

Buying advice: notebooks

Thinking of purchasing a notebook, but don't know what hardware specifications you should expect, or whether a 13in screen is reasonable on a power model? Read on for our guide to what you should expect from your money – don't go shopping without it

If you're after a portable system to take on the road, or simply want an alternative to your bulky, space-hogging desktop PC, a notebook is the device for you. Whether you've got a huge sum of money to spend, or need something that's more at the budget end of the market, *Buying advice* will help you make the right choice.

Processors

- **Power** Don't settle for less than a 1GHz processor, with 1.2GHz a better option still. Make sure that the chip is a Mobile version, as repurposed desktop processors tend to suck battery life when placed in notebooks. Whereas mobile processors include technology to conserve battery life, Intel's is called Speedstep, while AMD has PowerNow.

- **Budget** Intel previously had a stranglehold on the mobile computing market, but the arrival of AMD's Mobile Athlon 4 chip could herald a wind of change. If you opt for a Pentium III processor, it's unlikely you'll get your hands on the Mobile version with Speedstep technology – a Pentium III flip chip is more likely. Either way, make sure your processor is running between 1GHz and 1.2GHz.



Memory

- **Power** Memory is extremely important as it ensures smooth notebook performance. Look for 128MB of RAM, however 256MB or 378MB is preferable.
- **Budget** Three new entries in our Top 10 Budget notebook chart included a massive 384MB of RAM and, if you can get that for your money, you've got a great deal. Expect to settle for 256MB or 192MB as the minimum.

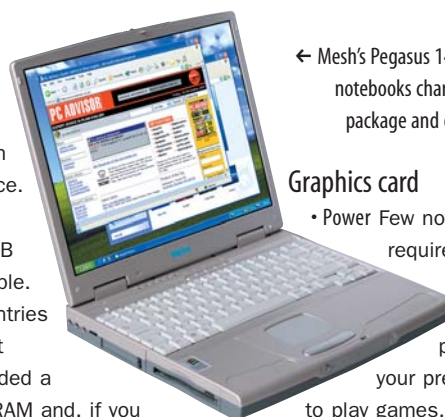
Storage

- **Power** Notebook users tend not to load up their machines with huge applications and suites, so 20GB of hard drive space should be fine. If you're after peace of mind, though, opt for 30GB or more.
- **Budget** The average capacity in our Top 10 Budget notebooks chart is 20GB, which will suffice. Some manufacturers do offer Budget notebooks with 30GB, but they will be hard to hunt down. If you require plenty of backup storage, look for a combination DVD/CD-RW drive.

Screen size

- **Power** If you're looking to maximise portability, you might want to keep the screen size to 12in or 13in. A 14in or 15in screen will increase the notebook's size and weight enormously although, as these offer almost as much workspace as a 16in or 17in CRT (cathode ray tube) monitor, such a move will pay dividends in terms of productivity. Remember that you can usually plug in an external monitor for use in the office, so a large screen may not be essential.
- **Budget** All machines in the Top 10 Budget notebooks chart can manage 1,024x768 with 32bit colour. Resolutions beyond this are possible on some models, but you need to scroll around because they can't fit all the information on the screen.

← Top of the Power notebooks chart is the Compaq Evo N600c, which is the only notebook to survive this month's chart refresh



← Mesh's Pegasus 14.1 Pro heads up the Budget notebooks chart with an excellent software package and generous two-year warranty

Graphics card

- **Power** Few notebook users will require a heavyweight graphics card. If you do use action-packed 3D graphics in your presentations or want to play games, the onboard graphics controllers will frequently be found wanting. ATI's Radeon Mobility is the best card commonly offered to notebook users.
- **Budget** Onboard graphics with user-definable memory are the most popular choice. They use system memory, which can often be pushed up to 64MB. You might be able to track down a standalone card, but it's unlikely at this price. ■

Checklist

Power notebook

Processor In terms of speed, 1GHz is fine, although 1.2GHz is even better.

Memory Settle for no less than 128MB, although 256MB and above is preferable.

Storage For most office users, 20GB is perfectly satisfactory.

Screen size Displays that measure 14/15in will provide plenty of workspace, but if you need to keep weight down a 12.1in will do the job.

Graphics card For intensive 3D graphics you'll want an ATI Radeon Mobility.

Budget notebook

Processor Try to get a Mobile Athlon 4, or a Mobile Pentium III, although a Pentium III flip chip will suffice. The clock speed should be between 1GHz and 1.2GHz.

Storage The hard drive should have at least 20GB storage space. Look for a CD-RW drive for backups.

Display The screen should be able to achieve resolutions of 1,024x768 with 32bit colour.

Graphics Onboard is most likely at this price point, with user-definable memory borrowed from the system's RAM.