

## Chapter 1

# Buying a Computer (Step-by-Step)

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### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ The five steps to buying a computer
  - ▶ Step 1: Decide what you want the computer to do
  - ▶ Step 2: Find software to get that job done
  - ▶ Step 3: Find hardware to make the software go
  - ▶ Step 4: Shop for service and support
  - ▶ Step 5: Buy that computer!
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**W**hether you're just walking through the door of the computer age or angrily returning to the store to purchase your sixth system this year, there are definitely good ways and bad ways to buy computers. This chapter shows you the good ways.

## *Relax — You Have Nothing to Fear*

It's easy to understand why buying a computer can be a scary thing. It's a big investment. Not only that, but lots of scary terms and frightening technology are involved. Are you getting the right thing? Is the salesperson baffling you with b.s.?

Unlike snakes, spiders, fire, and nearly bald guys with bad combers, humans don't have a natural fear of technology. You have no need to worry about slipping into *The Twilight Zone*; no need to confirm that you're in a Fellini movie. As with buying anything, the more you know about what you're buying, the better you can make your decision.

A well-informed shopper is a smart shopper. The key to becoming a smart computer shopper is to follow the five easy steps outlined in this chapter.

- ✔ I should tell you up front that the biggest mistake people make in buying a computer is shopping for price rather than service. Although lots of places can sell you the cheapest computer in the galaxy, don't expect them to offer much after-sale support.
- ✔ Yes, you need support.
- ✔ The second-biggest mistake is shopping for hardware before shopping for software, including shopping for brand-name computers. Just because the TV has trained you into thinking that such-and-such a company makes computers doesn't mean that you have to buy one.
- ✔ I explain the difference between hardware and software in Chapter 4. That's where I also inform you why software is more important.
- ✔ Though you can use this book to help you find a nice used computer, I don't recommend buying one as your first computer. Why? No support (see Chapter 21).
- ✔ You can also build your own computer, although I don't recommend this route for your first-time foray into the world of high tech. Why? Same reason: no support.

## *The Five Steps to Buying a Computer*

If you want to buy the perfect computer, the one Santa would have given you had you been good all year, you should follow these five simple steps:

### **1. Decide what you want the computer to do.**

When you know what you want to do with the computer, the rest of the steps fall neatly into place. That's because the computer is a device that can do many, many things; you have more reasons to buy a computer than could possibly be listed by a computer! Getting a good idea of what you need the computer for — e-mail, digital photography, music, video, writing, education, or entertainment, for example — is that vital first step.

### **2. Find the software that can get you the result you want.**

It's the software that does the work.

### **3. Find the hardware to run your software.**

Most people confuse this step with Step 2, finding software. Despite all the advertising out there, software is really more important; the hardware merely obeys the software. To put it another way, you don't buy a home gym to own all that fancy metal and those pulleys and cushions. No, you buy a home gym to get into shape. You buy an oboe to play oboe music, not because it makes a unique vase. Likewise, you buy a computer to run software. Therefore, the software is more important, and you should look for it first. (I tell you more on this topic in Chapter 4.)

#### 4. Shop for service and support.

This step is the most important one — more important than knowing whether to push or pull the computer store’s front door. Too many shoppers overlook service and support and regret it later. I rant about this subject at length later in this chapter.

#### 5. Buy that computer!

Although this statement seems obvious, I know lots of folks who put off the purchase, holding out for a better deal or newer technology that’s just “moments away.” Bah! When you’re ready to buy, buy. ’Nuff said.

I use these steps myself and have touted them for years. They work. Especially when you’re buying something high-ticket like a computer, you don’t want to make a simple mistake.



- ✓ If you haven’t already decided what a computer can do for you, flip through Chapter 16 to see what the little beasties are capable of.
- ✓ The *software* gets the work done. You buy hardware to support the software you have chosen.
- ✓ *Service* means getting the computer fixed. *Support* means getting H-E-L-P when you need it. *Everyone* needs service and support with a new computer. Everyone.

## Step 1: Figure out what you want to do with your computer

Believe it or not, knowing what you want to do with the computer before you buy it is really helpful. Even if your only reason for buying one is that it would match the décor of your high-tech office, that’s a good enough reason. Other folks, though, usually have some inkling in mind about why the Emperor of All Gadgets would be useful to them.

The first step toward buying your own computer is to decide what you want to do with it. As with other handy devices you own — a telephone, a car, a refrigerator, and that lava lamp — you need a reason to have a computer. Well? What do you see yourself doing on a computer?

- ✓ The number-one reason to buy a computer now is “to do the Internet.” With your computer, you can exchange e-mail, browse the Web, view news and sports, entertain yourself, chat, shop, trade stocks, mind your finances, or just plain goof off. Hey! That’s a *great* reason to own a computer! If that’s you, bravo!

