

Getting a Computer Ready for the Internet

Don't worry, I'm not going to tell you that you need really fancy equipment to get started online, but you must *have* a computer. These days, there are more choices than you can imagine for joining the online social scene. If you're in the market for a computer, you've got a few choices, which I tell you about in this chapter.

Shopping for a computer can be a dizzying experience. As a matter of fact, it's downright confusing. I suggest you go to a store and kick a few tires (or try out a few keyboards) before you make a decision. Also, recognize that your decisions about computer equipment depend on how and where you plan to use your computer. Follow my advice in this chapter to evaluate your computer use and find the right source for your equipment.

Chapter 1

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Along with your hardware of choice and an Internet connection (see Chapter 2), you need just one more item — a software program — to interact with online social sites (such as Facebook and Twitter). When you get a computer, you get an Internet browser for free. A browser is the software program that lets your computer talk to the Internet. It's like having your own private cyberchauffeur. In this chapter, I also tell you a little about the common browsers that are readily available.

Pick Hardware to Match Your Computer Use

1. I confess, I have a desktop, a laptop, *and* a netbook computer — and I use each one at different locations and for different reasons. You certainly don't need to have all three varieties to work with Facebook and Twitter; simply decide on which type is right for you before you buy. Think through the scenarios in this section and see which one matches your plans. Then go find the computer hardware that fits.
2. If you are one who likes to sit at a desk or table, or wants a regular place to use your computer, you'll be happy with a desktop variety. Also, if you like to have all the power of today's computing at your disposal, you'll have to get a desktop. *Desktop* computers are larger than their portable cousins, and can hold more bells and whistles.



These days you can buy a package that combines a monitor, keyboard, and a computer module. But with all the great deals on the Internet, you may want to make these purchases separately. See the section "Shop for Your Computer of Choice" for more about where to purchase.

3. If you're looking for a computer that will allow you to sit seductively at Starbucks — looking cool — you'll have to get a laptop. Okay, how about if you just want to use Twitter or Facebook from *anywhere* in your home other than your desk (say, the kitchen counter)? The major difference between a desktop and a *laptop* (as shown in

Figure 1-1) is that everything you need is combined in one compact, lightweight package. Also, you'll be able to use your laptop (called *notebook* by some) to go online anywhere a wireless (WiFi) connection is available. WiFi readiness is built into all laptops these days.



Figure 1-1

Also consider the following if you're leaning toward getting a laptop:

- You'll find that keyboards can get progressively smaller, depending on the size of notebook you buy. So if you have big fingers, be sure to test out the notebook offerings in a store prior to buying one.
- You'll find smaller monitors on today's laptops, so they can be portable. It somewhat defeats the portability purpose when you have to lug around a 26-inch, 6-pound behemoth. Keep in mind that Web browsers allow you to easily increase the size of the text you see (more about that in the task "Browse for a Browser" later in this chapter).



I've taken my laptop out by the pool when I'm on vacation, and at home, I sometimes *tweet* (send a message on Twitter) from my garden. Portability is a wonderful thing.

4. If you're looking for extra portability and convenience, think netbook. *Netbooks* are smaller than desktops or laptops (they generally have 10-inch screens), you can stick them in a purse or shopping bag, and you can buy one for as little as \$300. They are a great deal. My netbook, shown in **Figure 1-2** (nail polish is for scale), is an Asus Seashell, and it weighs a little over two pounds.

