

buying advice: inkjet printers

When you buy a printer, how you intend using it is the most important factor in your purchasing decision. Will you be printing text only? Do you want to print at photo quality? Is your PC USB compatible? But fear not, our guide explains all you need to know

Buying an inkjet can be a tricky business and a lot depends on what you intend to print. Dedicated photo printers will offer the highest quality for your snaps, but they're not suitable for text documents. Purchase price versus running costs can also be a problem.

Price

Inkjet printers range in price anywhere from £50 to £400 so you must decide what your printing needs are. There's no point in paying more than £150 for a printer if you only want to output text documents. If you're looking for a good all-purpose mid-range model then we suggest paying about £100 for an inkjet printer. A high-cost photo printer will cost a bit more, particularly if it includes lots of extras.

Interface

A lot of printers still come with a parallel connection but it's gradually being phased out in favour of USB. Parallel is a lot slower than USB and you rarely get a lead in the box. USB is plug and play so it's easier to install. There are a lot of mid-range models that support both connections but we suggest opting for USB because it's faster when printing out high resolution images. There's a new USB standard to look out for called USB 2.0 and, in theory, this is 40 times faster than its predecessor, USB 1.1. A word of warning, though: if you buy a printer with USB 2.0 support it will only run at this speed if your PC supports the USB 2.0 standard, too.

Resolution

Make sure the stated maximum resolution is the hardware resolution. If it's software optimised it means the software fills information in by guessing where the dots should be placed on the paper. If you're printing photographs the results can be disappointing because optimised resolutions tend towards artificial colouration. Plus, look for a maximum

resolution that suits your needs. If you're only printing text or graphics there's not much point in printing beyond 600x600dpi (dots per inch) for the best results. Photo printing will require a minimum resolution of 1,200x1,200dpi.

Speed

Speed is essential in an office environment. Inkjets are slower than laser printers yet there's still a lot of variation in results. Obviously, speed is dependent on the resolution at which you're printing and it's worth noting that many manufacturers quote print speeds greater than you achieve in general use.

Print speeds are calculated on the fastest possible settings – usually economy or draft mode – so don't be surprised if you wait 15 minutes for a high-resolution photo to print from a machine that claims it can churn out five colour pages a minute. It's worth asking the sales staff to demonstrate the speed of a printer. On average, printing 6ppm (pages per minute) or higher in monochrome is good and 3.5ppm or higher in colour.

Maintenance

Manufacturers usually calculate the amount of paper used by one cartridge by suggesting 15 percent coverage. That is, if 15 percent of a page is covered in ink then the cartridge will be able to print X amount of pages. A cartridge that claims it will last for 400 pages will only do so if each page is covered with no more than 15 percent of ink. This is fine for text documents, but the 400-page equation is void when you apply it to photo printing which puts almost 100 percent coverage on a page. Higher yield cartridges mean lower maintenance as they don't have to be changed too often.



← Our Best Buy inkjet printer, the Epson C62, offers cheap running costs as its black cartridges last for a respectable 640 pages

Running costs

If you spot a cheap cartridge you won't necessarily get a good buy. Always check the page coverage and expected print life before you buy. A black cartridge for the Epson C62 will cost £11 whereas the same will be £8.99 for Canon's S900. However, Canon's cartridge only has a print life of 270 pages while Epson's will last for 640 pages. If you have a mid-range inkjet you shouldn't pay more than 4p per page for black printing or 7p per page for colour. Naturally, with a dedicated photo printer, the costs will go up. ■

Checklist

1. Price **Over £150 for a photo printer, around £100 for a mid-range model and less than £100 for entry-level.**
2. Interface **Avoid parallel and get USB – preferably the newer USB 2.0 standard if your PC supports it.**
3. Resolution **600x600dpi (dots per inch) is fine for text or graphics, while 1,200x1,200dpi (dots per inch) is the minimum for photo quality. Avoid software optimised resolutions.**
4. Speed **Look for actual speed rather than manufacturers' claimed speeds. On average, printing 6ppm (pages per minute) or higher in monochrome is good and 3.5ppm or higher in colour.**
5. Maintenance **Higher yield cartridges mean a lower maintenance printer.**
6. Running costs **For black printing look for 4p per page or less; for colour printing 7p per page or less is acceptable.**