



Ultimate PC Purchasing Playbook

When it comes time to purchase your first computer, it doesn't matter if you are 8 or 80 - there is a lot to know. The team here at Be Your Own IT wanted to put together a great guide that should help you avoid any unnecessary stress associated with the purchase and setup of a new computer. Contained in this guide, you will find advice on how to purchase a computer, how to set it up, what to do once you have hooked everything up, and some important tasks that need to happen afterward - like setting up your internet, registering your hardware and software, and more. This guide will take you from the decision to purchase a computer to being fully functional.

Information On How To Buy A Computer:

Even though the price of a computer has dropped significantly over the recent years the purchasing of a computer is still really important. You need to make sure you get one that fits your needs the best, and that you don't over or under spend. Computers for the most part should last most people 2-4 years. Even though new hardware and new features come out seemingly every month, the vast majority of peoples' needs don't change nearly as much.

-What brands are good

With so many major players out there its hard to know who's the best anymore. The team here at Be Your Own IT normally builds our own computers, but when people ask us what brand to buy, 90 percent of them are told Dell is the best fit. If you like to go to big box stores like Best Buy, and you're not sure what brand to go for, we generally find that Dell has the most bang for your buck. They back their warranty the most often, and they have the widest selection.

-What Features You Need

With new processors coming out nearly every couple of weeks, its tough to really know what the difference is between each processor. Hard drives have gotten so large, the vast majority of people will never use more than 25% of their available space. What we are getting at here is, for the general public, almost anything new will handle what you want. As a general rule, if you stick to a computer that is in the middle somewhere you should be great. Keep in mind if there are specific things you would like to do, for example burn DVD's, want a place right on the computer to plug in camera memory sticks, or any other specific features, those should top your list as well.

-Common Features to Look For

- “Media Centers” – This typically refers to the ability to plug most, if not all, of the standard memory card sized directly into your computer, bypassing the need for messy cables and slow, flimsy card readers. The transfer time between a built in card reader versus an external USB-connected card reader is significantly better, so you’ll no longer have to wait hours for all of your images to transfer onto your hard drive.
- DVD R/RW – Until recently, most consumers didn’t have much need for a DVD drive that could not only read the discs, but could also record them. With hard drives growing in capacity, and more consumers learning to back up their files (as well as wanting to transfer larger files), the need for a DVD burner is also growing. You’re able to store over *four times* the amount of information on a DVD than you could on a CD, and with the right software you can even create backups of any DVDs you may own.
- HDMI Output – HDMI outputs and cables are a fairly recent technology that seems to be growing in popularity rather quickly. A decade ago, your computer and your television were two separate devices. With the use of an HDMI cable and a television that had HDMI inputs, you can now view everything you’d see on your computer right there on your TV screen. This comes in handy in particular for anyone who wishes to view pictures, movies, games, etc. on a larger screen than one would normally have for a computer monitor. It’s also a nice feature to have if you’re an avid movie watcher, as you can take advantage of places like Netflix and Blockbuster, who offer instant downloads right to your PC. Just hook up your HDMI cable, hit download, and enjoy that new release from the comfort of your living room without having to drive to the video store!
- Printers – While most computers nowadays are offered either alone, or in “value bundles” with printers or other extra equipment, it’s important that you take a little extra time to make sure you are buying the right equipment for you. If the computer you settle on is offered in a value bundle with a printer, make sure you decide separately whether the printer in question is actually the right printer for you. Too many people seem to get caught up in the “value”, then find they need to purchase a separate printer later on that actually meets their needs.

If you’re in a big box store such as Best Buy, ask to see samples of photos printed from the printer they’re offering, as well as those of a few others so that you can compare them side by side. Laser printers, inkjet printers, and multifunction printers all have their own unique benefits, and you’ll need to choose which is the best for your needs. If you plan to do a lot of black and white printing, such as text documents, we’d recommend a laser printer. The price of the printer may be higher, but you’ll save in the long run with ink usage and cost.

For those who like to print photos and colorful documents, your best bet is to go with an inkjet printer, which can print high quality photos on several different varieties of photo paper. The cost of the inkjet printers can be quite low, and these are usually the type you’ll find in the value bundles – just be sure to take a look at the costs for refilling the ink before you decide on which brand or model you’ll buy.

Last, but certainly not least, are the multifunction printers. These are great for the average home office, as they combine your printer, scanner, fax machine, and sometimes even your telephone all into one

space-saving, low cost machine. While these are available in both laser and inkjet printers, we find that most of our readers are fine with the more popular inkjet option.

- How Much Should You Spend?

Like any other big purchases, you should decide on a budget and stick to it. It is easy to get swept away with all the new bells and whistles out there, or even talk yourself into something you just don't need. Plan ahead, decide on a budget, and remember it's ok to spend a little less - you don't have to spend it all to get what you're looking for. You should plan ahead for a little growth, if you can. Take that next little technological step up just to ensure your new computer lasts a little while longer. If your needs change at some point (maybe you want to upgrade to the latest operating system, or you get into computer gaming) it's good to not be up against your PC's maximum capacity right away.

-Extended Warranties

Extended warranties used to make a lot of sense, back when computers cost several thousand dollars to purchase, but currently they are pretty much just a way to increase margin. Computer sales in general have a very low profit. In a store like Best Buy, it has some of the lowest profit margins in the store. That is why it is so important for their employees to sell you a printer, extra ink, cables, and extended warranties.