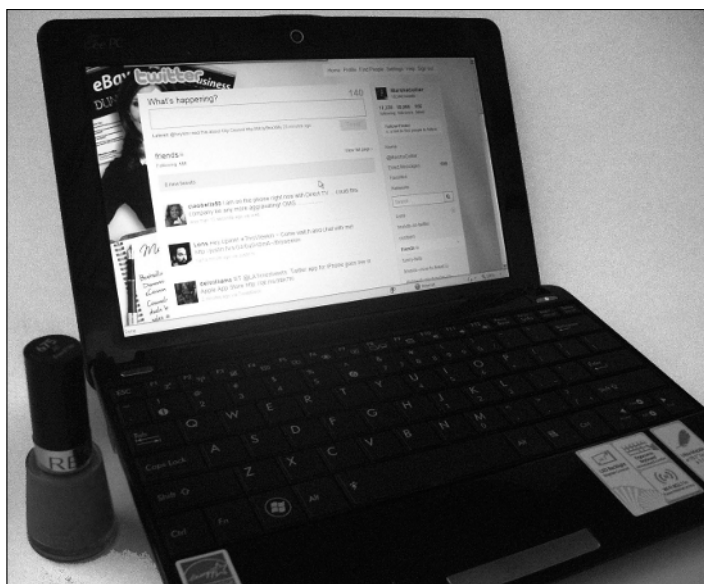


Figure 1-2

Due to size limitations, there are a few tasks that a netbook can't perform, as illustrated in **Table 1-1**.

Table 1-1 What a Laptop and a Netbook Can Do

Task	Netbook	Laptop
E-mail, chat, instant messaging	x	x
Social networking, blogging, Twitter, and Facebook	x	x
Surfing the Web	x	x
Streaming audio or video	x	x
Using word processors, spreadsheets, and small business programs	x	x
Capturing live action with a built-in Web cam	x	x
Playing games	Online Games	PC Games
Editing videos and photos	Lower resolution photos only	x
Converting music from CDs to Mp3 files		x
Seamlessly watching HD movies		x
Running complex software		x



My laptop gets the most use, but my netbook always travels with me. But don't think that netbooks are just for traveling; they can easily fulfill your every need for using online services.

- 5.** If you really want to Tweet or Facebook from your pocket, you can do so from any of the current smartphones. A *smartphone* is truly a mobile personal computer that fits in your hand, and you can also use it to make phone calls. Smartphones often contain mini versions of almost every piece of software you have on your laptop. When your WiFi connection is out, or if you have the need to connect from a restaurant, your smartphone can do the trick.

Popular smartphones include the iPhone, Blackberry, Android, and the Palm Pre. **Figure 1-3** shows my phone ready for action.



Figure 1-3

Know What Hardware Options to Look For

1. Before you purchase one of the different types of equipment I outline in the previous section, think about some of the options you need to look for on any computing device that you plan to use for interacting with your pals on Facebook and Twitter. Look for a computer with a large hard drive. The more time you spend using — and storing stuff on — your computer, the more Blob-like your hard drive's contents become. (Remember that 1950s horror movie, *The Blob*, where an alien life form just grows and grows?)

A hard drive with at least 60 gigabytes (GB) of storage space should keep your computer happy, but you can get hard drives as big as 500 GB. You're probably going to be

storing photos and videos (yes, you will — I promise), so I suggest that you buy one with the biggest hard drive you can afford.

2. One USB port is *never* enough. These days, it seems like every peripheral device you need connects to your computer through a Universal Serial Bus (USB) connection. You may end up with an external hard drive for backup, a mouse, a printer, and a digital camera that you need to connect (so you can download pictures). **Figure 1-4** shows a common peripheral device: a USB flash drive. Make sure that the desktop, laptop, or netbook computer you get has at *least* two USB ports (you can plug and unplug from these at will).



Figure 1-4

3. Make sure the computer's central processing unit (CPU) is fast. A *CPU* (also known as a *chip*) is your computer's brain. It should be the fastest you can afford. You can always opt for the top-of-the-line, but even a slower 900MHz (megahertz) processor *could* suffice. The popular Atom processor from Intel is in most netbook computers, and that clocks at 1.6 GHz (gigahertz). If you want lightning-fast speed (imagine a Daytona 500 race car with jet assist), you have to move up to one that boosts to at least 3.6 GHz.

