

"What do I need to know before I buy a computer?"

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You have probably noticed it can be pretty hard to keep up with computer technology and the vocabulary that goes with it. You're not the only one. While computers have been around for a long time, there seems to be no end in sight of the trend of rapid change in personal computing and the linkage between computers and telecommunications technology. In this and future columns, we will explore and demystify many aspects of computer technology and its applications for education and business. Please feel free to send me questions or comments on topics you wish to see discussed.

Let's start with the basics.

What do you need to know before buying a personal computer?

The first thing to consider when you are going to buy a computer is what you plan to use it for. This will determine the types of programs you wish to run. Programs, also known as *software*, are the instructions that tell your computer how to do something. Without software, computers are just plastic shells.

Personal computing programs come in two basic formats: IBM-compatibles—which run Windows/DOS— and Macintosh. Buying the right computer begins with figuring out which of these is best for you. Read carefully and compare the specifications on the software label. To focus more clearly on the question of what kind of a computer to buy, look for the minimum computer system requirements listed on the package.

The funny thing about personal computers is that the price for a low-end system (\$1000-\$1500), midrange system (\$1500-\$3500) and top-end system (\$3500+) has remained the same over the years. Prices fall and today's top end system will be next year's midrange system. What has changed, however, is the power of the systems and the complexity of the programs that they run. If you are interested in running today's software

and much of tomorrow's software, you'll have to choose between a top-end computer or a midrange computer (which will require further investment to upgrade relatively sooner). I recommend low end computers only for those who have a specific, limited task in mind which will run properly on the low end system.

Macintosh systems are renowned for their ease of use. The major drawback has been that there are fewer software titles for the Macintosh systems than the Windows/DOS systems. This has changed with the introduction of the power Macintosh line which can run both Macintosh and some of the early-generation Windows programs when properly configured.

The IBM compatible systems have also changed recently with the introduction of the Windows 95 software and "Plug and Play" components, making use and configuration of IBM-compatibles much easier than they used to be. And, since over 90% of computers in use are IBM-compatibles, you'd be in good company if you want to share information with the rest of the world.

Depending on your needs, and the specifications of any, given system, Macintosh or IBM-compatible machines can both be powerful tools to enhance your productivity and your access to a world of information.

Stuff you oughta know

- Software is the most important component of your overall system. Save some money in your budget for the software best suited to the functions you want to perform.

- Screen quality depends on something called dot pitch. I recommend .26 or smaller. Smaller dot pitch and larger screen size are better.

- Get a tape drive if at all possible. It is cheap insurance for important work and it is liberating for the first time user

to know that you can always return to the way your computer used to work when the tape was made.

- Memory and disk space do more to make a system usable and fast than a faster processor.

quires 4 Bytes of space on the computer to store. Kilo means 1,000 or so. Mega means 1,000,000 or so. Giga means 1,000,000,000 or so. Therefore, a Megabyte of disk space could hold about 1 million characters of text.

- MHZ, or megahertz, refers to the speed with which functions take place in the computer. The bigger the MHZ, the faster the computer.

In the next issue, I'll give you my specific recommendations for the best systems to buy. In the meantime, look for a publication called *Computer Shopper*. It's available in many stores and newsstands and provides a quick way to track current prices for most of today's major systems.

We'll also talk more about software, about purchasing by mail and using your credit card. That piece of plastic can be your best friend if you have warranty disputes, lost shipments or bungled orders.

Editor's Note: Matt Joy is a computer consultant with Alaska Village Initiatives, providing computer support and training for rural Alaskan computer users.

Coming to terms with that vocabulary

It's impossible to cover in one column all the terms you'll encounter as you shop for your system, but here are a couple of crucial ones to remember:

- A byte is simply one character a letter or number. The word "book" re-

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"Matt Joy helped me purchase and set up my computer and software. He was a great help... even now, he's only a phone call away!"

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