

# Introduction

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### How this book is structured

This book is written for the many people who want easy to understand and up-to-date information on buying and using a laptop. It uses plain language and acronyms and jargon, such as RAM, gigabytes and MP3, but only where it is needed to help you be successful.

The content of this book is directed in the first instance at PC users working with Windows Vista or Windows 7 operating systems. I also mention the Mac to a lesser extent and briefly mention less popular alternatives such as Linux.

This book is broken up into 12 chapters that take you through the steps of buying a laptop and learning how to use it. I will show you how to confidently choose a laptop that will suit your needs from the ever-widening array of choices available. This book is also suitable for those who already have made the first step of buying a laptop, but now want to learn how to use it.

I will help you get up and running online and show you how to start putting your laptop to use while ensuring you protect your personal details. I'll help you overcome any problems you might encounter, but more importantly, I'll discuss how to avoid having problems in the first place.

Throughout the book you will notice an array of icons including skills and equipment needed (at the beginning of each chapter), try it, warning, note it, trivia and tip. These are aimed to offer helpful tips and tricks whilst you read through the book. At the end of each chapter you will also notice that there is

a summary and brain training section. These are there to provide you with a helpful overview of the topics covered in the chapter and to test your knowledge. It doesn't matter if you get the questions wrong; it's just a bit of light-hearted fun intended to help you remember what you've learnt along the way.

## Guardian angels

You may recognise the guardian angel from other *Older and Wiser* titles, and could be familiar with the concept. However, for those who don't know, a guardian angel in an *Older and Wiser* series book is someone who could be a friend, family member or neighbour who has a bit of computing experience. You can ask your guardian angel for advice, reassurance or guidance whilst you are becoming more familiar with computers. It can be anyone who knows a fair bit about computing; not necessarily an expert, but someone who you can ask if you have the odd query every so often. They usually don't mind imparting their computing knowledge when you ask – but if you have a slightly more complex question it might be a good idea to offer them a cup of tea and a biscuit in return for their computing wisdom.

## Keeping your eyes on the prize

Computers used to be very large and were only found at work or in universities. A few brave souls bought the first mass-produced home computers about thirty years ago. Since then, about a billion people have bought a desktop or laptop, many of them for home use.

Anyone who first started using computers during this boom in sales, when computers were more expensive and less powerful, often had to learn a bewildering array of acronyms and jargon to spend their money wisely and get the best computer they could afford. But for most people, the need to learn a lot of technical terms is no longer present.

Computer vendors may still use a few incomprehensible terms, but you can just refer to them as a tick list to make sure you're getting what you're paying for. You can put your main focus on getting a laptop that's comfortable for you to use and one that will perform the tasks you want.

## Taking it with you wherever you go

One of the most important aspects of a laptop is its portability. This means that a laptop can be 'yours' in a way that a desktop computer cannot. You can use a laptop outside the home and take it with you when you travel. You can almost always use the same laptop, at home or away.



If you take your laptop abroad, check that you have the right adaptor to avoid disappointment.

The reason laptops are so popular – and so widely used – is because previously having a computer that was portable used to be difficult and often involved many compromises. You needed a fairly big box to contain a fully-powered computer, and they cost more because they used specialised parts. So in the past having a laptop often meant you had to compromise. Paying extra for a less powerful computer meant laptops were not as popular as desktop computers.

I was lucky enough to be working at Apple Computer when the very first Mac laptop came out, in the early 1990s. Apple is famous for not compromising, so their first laptop was powerful, but big and heavy as well. I was late for a flight and suffered, trying to run through the airport with my Mac 'portable', but the components of a computer have become smaller and cheaper since then. The picture below shows the first Mac Portable. You can see that the laptops on offer today are much smaller.

Laptops have also become less expensive, more powerful and more popular. As this book is going to press, a new wave of laptops based around brand new, even cheaper components are appearing. The small, thin laptops that used to cost thousands of lbs, and which were reserved for executives and nerds who loved computers, are now available to anyone for a price around £300 to £400.

Today you can buy and use a laptop without compromising much. You can have a laptop with a medium-sized widescreen and full-sized keyboard that only weighs about five lbs. (This weight is usually considered the dividing line between computers that are fairly easy to carry – five lbs or under – and ones that feel a bit heavy to most people, six lbs or more.)



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**Figure 1.1**

## Keeping in touch with friends, family and colleagues

The first personal computers didn't have any communications capabilities at all. They were used in 'standalone mode', as it was called. If you wanted to share information between two or more computers, you saved a file to a 'floppy disk' about five square inches, removed the 'floppy', as it was called, and carried it to another computer.