4. Get a CD/DVD drive; a disc burner is standard equipment. You use the drive to load new software programs into your computer from compact discs. You can also use the CDs or DVDs for your backups. These days, all models play and record DVD movies on your computer, and most new software comes in the CD or DVD format.
5. You must have a keyboard. No keyboard, no typing. The basic keyboard is fine. They do make funky ergonomic models that are split in the middle. But if the good old standard keyboard feels comfortable to you, stick with it.
6. Multiple media-card reader. Your digital camera will no doubt have a memory card in it where it holds all the pictures you take. It's a lot easier to pop out the card and slip it into your computer than mess around with connecting cables so you can download your photos. Different cameras take different sizes of media cards, and camera manufacturers haven't really conformed to a standard yet. So it's a plus when the computer accepts multiple cards — because you'll probably get a new camera before you get a new computer.
7. You need a pointing device that moves the pointer around the computer screen; it's usually a *mouse*. Laptops and netbooks come with touchpads or trackballs designed to do the moving and give you a quick way to select options by clicking or tapping. I personally find that a mouse is a better choice.



To save possible pain in your hands, I recommend you use an ergonomic mouse like the Contour Mouse from Contour Design (<http://ergo.contourdesign.com>). I've used one for over a decade. See **Figure 1-5**. The Contour Mouse fits your hand and is available in seven different sizes, for right and left hands. This mouse reduces or eliminates the grip force required to navigate

and click traditional mice. This sculpted mouse is designed to support your hand comfortably without the need to clutch the mouse to control it.



Figure 1-5

8. When buying a monitor to go with a desktop computer, size counts! An LCD (Liquid Crystal Display) monitor that has at least a 17-inch screen can make a huge difference in your comfort level after several hours of rabid tweeting or reading your friends' Facebook posts. Anything smaller, and you could have a hard time actually seeing the words and images. The good news: Monitors have become so inexpensive that you can find a 20-inch or larger variety for about \$200.

Shop for Your Computer of Choice

1. These days you can find computers at many retailers, including Office Depot, Staples, Apple Store, Sony Style, and my favorite, Costco. Try out each computer and ask questions. Every brick-and-mortar retailer these days is more than willing to show you the options they offer.
2. You can also get online and find sellers who have even better deals on new, used, or refurbished computer equipment. Some Web sites that include computers for sale are Amazon (www.amazon.com), Buy.com (www.buy.com), BestBuy.com (www.bestbuy.com), and even at Costco.com (www.costco.com).

3. If you don't feel comfortable buying a used machine (but want to save money), you may want to consider a factory-refurbished model. These are new machines that were returned to the manufacturer for one reason or another. The factory fixes them so they're nice and spiffy, and then sweetens the deal with a terrific warranty. Some companies even offer optional, extended, on-site repairs. What you're getting is a new computer at a deep discount because the machine can't be resold legally as new. Here are some things to know about refurbished computers:

- **They're rebuilt and come with warranties.** For the most part, refurbished computers are defined as returns, units with blemishes (scratches, dents, and so on), or evaluation units. The factories rebuild them to their original working condition, using new parts (or sometimes used parts that meet or exceed performance specs for new parts). They come with 60- to 90-day warranties that cover repairs and returns. Warranty information is available on the manufacturers' Web sites, so be sure to read it before you purchase a refurbished computer.
- **You can get name brands.** Major computer manufacturers such as Dell, IBM, Sony, Hewlett-Packard, and Apple provide refurbished computers. Check whether their Web site has an outlet store (**Figure 1-6** shows one example). I visit shopping.hp.com/outlet, www.sonymstyle.com/outlet, and www.dell.com/outlet, and check the sites for closeouts and refurbished goods all the time — and I've never been burned!



Because the inventory of refurbished computers changes daily (as do the prices), there's no way of telling exactly how much money you can save by buying refurbished instead of new. I suggest that you find a new computer system you like (and can afford) in a store or a catalog, and then compare it with refurbished systems of the same brand and model.



Figure 1-6



If you're thinking about buying from the Web or a catalog, don't forget to include the cost of shipping in the total price. Even with shipping costs, however, a refurbished computer may save you between 30% and 60%, depending on the deal you find.

Browse for a Browser

1. The two most popular *browsers* (the software programs that help you read what's on the Internet) are Firefox (available both for MAC and the PC) and Microsoft Internet Explorer. (They are to browsers what Coca-Cola and Pepsi are to the cola wars.) Both programs are powerful and user-friendly. Type the address (also known as the *URL*, for *Uniform Resource Locator*) of the Web site you want to visit, and boom, you're there. For example, to get

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to Twitter's home page, type **www.twitter.com** in the browser's address box and press Enter. (It's sort of a low-tech version of "Beam me up, Scotty!" — and almost as fast.)

