a nice round number, the 3GHz Pentium 4 takes a cunning trick, already in use in the server space, to the desktop market.

Intel's hyperthreading technology allows one chip to behave as two. Usually, when a computer needs to perform an assignment the operating system breaks the workload down in to a series of tasks (or threads) and sends them to the processor. This can cause wasted time as the processor must twiddle its thumbs while waiting for something to happen before it can complete a task.

By masquerading as two processors the second 'processor' can be getting on with the next task while the first is sitting waiting – making more efficient use of the processing power available. It can, in some cases, decrease performance – but on the whole it should be quicker.

The clever bit about hyperthreading is that it provides a performance gain while adding very little size to the processor core. The smaller the core, the cheaper it is to make and the cooler it runs.

Hyperthreading has also been given a bit of a leg up thanks to the existing multiprocessor systems already in use. With Windows XP happy to support more than one processor (whether real or not), everything is in place to take advantage. To see how it all works, turn to page 42.



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238 Top 10 charts

Top 10 charts

Our new-look Top 10s start on page 238. We've moved them to the back of the magazine, where they're easier to find, and designed them so they're now a cinch to navigate. We've added at-a-glance comments and buying advice to help you make the right purchasing decision. Products we've already tested are ranked in our charts after competing against existing entrants. The result is a definitive guide to the best hardware available on the market.