



RIGHT AT FIRST BYTE

Choosing a computer doesn't have to be a high-tech horror.

The more our lives become entrenched in the age of electronics, the more we seem to need computers. We use them in libraries, at work, and increasingly at home, where we can document personal finances, store favorite recipes, teach children how to spell, play computer games, read computer newspapers, create documents, and write.

But as computers have become easier to use, they've also become more daunting to buy. If you've ever walked into a computer store, you know the market is swamped with options. To make matters worse, salespeople typically speak a foreign language filled with words like megabyte (a unit of memory for storing information) and CD-ROM (discs with information that can be read but not altered).

How are people supposed to know which computer is right for them?

In search of some answers we sought advice from the University Computing Services center in Hinds Hall. Computing Services staff members are available to advise students, faculty, and staff on making computer purchases.

Charlene Kirchoff, director of client services, and June Quackenbush, manager of student computing services, suggest computer buyers consider the following before emptying their wallets:

1. What's the purpose of your purchase? Find out what different computers can do and how much prices vary. Ask yourself why you want a computer. How will you use it? For playing games?

Spread sheets? Word processing? Do you have business as well as personal needs, or do you just want to learn how to use a computer? Is simplicity important? Will you consider adding options in the future? Your purpose will help determine the brainpower, speed, and storage you'll need.

The two main types of computers are Macintosh and IBM (or IBM-compatible). The brain of either is called the processor, or CPU. In IBM-compatibles, it's usually a chip that ends in 86, such as 286, 386, or 486. On a Mac, the best processor chips begin with the number 680, as in 68030 and 68040. With both types, the higher the number, the more potent the chip. Megahertz, or MHz, refers to the speed at which the processor runs. The higher the number, the faster the computer.

There are three kinds of storage to think about. RAM (random access memory) determines the capacity of programs and data files the machine can handle at any one time. Memory and hard-disk storage are both measured in megabytes. The greater the RAM, memory, and hard-disk capacity,

the bigger and more complicated data and software files the computer is able to handle and the more permanent storage it has.

You'll also need to purchase the software programs to accomplish your desired tasks. Most software is not compatible with both Macs and IBMs.

"It used to be that Macs were thought of as the better machine for creative needs, like making your own stationery, and IBMs were better for spread sheets and personal finance," says Kirchoff. "But those applications are available for both now."

2. Talk to friends who already own computers. Ask them what they have and if they're satisfied. Also, talk to people who have similar computer needs. It doesn't hurt to have knowledgeable friends when difficulties arise. "Settle on the machine you feel comfortable with or that is a twin to the one your best friend has, if your best friend is the person who is going to help you," says Quackenbush.

3. Think about service. Before you buy, consider the service arrangement. Can you take your computer into the store for repairs or must you mail it across the country? How much support will the company provide in setting up the computer and getting you started? Such questions are particularly important if you're purchasing from a mail-order company.

While Quackenbush and Kirchoff agree most computers will accomplish standard tasks, they say doing your homework will ensure that life with your new computer is user friendly.

—ANDREA C. MARSH

