



50	Hardware reviews
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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.



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.



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This month: can we really do without keyboards?

Keyboards, despite their foibles, are good at what they do. The layout may have originally been designed to slow us down, and they're not so great for use on the move, but all in all they're not bad really. Add the shallow learning curve – when was the last time you saw someone have to ask how to use a keyboard? – and you can see why they've been the primary computer input device for so long.

And it's the keyboard that's proving such a great problem to tablet PCs. Tablet PCs come in two flavours – pure tablets (completely keyboard-free zones) and convertibles. The problem with the pure tablets is that keyboards are so useful; it's pretty hard to use a PC without one. At the very best you'll be able to stretch to note-taking and the odd email – and given the price of these things that's not such a great investment (anyone below director status need not apply).

Convertibles, on the other hand, run the risk of being compared to notebooks and invariably come off worse in the price/performance stakes. And then there's the turning, twisting or swivelling involved in switching from notebook to tablet mode. It's an awkward two grand's worth of equipment.

Now those clever chaps at HP Compaq have come up with the idea of a removable keyboard. It clips to the back, swings easily into use and can be dispensed with entirely when not required. It's incredibly neat and may prove there's life in this tablet PC thing after all (see page 50 for our review).



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76 Technofile

Photo printers explained

82 Reader's choice

We help a reader choose an inkjet printer

230 Top 10 charts

Our new-look Top 10s start on page 230. We've moved them to the back of the magazine and designed them so they're a cinch to navigate. The at-a-glance comments and buying advice 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.