Now computers are connected to the Internet a good part of the time. There's usually a constant connection to the Internet when a computer is used at home or in the office.

However, when you're on the move, you can be restricted in just how connected you can be. Laptops are usually connected to the Internet by a wireless

connection, even in the home. There are a lot of buzzwords around regarding the different types of connections available; I'll explain a few of them in later chapters. But you don't usually need to know them; you just need to ask how to get or use a wireless Internet connection and people will know what you're talking about.

When you're connected to the Internet you can access the Web, get email, exchange instant messages and even make low-cost phone calls using a headset. Social Networking is currently growing in popularity and it enables you to keep in touch with people online. To learn more about Social Networking take a look at Sean McManus's book, *Social Networking for the Older and Wiser* (ISBN 9780470686409). Staying connected whilst on the move is important to a lot of laptop users so I will explore this in considerable detail later in the book.

## Shopping, booking travel and learning online

Almost everything you can do in the real world, you can now do online as well. Some people even find it faster and more convenient online. In other cases you can learn things online that then make things easier, faster and less expensive in the real world.

For instance, let's say you want to buy a digital camera for holiday photos. If you just walk into a camera shop you're a bit like a lamb strolling into a sheep-shearing barn; you may leave without your fleece! But if you research online first you can find helpful reviews from magazines, comments from other customers and more.

You might even buy your camera online, being careful to choose a reputable site. Or you might decide to buy online, but pick the camera up from a store. Finally, you might simply do what so many people do today: you still make the purchase in a store, but you go there armed with your new-found, online knowledge. It doesn't matter too much; by shopping online first you're better-informed and far more likely to make a purchase you'll be happy with.

Booking travel online is another great idea, but can take a bit of getting used to. This would be a good time to ask your guardian angel to help you. It's nice to have someone's advice the first time you book a holiday online, even if it is only to reassure you that you are completing the process correctly.

Part of the appeal of a laptop is that you can do all your online research and shopping, take notes and more, all in one place and at a time that's convenient for you.

### Taking care of finances and banking

Initially, when companies began creating web sites, many people believed that the last thing anyone would do online is something as personal and important as banking.

However, once you learn how to use online banking and other financial services, the power and convenience of doing so will no doubt become part of your normal life. The flexibility afforded by a laptop, including the comfort level of using your very own computer even if you're out of the house or travelling, will be an important part of the overall experience for you.



When logging into important sites online, such as viewing your bank balance, make sure that you are using a secure network and a secure site. It's quite easy to check whether or not a site is secure; take a look at the address line in your web browser. If the site is secure, you will see that the `http://` at the beginning of the address becomes `https://`. Commonly, you will also see a padlock symbol appear in the bottom right corner of the screen.

### Challenging old beliefs

Owning a laptop provides a lot of opportunities. Not only can you stay connected whilst you are travelling, but they take up considerably less space in the home and you can take them with you when you go out and about. Whether it is because you want to stay connected whilst on the move or merely because you want to show a slideshow of your grandchildren to friends when you go to a dinner party. Having a laptop isn't all about staying connected online. You can do as much or as little on the Internet as you would like to. There are many other uses for your laptop and I explain several of them as we go through the book.

Here I'll list and discuss some of the negative opinions that might otherwise hold you back. I'll show you where things have moved on, and where there's still some

lingering grounds for concern; concerns that are worth paying attention to, but not a reason to avoid the whole topic entirely.

## Laptops are for young people

Laptops are indeed for young people. They make perfect sense for students and young office workers who need to bring work home with them or travel on business. For these people laptops are a wonderful tool. What's changed is that laptops are no longer *only* for young people. Laptops are just another type of computer, and computers are for everyone. In fact, laptop sales recently caught up with desktop system sales. For consumers buying a computer for personal use, a laptop is rapidly becoming the preferred choice for all age groups and income levels.

Laptops have no obvious gender bias either. Individual models, even colours and styling choices, might be more suited to one gender than the other, but at the end of the day there's a laptop to suit just about anyone.

## Laptops are too expensive

For a long time laptops were indeed more expensive than desktop computers, sometimes twice as much for a typical laptop machine. Even though the price was twice as high, the typical laptop was still less powerful than a desktop.

In fact, it's only very recently that the sort of laptop one would ideally want i.e. thin, light, with similar specifications to a mid-range desktop computer, has become competitive in price with a desktop.

You may still find that a truly bargain desktop computer may have a bigger screen, a larger, more comfortable keyboard, more memory, a bigger hard disk and more connectors than a similarly priced laptop. The point is that these extras sound good, but are probably not something you really need when offset against the convenience and simplicity of a laptop.