- ✔ Some people know instantly what they want a computer to do. I want a computer to help me write. My son is into film, and he wants a digital video studio. My younger kids want to play games and send e-mail.
- ✔ If you ever work with lists, numbers, 3-x-5 cards, home finances, stocks, bonds, or Swiss bank accounts, or if you trade in plutonium from the former Soviet Union, you need a computer.
- ✔ If you're buying a computer to complement the one at your office, you probably need something similar at home.
- ✔ If you're buying a computer for your kids in school, ask their teachers what types of computers best run the software the school uses. Buy something similar for home.
- ✔ A survey was taken a while back to find out why some people do not yet own a computer. The number-one reason? (Can you guess?) No, it wasn't that computers are too expensive. The number-one reason that people don't buy computers is that they haven't yet figured out what to do with one!
- ✔ If you're really stuck, it helps to picture yourself in the future, working on a computer. What are you doing (besides swearing at it)?



## Step 2: Look for software

After you know what you want the computer to do, you go out and look for software to get the job done. *Software* refers to those computer programs that make the computer behave in a certain way. The programs are also called *applications* in that they apply the computer's power to help you accomplish some task.

You need to visit some software stores to hunt down the software to make your computer do what you need it to do. Or, if you already have a computer, you can browse the software selection on the Internet and visit online software stores as well as the developers who make the software. Finally, you can ask around and see what kinds of software your friends use or what your accountant recommends or what that brilliant 14-year-old Chess Club genius down the block thinks you need. Advice is good!

When you have found the software you need, take notes. Each software package has its hardware requirements listed right on the box — like the nutritional contents on a box of cereal. Write that information down, using a form similar to the one shown in Figure 1-1.

Chapter 17 shows you how to fill out the form. That's your ticket for the next step: Buy hardware to run your software.



- ✔ You should try software before you buy it. Just about any computer store lets you try it: Sit down at the computer and play with the software you plan to buy. See how much you like it. See whether it works the way you expect it to. Does it make sense? If not, try something else.
- ✔ If you have high-speed Internet access, many developers let you download demo versions of their software. Note that these files can be quite large.

### Software Worksheet

Product name: \_\_\_\_\_

Developer: \_\_\_\_\_

Price: \_\_\_\_\_

Category: Office      Word processing      Spreadsheet      Presentation  
 Utility      Database      Graphics      Education  
 Internet      Networking      Programming      Financial  
 Multimedia      Entertainment      Reference      Other

Type of support: Vanilla      Chocolate      Carob      Fudge

Operating systems: Windows 2000 / NT      XP Home/Pro  
 Macintosh OS X  
 Linux: \_\_\_\_\_  
 Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Microprocessor: Pentium: \_\_\_\_\_  
 G4      G5  
 Alpha  
 Speed: \_\_\_\_\_ MHz

Memory (RAM) needed: \_\_\_\_\_ Megabytes

Hard disk storage: \_\_\_\_\_ Megabytes / Gigabytes

Media: CD-ROM      Floppy      Zip: \_\_\_\_\_ MB  
 DVD      DVD-R      DVD-RW Plus(+)      Minus(-)  
 DVD-RAM      Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Graphics: Memory: \_\_\_\_\_ Megabytes      GPU      3D  
 PCI / AGP      ATI      Nvidia

Printer: \_\_\_\_\_

Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Notes: \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 1-1:**  
The software worksheet.



- ✓ No, you're not buying anything in this step. You're just looking at various software packages that you may purchase later and jotting down their hardware appetite. That information — the stuff on the side of the box — helps you assemble your perfect computer system.
- ✓ Software-store people don't mind if you're "just looking."
- ✓ After you find something you like, you fill in the Software Worksheet. Fill in one worksheet for each program you plan on buying.

### *Step 3: Find hardware*

After reviewing your software lineup, your next step is to match the software's requirements with a suitable computer. The idea is to find the hardware that can run your software. The software knows what it needs (it's on the side of the box), and you have collected all that information on the Software Worksheet, so this next step is simple: Fill the order.

Figure 1-2 shows a sample of this book's Hardware Worksheet. The information you find there may look intimidating now, but after you do your software research, filling in the worksheet is a snap.

Thanks to the worksheet, you know exactly what type of computer hardware you need. You're never steered to the wrong machine.

Don't buy anything yet!

- ✓ Most people make the mistake of shopping for hardware first and software second. After all, what you're buying is a *computer*. But now you know that what the computer *does* with software is more important.
- ✓ By matching your software needs to your computer hardware, you avoid a perilous fate: You *do not* become one of the sorry people who have to return to the computer store weeks later to upgrade their memory or hard drive or something else they should have had in the first place.

### *Step 4: Shop for service and support*

Crazy Omar and Discount Dave may have deals on computers, and you can pick up a computer at the massive warehouse or membership store along with a six-month supply of pop and a vat of peanut butter — but what kind of

support do those places offer? Especially if you're a first-time buyer, there's no substitute for after-sale support. The support consideration far outweighs getting a deal or finding the cheapest computer in the land.