According to recent statistics, the most popular browsers are Internet Explorer, Firefox, Chrome, and Safari.

Figures 1-7 and 1-8 show you the first two browsers and how they show pages in the same way. (Sit, browser! Now shake! *Good* browser!) The one you choose is a matter of preference — I use them both!

A Web page in Firefox



Figure 1-7

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The same page in Internet Explorer

Icons on the toolbar



Figure 1-8

2. You can get Microsoft Internet Explorer and Firefox for free. To find out more information (or to make sure you're using the most up-to-date version of the software), go to:

- www.microsoft.com for Microsoft Internet Explorer
- www.mozilla.com/firefox for Firefox

3. If you've ever wondered what all those buttons and drop-down lists at the top of your browser do, now's the time to check it out. At the top of almost all Microsoft-enabled programs are standard drop-down menus that

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invoke various functions. (If they don't appear on your version, press the Alt key.) Who'd ever think you'd need to use menus, given all the colorful icons that Internet Explorer provides? Well, the drop-down menus give you more in-depth access to what the program can do. Table 1-2 and Table 1-3 give you an overview of the various tasks you can perform from these menus.

Table 1-2 **Internet Explorer Menus**

Menu	What You Can Do
File	Open, print, save, and send HTML Web pages
Edit	Select, cut, copy, paste, and find text on the currently displayed page
View	Change the way Explorer displays Internet pages
Favorites	Save your favorite pages in the Favorites file
Tools	Enable pop-up blockers, add filters, and clear your machine's history of the Web sites you've visited
Help	Find help

Table 1-3 **Firefox Menus**

Menu	What You Can Do
File	Open, print, save, and send HTML Web pages
Edit	Select, cut, copy, paste, and find text on the currently displayed page
View	Change the way Firefox displays Internet pages
History	See and navigate back and forth among the sites visited in your current session
Bookmarks	Bookmark a page or access your saved bookmarks (same as "favorites" in Internet Explorer)
Tools	Enable features, install add-on programs, clear Private Data, and set browser options
Help	Find help

- 4.** As a *graphical interface*, Internet Explorer also presents you with colorful icons that allow you to invoke programs or tasks with a click of the mouse. You find these icons on the toolbars at the top of your browser window (refer to Figure 1-8).
- 5.** If you want to add speed to your browsing and cut down your desk time, get comfy with using keyboard and mouse shortcuts. I'm all about using keystrokes instead of always pointing and clicking! I also love the controls available on my mouse. **Table 1-4** and **Table 1-5** give you a list of all the shortcuts I could find. You'll see that Internet Explorer and Firefox share some shortcuts.

Table 1-4 **Internet Explorer Shortcuts**

<i>Press This</i>	<i>Explorer Will</i>
F1	Open a help window
F3	Open the Search box so you can perform a search for a specific word on the current page
F4	Open your URL list so you can click back to a site that you just visited
F5	Refresh the current page
F11	Display full screen, reducing the number of icons and amount of other stuff displayed
Esc	Stop loading the current page
Home	Go back to the top of the Web page
End	Jump to the bottom of the current page
Backspace	Go back to the last Web page you viewed
Ctrl and + (plus sign); Ctrl and – (minus sign)	Enlarge or reduce the text on the screen
Ctrl and D	Add the current page to your Favorites list. (Don't forget to organize this list once in a while!)

Table 1-5**Firefox Shortcuts**

<i>Press This</i>	<i>Firefox Will</i>
Backspace	Go to the previous page you've viewed
Ctrl and O	Open a window to open files from your computer
F5	Refresh current page
Ctrl and U	View Page source (to study HTML)
F11	Display full-screen, reducing the amount of icons and stuff displayed
Esc	Stop loading the current page
Ctrl and P	Print the page
Ctrl and S	Save the current page to a file on your computer
Backspace	Go back to the last Web page you viewed
Ctrl and + (plus sign) or Ctrl and – (minus sign)	Enlarge or reduce the text on the screen
Ctrl and F	Find a word on the current Web page