Most computers come with a 1 year warranty, and in our experience if something goes wrong, it's going to happen within that time frame. If you connect your PC with a nice surge strip and make it through that first year ok, you've pretty much cleared yourself of anything to worry about. If you are really nervous and just need peace of mind, a warranty is ok to buy - but only if it extends the existing one.

A lot of places will sell you a "2 year extended warranty", but it only covers 2 years from date of purchase. In general stick with the shorter of the options and make sure if anything ever goes wrong, you take your PC in or create some sort of ticket, even the small stuff. Once it is on record, it's a lot easier to make a claim. We are not against extended warranties in general. In fact, we always buy them on digital camera's, MP3 players, and Smart Phones - things that can get dropped, suffer a lot of use and abuse. PC's pretty much just sit there and work. Laptops are different; those are usually worth it.

Un-boxing & Setting Up Your Computer:

One of the most common mistakes people make when setting up their new computer is to get so excited and anxious to "try it out" that they rush through the process of hooking up the various cables, and click through the initial installations and product registrations as quickly as they can. Most computers, and their various components, come with warranties from the manufacturer. You *have to register* your computer and equipment in order to take advantage of these warranties, so be sure you slow down and take the time to fill out the registration pages right away, and with correct information.

While most manufacturers color code many of their cable tips to make setting up your computer easier, not all of your cables will match. If you've purchased any extra equipment, such as a webcam, a printer, or speakers, it's important to make sure you're hooking them up to the right places. You'll also find that some types of equipment have multiple options for how to hook them up. Printers, for example, can typically be connected via a printer port or via USB.

Make sure you keep all of your pieces together, and don't get into such a rush that you move on to the next piece before you've finished hooking up the first. Trying to set up your printer, webcam, speakers, monitor, keyboard, mouse, and more all at once is the quickest way to get yourself into one heck of a cable mess, which will only serve to frustrate you more when you're trying to find the right pieces.

If you have an older computer that you'll be disassembling before setting up the new one, be sure to wrap and label all of the equipment and cables that you won't be using with the new computer. This makes storing or selling your outdated computer much easier when the time comes, and makes it easier to find the right piece should you need to grab a spare cable or part later on down the road.

The First Setup:

Most mainstream computers will have a good amount of setup that you need to do when you first turn on the computer. The vast majority of it is nothing manual; it's just about entering data like your name and address, registering for things and setting personal options. In some cases you won't have a ton to do when you first turn your computer on; other times, you may be spending about 20 minutes or so entering data, restarting the computer, and entering more data. The main key is to stay patient, and just get it all right.

- Complete Registration
- Download All Critical Updates
- Install Antivirus
- Take Note of Any Registration Codes
- Reboot after each major software installation

Disposing Your Old Computer:

If you are replacing an old computer, a lot of people are not so sure what to do with it so a lot of them end up in basements or sheds doomed never to see the light of day again. There is a natural fear that you need to protect your hard drive and any personal data that may be on there. On the flip side, there is also the task of moving any old files off the computer and on to the new one. Many people now just use a simple flash drive. It used to be much more of a pain, but when you can get 8GB flash drives for under \$30.00 it will work just fine. You just plug the drive into your USB port, copy what files you want on there, then place them on the new computer.

Using The Internet & Setting Up Email

-Safety - A couple of points about using the internet: make sure you know where you are going, and avoid ever clicking on suspect banner ads as they often can contain malware. Pop up blockers are normally default now on new browsers, and can help protect you from unwanted ads - but they can also keep out stuff you want, too, so keep that in mind.

-Downloading Items - Download from a trusted source like download.com whenever possible. Sometimes you won't be able to avoid it, but trust your intuition on this. If the site seems like a scam or appears shady, look for another place to download it. There are, more often than not, plenty of other options.

Downloading music or movies legally from places like iTunes is fine, but once you start using programs to pirate free movies or music you often get things you didn't bargain for, such as spyware, a virus, or worse - a lawsuit. Pay for the movie if you really want it, and if you want music there are loads of affordable trustworthy places to get it like Amazon, Emusic, Rhapsody, and iTunes.

-Buying Things Online - Check to see if they are secure. Make sure whatever checkout you are using is safe and secure. Never give out your social security number, unless on a very secure site like the IRS or a major credit card or Bank. Remember, you shouldn't be so afraid about your credit card - there are laws in place to protect you, and greatly limit your liability if someone were to gain your number.

-Virus & Spyware - This is most consumers' second biggest fear online, behind identity or credit card theft. There is a lot to say on the topic, but here is the bottom line. Don't pirate software, music, or movies, stay off suspect websites, don't open email attachments from people you don't know, and always have a good antivirus program running. If you do those few things, you will almost never get infected.

We still recommend running a good spyware scan one a month in case anything sneaks by, but other than that they really are not as big a deal as they used to be. Most infections can be cleared up with a simple scan and reboot. If you end up more severely infected, there are plenty of resources out there to help.

-Setting Up Email – While most internet service providers offer a free email account with your internet service, the vast majority of internet users still tend to set up a free web based email account. The most popular sites for these are Gmail, Yahoo, and Hotmail. Simply go to their website, fill in your information, select a screenname and password, and you're good to go! The process literally takes just minutes to do, and before you know it you're ready to connect with your friends and family.