What's changed is that a laptop that really can do everything that most people need is now available for a fairly low price that's comparable to a moderately powerful desktop machine. Desktops have advantages at the extremes of very low cost and very high capability, but that's not where most people need to be today.



There's also a subtle cost advantage for laptops that desktop machines can't match. Because laptops are so well integrated, there are fewer separate parts, simplifying the task of buying, owning and maintaining it. So while there are circumstances where a laptop costs more for the same technical specifications, the practical difference is negligible for many people. The advantages of a laptop are available without your having to break the bank.

### Laptops are only good if you're on the move

When laptops cost more and did less, except for being portable, you really had to value portability to make it worth the extra price. As laptops have become more common, however, the flexibility and space savings they offer are increasingly seen as necessities.

Laptops are now so highly valued that many people buy one even when a desktop would do. There's even a name for this kind of laptop: a 'desktop replacement'. The space savings and portability of a laptop are valued even in what would otherwise be a desktop setting. A desktop computer is seen as less valuable even if the need to move it only comes up as an occasional or potential requirement.

Holidays are a great example. Some people only move their laptops once a year, when they go on holiday and settle for a few weeks away from home. On this kind of extended trip it's great to bring your laptop with you, set it up and keep it secure in your home away from home.

For this kind of use, you're only moving the computer once a year. Therefore, being able to easily make that move just once a year may be enough to make the laptop a better choice for you.

### Challenging fears

Old beliefs are at least logical, and can be answered easily by facts. In fact, most of the set beliefs listed above were true in the past. It's the onward march of technology, and the steady lowering of prices, that have largely resolved them.

Fears, however, are more personal and harder to get at. Typically, the best antidote is often simply seeing a lot of other people doing the very thing causing the anxiety.



Luckily, with laptops becoming so very popular, the fear level automatically drops; if all those other people can find a laptop easy and useful, you can too!

However, let me take a moment to help dispel the most common fears that I've heard over my years of using and recommending laptops. That way you can look at them head-on and decide, in the cold light of day, if it's time to move beyond your fears and make your decision based solely on your needs and wants.

## **I'll break it**

Breaking a computer is a bigger fear among people who are inexperienced with them, even though many people with computer experience actually have broken a computer in one way or another. It's just part of life, like stubbing your toe, or losing your watch. It's entirely possible to break a laptop. However, it's also pretty rare. I've used both laptops and mobile phones for the same amount of time, about 15 years. I've broken two mobile phones and have never broken a laptop, despite being fairly careless with both.

I did spill Coke in the keyboard of a laptop once, and while it didn't get to the circuit board – which would have 'fried' the laptop and ruined it – it was slightly troublesome until I unplugged the computer from the wall, pried some of the keys off and cleaned around them to unstick them. The keys went back on pretty well.

So you can indeed break your laptop. You just need to be careful with it. Keep drinks away from the keyboard to avoid unfortunate spills, just like you would with any piece of electrical equipment. I personally think it's not worth losing out on the advantages of a laptop just because you're worried about breaking it.

## **I'll lose it or have it stolen**

The very convenience of laptops makes it easy to carry it with you so often that forgetting it, or leaving it where a thief can grab it, becomes all too easy. Losing your laptop can be a big worry.

Laptops today are so portable, resilient and, yes, cheap that they're often kept in travel bags with other 'stuff' rather than in separate laptop bags. In my experience this actually renders them less vulnerable to theft and loss. A dedicated laptop

bag can be more noticeable to a potential thief. However, as long as you keep your laptop close to you and don't leave it unattended you will hopefully avoid losing it or having it stolen.

Having a laptop lost or stolen isn't really a reason not to buy one. It's more a reason not to take it with you on some occasions where you might otherwise like to, but where the risk of loss or theft is particularly high.

### **I'll suffer from identity theft and lost data**

You can deal with the loss or theft of the laptop itself by insuring it, or by owning one that's cheap enough that you can afford to replace it. Because your laptop has your information on it, identity theft or the loss of personal data can be a worry, but as long as you take precautionary steps this is easy to avoid.

You can suffer identity theft and lost data by having your laptop lost or stolen or while it's still in your possession, by people signing onto your computer when you're not looking or electronically accessing it via an online connection. These are real concerns that shouldn't stop you from buying and using a laptop but do constitute good reasons to be careful.

In later chapters I'll tell you how to manage use of your laptop to protect you from identity theft and lost data. As with many other problems, an ounce of prevention is worth a lb of cure.

Now that I have hopefully allayed some common fears and concerns, let's help you get up and running on your laptop . . .