

realize it isn't such a big deal, and then continue learning more about the computer before you make your investment.

It's empowering to know that this is nothing more than a research expedition. No obligation, no financial outlay, no decision making. If you don't want to go back, there is always the option of mail order or purchasing from the store by phone so you never have to reenter the place. And remember, if the salesperson you are dealing with really doesn't appeal to you, give him the brushoff, let him get out of sight, smile sweetly at another salesperson, and watch her come running.

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 it's easier, rip the pages out to make the copies.

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: _____

Include any numbers that follow the brand name—this will indicate the model. For example: Dell Dimension 966.

3. Cost: _____

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

SYSTEM INFORMATION

4. Computer Case: Standard Tower

Is the computer case a standard model 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 2 GHz, but if you want to splurge, you could go as high as 3 GHz, or even higher.

6. RAM: _____ Upgradable Yes No

The Random Access Memory (RAM) size is measured in megabytes (MB). You will want a RAM size of at least 1 GB—but 8 GB is more fun.

7. Hard Drive: _____ Upgradable Yes No

The hard drive size is also measured in megabytes or gigabytes (GB). I recommend that you start with at least 40 GB. I doubt you'll require more than 500 GB, since that will suffice for almost anything you could think of doing on the computer.

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 screen is better, but you can judge what suits you best by checking out several different sizes.

9. CD-RW Drive: Yes No

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.

10. DVD-RW Drive: Yes No

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! Another compelling reason to consider a DVD drive is that some software comes on a DVD rather than a CD, so you won't be able to install it without a DVD

“Even with all the choices in the store, there were only a couple of computers that appealed to me. My son helped me decide which of these few was the best.”

—*Bert*

“I’m glad I didn’t have someone else buy my computer for me. I learned so much when I visited the computer store.”
—*Kreeseon*

drive. With a DVD-RW drive, you can copy, or “burn,” information onto a DVD from 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. You want to be sure your computer has at least two USB ports. If it only has one USB port, you can purchase a USB hub, which offers additional USB ports off of the hub, but a computer with additional USB ports is preferable.

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 regular 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.

13. Wireless Network Card: Yes No

A wireless network card allows your computer to connect to the Internet without needing to be plugged into anything. It works in a similar fashion to a cell phone, which doesn’t need to be plugged into a phone jack. Again, even if this technology doesn’t interest you now, you want to keep your future options open.

14. Speakers Included: Yes No

15. 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.

16. Notes on Keyboard: _____

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

17. How will it fit in your workspace? _____

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

SUPPORT

18. Warranty: _____

The length of the warranty will be in months. What parts fall under warranty?

19. 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.

20. 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 only offer 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.

21. 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.

“I was apprehensive about our class field trip to a nearby computer store. It seemed much more than I could handle. But once I tried a couple of different computers, I knew that it was the right thing to do. I still wouldn’t stroll into a computer store for fun, but it helped me make a more informed decision.”

—Vance

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 number of the manufacturers you are considering. When you are home, call the number 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.

22. 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?

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

Can someone come to your house to install your system?

SOFTWARE

24. Operating System: _____

Preinstalled Software: _____

Note the operating system in your computer (Windows XP, 7, Mac OSX, Snow Leopard, other) and any preinstalled application software.

25. Additional Software: _____ **Cost:** _____

Additional Software: _____ **Cost:** _____

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

26. Brand Name & Model: _____

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

27. Cost: _____

28. 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.

29. Features: Color Black & White Only
 FaxCopy Scanner

You will choose features based on your specific needs. A color printer and scanner might be helpful if you decide to do something like a family newsletter or making 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.

30. Paper Loading: Top Front

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

31. Wireless: Yes No

Some newer printers don't require a cable between computer and printer.

32. 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.

33. 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.

“I almost skipped class the day of the field trip. It made me think of going to the dentist. But it wasn't that bad at all. I've already gone back twice on my own to ask more questions.”

—*Nicole*

34. Cost of Ink Cartridge Replacements: _____

35. Length of Warranty: _____

36. Extended Warranty: _____ **Cost:** _____

To repeat point 19, 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.

37. Money-Back Guarantee: Full refund Store credit
 Other

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.

38. 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.

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

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

40. Did you ask if all of the peripherals are compatible?

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

Filling out this form may seem like a lot of work—perhaps more work than you've done buying anything else. This isn't just a way to have you make an educated purchase; it is also a way for you to learn about the machine you will be using. By the time you go through this process and get the computer home, you'll be much more knowledgeable than