

“IS THIS THING ON?”



AskAbbyStokes.com

If you're trying to decide which is best for you – a desktop, laptop, or tablet – make a trip to the computer store solely to help you determine which device you should buy. Try a couple of models of each. While you're at it, think about your workspace and how you're planning to use the machine. Keep in mind that all the basic hardware components are the same on a laptop or a desktop and between tablets. What you're considering is how the size of each type of device suits your needs and whether you want something portable. Once you think you've made a choice or if you're feeling overwhelmed, leave the store. Either go have lunch and return in the afternoon or come back another day to continue your field trip. If you feel you've absorbed all you can, take a break. This is an important decision, and you want to make a thoughtful choice. Initially, the computer store can sometimes add to any confusion you might have, especially after you get home and try to remember all you saw. The **Test-Drive Form** that follows will give you a written record to reference at your own pace in your own home. Copy these pages to bring with you to the store. If you have any questions or need any advice, feel free to email me at abby@AskAbbyStokes.com. (Also review Ch. 7 – “Would You Buy A Car Without Test-Driving It?” p.56)

TEST-DRIVE FORM

1. Store: _____

Salesperson: _____

Note the address and phone number of the store and the name of the salesperson you spoke with.

2. Brand & Model of Computer or Tablet: _____

Include any numbers that follow the brand name—this will indicate the model. For example: Dell Inspiron 15 3000.

3. Cost: _____

Note the basic cost and any additional costs. For example: \$499 plus \$50 for RAM upgrade = \$549.

SYSTEM INFORMATION

4. Computer Case: All-in-One Tower

If you're buying a desktop, is the computer case an all-in-one or a tower model that will go on the floor?



5. CPU Speed: _____ Upgradable Yes No

Remember, the central processing unit (CPU) speed is measured in gigahertz (GHz). You will need a CPU with at least 1.7 GHz, but if you want to splurge, you could go as high as 3 GHz, or even higher. Tablets don't allow for as much customization as a computer. Comparing CPU speed is only for computer buyers.

6. RAM: _____ Upgradable Yes No

The random access memory (RAM) size is measured in bytes—specifically gigabytes (GB) for RAM. You will want a RAM size of at least 1 GB—but 8 GB or higher is more fun.

7. Hard Drive: _____ Upgradable Yes No

The hard drive size is also measured in bytes—these days usually in gigabytes (GB), but it can go as high as a terabyte (TB = 1,000 GB). With a computer, I recommend that you start with at least 250 GB. I doubt you'll require as much as a terabyte, but it all depends on how many photos, videos, or how much music you store on your computer. With a tablet, the low end for the hard drive is 16 GB, but you can go as high as 512 GB. Again, your decision is based on how much you want to store on the device.

8. Monitor Size: _____

Monitor size is measured in diagonal inches from a top corner to the opposite bottom corner of the screen itself. For most, a bigger computer screen is better, but compact and portable may be what you want—you can judge what suits you best by checking out several different sizes.

9. Touch Screen: Yes No

Touch screen technology is not limited to tablets. Many new laptop and desktop computers offer touch screens as well. Touch for yourself and see if you have a preference.



10. Media (CD/DVD) Drive: CD-RW DVD-RW

Tablets and netbooks do not have built-in media drives. CD-RW stands for “Compact Disc Re-Writable.” Information can be brought onto the computer using a CD. You can take information off the computer as well—it could be that you want to have a backup of all the information you have on your computer. With a CD-RW drive, you can copy, or “burn,” information onto a CD from your computer. DVD stands for “Digital Versatile Disc” and/or “Digital Video Disc.” Whatever the name, you may want to strongly consider having a DVD drive. For most of us layfolk, we’ll use a DVD drive to watch movies. If you don’t already have a DVD player in your home, now is your chance to be able to watch DVDs on your computer!

11. Number of USB Ports: _____

USB stands for “Universal Serial Bus.” It is today’s most commonly used type of computer port to plug in a mouse, keyboard, printer, or scanner. It’s also where you insert a flash drive (see page 53). If you’re buying a computer, you want to be sure your computer has at least two USB ports. If it has only one USB port, you can purchase a USB hub, which offers additional USB ports off the hub, but a computer with additional USB ports is preferable. Tablets vary. Some do and some don’t have ports—that might make your decision right there.

12. Ethernet: Yes No

This port is used to connect your computer to an external DSL or cable modem for a high-speed Internet connection. An ethernet port looks like a phone jack, but it is slightly wider. Even if you aren’t interested in a high-speed Internet connection at the moment, you’ll want your computer to have the capacity for it down the road. Tablets don’t use an ethernet port.

13. Wireless: Wireless Cellular Data

A tablet uses wireless technology to connect to the Internet. Some tablets offer wi-fi only, some also offer cellular connection. With the



latter, you will have the choice of using its wi-fi capability (which limits you to connecting only when wi-fi is available) or paying a monthly fee for cellular data, which gives you a connection 24/7. Be sure to ask if the tablet is limited to wi-fi or offers both.

14. Speakers Included: Yes No

15. Webcam Built-In: Yes No

16. Type of Mouse: _____ **Notes on Feel:** _____

If you are buying a desktop, it will come with a standard mouse. If you are buying a laptop, note which kind of mouse it comes with (touch pad or touch point). Jot down some notes on the feel of each. Remember, you can't be expected to master the mouse at this point, but you will have an impression of how it feels. Is the mouse positioned in a place that seems easy to access or is your hand cramped while using it? Your mouse will be your constant companion when you're on the computer, so it must be comfortable to access and control. But generally speaking, control will come with practice.

