About Sound Cards

Sound is an essential element to virtually all PC applications. From multimedia business presentations to listening to high-quality MP3 files and playing thunderous game audio, a good sound card will bring your PC to life.

Things to Know

When choosing your sound card, the only things to really keep in mind are the features each card offers.   Sound cards do not rely on any special processor configuration so you're free to get the card that meets both your audio needs and budget concerns.   The only thing to keep in mind is to make sure you get a card that will fit in the type of slot you have free.   Higher-end and most new sound cards are designed for the PCI bus; if your PC is a newer model, or you have just upgraded to a new motherboard, chances are you will want to get a PCI-based sound card. If you are replacing an old sound card, you have an older motherboard, or you just don't have any free PCI slots, you might have to go with an older ISA design. Keep in mind, that if you do go with an ISA-based sound card, your selection of sound cards and feature-sets will be very limited. It is highly recommended you consider only installing a PCI-based sound card. **For more information on ISA and PCI, please refer to the glossary.**

With that said, most new sound cards today can handle the standard audio duties for recording and playing back high-quality sound. For extra features, musicians might want to get wave-table synthesis and DSP (digital signal processor) capabilities as well. Avid gamers should look for a card with 3D surround effects to make games come alive with realism.   We recommend checking reviews in major PC magazines for an idea of what's available and which card is right for you.

Software Configuration

Most of today's new, PCI-based, sound cards are Plug-and-play.   This makes software configuration a snap. Once the card is installed and you boot your machine, chances are Windows will display a message like: "Windows has detected new hardware". From here you will be prompted to have Windows search for a new driver for this device, etc.   Most sound card's come with a driver CD-ROM or floppy disk. Follow the instructions in your sound card manual for details on installing these drivers.   If you did not get a written manual, try looking for a readme.txt file on the floppy or CD for instructions.

Important Tips

Make sure that if your motherboard has a built-in sound card, you disable it before attempting to configure your new sound card.   If you are upgrading/replacing an existing sound card, this won't be a concern. However, in some cases, a motherboard comes with a built-in sound card as an extra feature; this built-in card will interfere with your new sound card if you do not disable it. Disabling the built-in sound card is often achieved by altering jumper settings on the motherboard itself.   You should consult your motherboard's manual for more information if you need to do this step.   **For more information on jumper settings, please refer to the glossary.**