Chapter 1

Buying a Computer (Step-by-Step)

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!

*A*ll human beings share some basic fears. Snakes. Spiders. Bowlers with cheap toupees. And perhaps the most recent horror to join the human menagerie of terror: buying a computer. It's a nightmare! It's from *The Twilight Zone!* It's like being in a Fellini movie!

Of course, buying a computer isn't really that scary. Sure, you can't escape from gruesome (well, tiresome) computer jargon. And technology marches forward like creeping radioactive slime from outer space, paralyzing you with fear that what you buy today will quickly become obsolete. Heck, even an "old hand" at computers can be intimidated by new gizmos and options.

Fear! Dread! Uncertainty! Doubt!

Does it really need to be that bad? No! Just like 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 will 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. I explain the difference and why software is more important in Chapter 4.

✔ 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 19).

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.**

   There are as many reasons for buying a personal computer as people to think up the reasons. And owning a computer brings more benefits than could possibly be listed — even by a computer. So you have no excuse for not completing this step. When you finish this task, the rest of the steps fall nicely into place.

2. **Find the software that will get you the result you want.**

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

   Most people confuse the order of Steps 2 and 3, worrying about hardware before software. But the software does the work; the hardware merely obeys the software. Put another way, you don't buy a TV set to watch the TV's imitation mahogany cabinet. No, you watch what's *on* the TV, the programming. Likewise, you buy a computer to run software. Ipso fatso, the software is more important. (But you can read more about this topic in Chapter 4.)

4. **Shop for service and support.**

   This step is the most important one — more important than buying the computer. 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've used these steps myself, and 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.

REMEMBER

✏ If you haven't already decided what a computer can do for you, flip through Chapter 14 to see what the little beasties are capable of.

✏ The *software* gets the work done. You buy hardware to support the software you've 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

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!

The first step toward buying your own computer is to decide what you want to do with it. Like 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.

✔ It helps to picture yourself in the future, working on a computer. What are you doing (besides swearing at it)?

✔ Some people know instantly what they want a computer to do. I want a computer to help me write. My son wants a computer to play games. My grandmother doesn't have a computer, although she could use one to help her with her church flock and to write up her meeting notes.

✔ 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.

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. This task involves going to software stores and seeing what's available or asking friends who have computers what they recommend.

When you've 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 15 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.

REMEMBER

✔ You're not buying anything in this step. You're just looking at various software packages you'll 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.

✔ After you find something you like, you fill in the Software Worksheet. Fill in one worksheet for each program you plan on buying.

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 98/Me   2000   NT   XP Home/Pro
Macintosh: OS 9   OS X
Linux: _____
DOS: _____
Other: _____

Microprocessor: Pentium II   III   4   Other: _____
G3   G4
Alpha
Speed: _____ MHz

Memory (RAM) needed: _____ megabytes

Hard disk storage: _____ megabytes

Media: CD-ROM   DVD   Floppy

Graphics: Memory: _____ megabytes

Printer: _____

Recommendations: _____

_____

_____

Figure 1-1: The software worksheet.

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've collected all that information on the Software Worksheets, 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 cinchy.

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

But 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.

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 computer. 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've already attended such a class, you know that new computer owners ask more detailed and useful questions.)

Hardware Worksheet

Operating system:	Windows: _____ Macintosh: _____ Linux: _____
Microprocessor:	Pentium G4 Other: _____ Speed: _____MHz
Memory (RAM):	_____megabytes
Hard drive storage:	_____gigabytes
Removable media:	Standard 1.4MB No floppy Zip drive Other: _____
Optical media:	CD-ROM CD-R CD-RW DVD DVD-R DVD-RW DVD-RAM SuperDrive Other: _____
Graphics adapter:	_____megabytes Other: _____
Monitor:	Size: _____inches Dot pitch:_____mm Traditional CRT LCD Other: _____
Modem:	Internal External Dial-up DSL Cable Satellite Speed: _____(bps)
Mouse or pointing device:	Standard Optical Wireless Wheel Trackball Other: _____
Ports:	Serial: COM1 COM2 Printer: LTP1 USB ports: _____ Firewire:_____ Joystick MIDI Other: _____
Printer:	Brand: _____ Laser Ink Impact Color Options: _____

Figure 1-2: The hardware worksheet.

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.

✔ It's easy to forget service and support because it's not mentioned prominently in the 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!

WARNING!

Buyer beware!

I'd 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 business 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 paid for.** Check the invoice and, if you're suspicious, have a third-party repair place check your computer.

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've found a proper dealer with service and support. *So buy it!*

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

Don't Sit Around Waiting to Buy!

WARNING!

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.