17. Notes on Keyboard: _____

Note the feel of the keyboard. Do the keys feel mushy? Are they too resistant? Or are they just right?

18. How Will It Fit in Your Workspace? _____

Take notes on how you picture your computer system in your home.

SUPPORT

19. Warranty: _____

The length of the warranty will be in months. What parts fall under warranty? Ask if the screen is covered. It is the most fragile part of the device.

20. Extended Warranty: _____

Cost: _____



It's more than likely that the computer store where you make your purchase will offer you an extended warranty. This is an agreement with the store or mail-order company, not the manufacturer. The agreement is valid only if the store is still operational for the duration of the extended warranty—a good reason to make sure you are shopping at a reputable store. Because a single repair on a computer can run into the hundreds of dollars, consider a warranty.

21. Money-Back Guarantee: Yes No

This may be an agreement with the manufacturer that you have a certain number of days to return the machine—kind of like the lemon law. Beware: Some manufacturers will not exchange a computer even if it is defective. They may offer only to repair the machine. In that case, you may want to engage your credit card company as an advocate for you. Or, before contacting the manufacturer, call the store you purchased it from and ask if it is willing to exchange the defective computer.

22. Technical Support: Yes No

This is crucial. You want to make sure that the store or mail-order company you purchase from has technical support. The last thing you want to have to do is pack up your computer and mail it to the manufacturer. It is irritating enough to have to bring it to the store for repairs. Ask specifically about telephone technical support. A lot of questions or problems can be answered by a telephone call to a technician.

You should be getting free support for the length of your warranty, whether you have a problem with your computer or you have a question about how to use the machine.

If the manufacturer, not the store, provides the technical support, ask your salesperson for the technical repair numbers of the manufacturers you are considering. When you are home, call the numbers and see how long it takes for you to speak to a technician.



I've been on hold with some for over 20 minutes. This could be a deciding factor in determining which computer you purchase.

23. On-Site Repair: Yes No **Cost:** _____

Can someone come to your home to repair your computer? How much will it cost if it is still under warranty? What if the warranty has expired?

24. On-Site Installation: Yes No **Cost:** _____

Can someone come to your house to install your system? (This is more relevant for desktops than laptops or tablets.)

SOFTWARE

Note: Software questions are only for computers, not tablets.

25. Operating System: _____

Preinstalled Software: _____

Note the operating system in your computer (Windows 8.1 or 10, Mac Mavericks, Yosemite, other) and any preinstalled application software. For example, many computers come with a basic word-processing program, such as WordPad or NotePad, already installed.

26. Additional Software: _____ **Cost:** _____

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You may want to buy word-processing software or some other software based on your interests. We'll talk about this choice in Chapter 8.

PRINTER

27. Brand Name & Model: _____

Include any numbers that follow the brand name—they will indicate the model.

28. Cost: _____



29. Type of Printer: Ink-jet Laser-jet

An ink-jet printer is less expensive at purchase time, but a laser printer proves cheaper over the long term because it uses toner cartridges, which last much longer than ink cartridges purchased for the ink-jet. However, that only proves true if you're doing a large volume of printing. Most individuals opt for an ink-jet printer, and most businesses purchase a laser-jet.

30. Features: Color Black & White Only
 Fax/Copy Scanner

You will choose features based on your specific needs. Some printers send faxes and/or make copies. A color printer and scanner might be helpful if you decide to create something like a family newsletter or your own greeting cards. Color is definitely fun if you're printing from a website or want to print pictures. With a color printer, you have to purchase both a black ink cartridge and a color ink cartridge. Be prepared; cartridges can be pricey.

31. Paper Loading: Top Front

It is important to note whether the printer is front or top loading so you can arrange your workspace accordingly.

32. Wireless: Yes No

Some newer printers don't require a cable between computer and printer. It is possible to print from a tablet, if you purchase a wireless printer.

33. Number of Pages Printed per Minute: _____

If you are anticipating a lot of printing, how quickly the printer works may be quite important to you.

34. Number of Pages Printed per Ink Cartridge: _____

This is an important issue. I have a student who was interested in having a small portable printer. She was unpleasantly surprised when



her ink cartridge ran out after fewer than 50 pages were printed and a replacement cartridge cost over \$20.

35. Cost of Ink Cartridge Replacements: _____

36. Length of Warranty: _____

37. Extended Warranty: _____ **Cost:** _____

To repeat point 20, it's more than likely that the computer store where you make your purchase will offer you an extended warranty. This is an agreement with the store, not the manufacturer. The agreement is valid only if the store is still operational for the duration of the extended warranty—a good reason to make sure you're shopping at a reputable store.

38. Money-Back Guarantee: Full refund Store credit

Again, this is an agreement with the manufacturer that you have a certain number of days to return the machine. Ask the store if you get a full refund or just a store credit.

39. Toll-Free Support: Yes No

Remember, this is crucial. You want to make sure that the store or manufacturer you purchase from has technical support. You should be getting free support for the length of your warranty.

40. On-Site Repair: Yes No **Cost:** _____

Even with the printer, ask if someone can come to your home to repair it.

41. Did You Ask if All of the Peripherals Are Compatible?

Make sure that all the parts you are buying are friendly with one another. Have your salesperson confirm this and note his or her name in case the person is wrong.