### Hardware Worksheet

Operating system    Windows: \_\_\_\_\_  
                                   Macintosh: \_\_\_\_\_  
                                   Linux: \_\_\_\_\_

Microprocessor:    Pentium G4    Other: \_\_\_\_\_  
                                   Speed: \_\_\_\_\_ MHz

Memory (RAM):    \_\_\_\_\_ Megabytes

Hard drive storage: \_\_\_\_\_ Gigabytes    Second hard drive: \_\_\_\_\_ GB

Removable media:    Floppy / No floppy    Zip drive:    MB  
                                   Flash Media: \_\_\_\_\_  
                                   Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Optical media:    CD-ROM    CD-R    CD-RW  
                                   DVD    DVD-R    DVD-RW plus / minus  
                                   Combination drive    Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Graphics adapter    \_\_\_\_\_ Megabytes    GPU    3D  
                                   PCI / AGP    ATI / Nvidia  
                                   Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Monitor:    Size: \_\_\_\_\_ Inches    CRT / LCD  
                                   Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Modem:    Internal / External  
                                   Dial-up    DSL    Cable    Satellite  
                                   Speed: \_\_\_\_\_ (bps)

Mouse/pointing device:    Standard    Optical    Wireless    Wheel  
                                   Trackball    Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Ports:    COM1    COM2    Printer (LPT1)  
                                   USB    IEEE (Firewire)    Ethernet (RJ45)  
                                   Joystick    Other: \_\_\_\_\_

Printer:    Brand: \_\_\_\_\_  
                                   Laser    Ink    Impact    Photo  
                                   Color options: \_\_\_\_\_

**Figure 1-2:**  
The hardware worksheet.



## Have a little class

I don't steer any of my friends to a local computer store unless it has a classroom attached. It's wonderful to know that a store is so dedicated to happy users that it devotes floor space to a classroom.

Some people take classes *before* they buy their computers. I recommend buying the computer

first and taking the classes afterward. That way, you have something to go home and practice on. Also, with the computer in your possession, you know specifically which questions to ask. (If you have already attended this type of class, you know that new computer owners ask more detailed and useful questions.)

- ✔ You can easily forget service and support because they're not mentioned prominently in most ads. Instead, you see prices and deals and sales. Ignore them!
- ✔ *Service* is the ability to fix your computer if something goes wrong with it. The best service is on-site, where someone comes to you and fixes your little electronic friend right where it lives. The worst service is when you have to pack up your computer and ship it to some overseas factory.
- ✔ *Support* is help. It can be in the form of classes, phone support, or training.
- ✔ The trade-off for a cheap computer is little service and no support.
- ✔ Chapter 19 goes into more detail about shopping for service and support. That chapter is very important! Read it! I'm not being funny!

## *Step 5: Buy your computer*

When you're ready to buy your computer, buy it. You know what you need the computer for, you know what software to buy, you know what hardware to buy, and you have found a proper dealer with service and support. So, *buy it!*

The buying process is covered in Part III of this book.





## Buyer beware!

I would like to tell you that lousy computer dealers don't exist, but they do. Even big businesses and longtime computer gurus get snagged into computer-buying tricks and traps. Here are my best tips and advice to avoid common computer-buying scams:

- ✔ **Check the ad for a street location.** Most fly-by-night operations work from P.O. boxes or rental mailboxes. Legitimate businesses have real street locations that you can drive by and see.
- ✔ **Never put money down on a computer.** That's typically the earmark of a rob-Peter-to-pay-Paul scheme. Pay the full price. You may have to wait while the system is being assembled, but that's not the same thing as making a down payment.
- ✔ **Run like the devil if the dealer insists that you pay only cash.**
- ✔ **Also consider running if the dealer doesn't accept credit cards.**
- ✔ **Always pay by credit card — never with cash or a check.** Many consumer protection laws are available to credit card users that are not available to people who pay with cash or by check.
- ✔ **Always make sure that you get what you pay for.** Check the invoice, and if you're suspicious, have a third-party repair place check your computer innards to be certain that you got what you want and what you paid for.

## Don't Sit Around Waiting to Buy!



It's only natural to hesitate a bit before buying a new computer. In fact, Step 5 (buying your computer) is the hardest of all the steps.

Money isn't the main thing that keeps people from finally buying a new computer. No, it's the rapid advancement of technology that instills hesitation. Computer technology speeds forward like a rocket sled on a frozen lake. A computer you buy today is guaranteed to be obsolete in three years, a dinosaur in five years, and nearly useless in ten. People see this situation as a warning: Don't buy today's computer; wait for the next generation!

Oh, pish. . . .

Although it's true that the next generation of computers will be better, faster, and probably less expensive, it's also true that waiting . . . gets you nowhere. It's like not catching a bus because you assume that the next bus will have fewer people on it or be cleaner. That may be the case, but while you're waiting, you're going nowhere.

The bottom line is when you're ready to buy, buy.