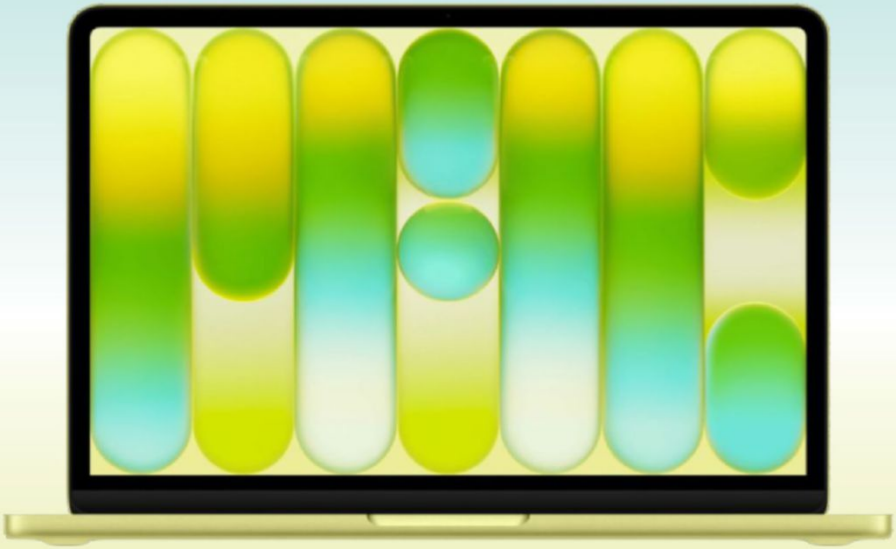
5 SECRET WAYS TO SCORE A GREAT PC DEAL

PCWorld

APRIL 2026



THE $599 MACBOOK NEO IS MICROSOFT'S NIGHTMARE

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The $600 MacBook Neo is Microsoft's nightmare

Apple's newest MacBook is an impressive play for affordability, coming right as the Surface line is looking expensive and out of touch. **BY MICHAEL CRIDER**

We've been hearing about it for a while (fave.co/4kxkWwg), and now it's official: There's a new entry-level MacBook in town. The MacBook Neo (fave.co/3P0iK4N) is small, cheap, colorful, and most importantly, available. Apple made some big compromises to get the price down, but now that it's here, I think it's coming at just the right time to kick Microsoft right in its, *ahem*, complacency.

We'll take a quick look at the hardware, because it isn't all that important. The MacBook Neo is a purely budget laptop

IMAGE: APPLE

running on Apple's A18 Pro Arm chip, previously seen in the iPhone 16. It only has 8GB of RAM and it starts with a tiny 256GB storage drive. It doesn't even get the notched screen seen on newer MacBooks (which, depending on your aesthetic sensibilities, might be a plus). It gets two USB-C ports, a headphone jack, and a fingerprint reader that's only available on the upgraded model. It is an affordability play down to its bones.

But there are also plenty of things to like about this design. With a 13-inch, 2408×1506 resolution, it's not making any huge compromises on the screen, like some cheaper Surface designs I could mention. It has a pure aluminum chassis all the way through, getting that classic MacBook look, and it also comes in some fun colors: silver, blue, pink, and a yellow-greenish one I don't love. It's delivering a full, if spare, MacBook design, at the same price as for the newest entry-level *iPhone* (fave.co/4shqJZG), an impressive accomplishment when every manufacturer on Earth is scrambling for affordable RAM and storage.

Now let's take a look at our own PC-laden shores. Over on Microsoft's official hardware store, you can get a Surface "Pro" starting at $800 (fave.co/3PfVakq). It's also running on an Arm chip and a midrange Snapdragon, and it starts at 256GB of storage. And to Microsoft's credit, an extra $200 gets you 16GB of memory…which Windows 11 absolutely needs. But what you *don't* get is a keyboard cover—you know, the thing that makes a Surface tablet a laptop replacement instead of just a laptop. You also don't get a charging power supply. Those cut corners are looking a lot more substantial today.

Over on Microsoft's official hardware store, you can get a Surface "Pro" starting at $800.

Want a full Surface Laptop? Then the cheapest you can get is $900 for the "affordable" Surface Laptop 13 (fave.co/3FK7Rjh), for approximately the same specs. Hey, at least this one comes with a keyboard…and something to charge it with. With the admittedly nice upgrades of an extra 8GB of RAM and touchscreen, it sure doesn't look

like it's worth a 50 percent price hike over the equivalent "cheap" Apple laptop.

Microsoft isn't the only Windows laptop maker, of course. But to get down into $600 territory, you're going to have to make bigger sacrifices: just 8GB of RAM, a plastic chassis, terrible battery life, or some combination of the three, unless you find a pretty fantastic deal (as I did last year, fave.co/4s9K2nY). I can see literally millions of college students going for the MacBook Neo in a few months as they're shopping for back-to-school laptops. And none of them will get my *Matrix* jokes, because it's 2026.

The cheapest Surface Laptop will set you back $900.

The Neo would be an impressive play in a normal market. But this market is anything but normal. The AI-induced RAM crunch is making prices on just about everything shoot up, *especially* laptops (fave.co/46UqUSe), but Apple seems to be using its supply chain muscle to make an incredibly savvy push for affordability. Add to that a discontent with Microsoft in general and Windows in particular, as users sour on the unnecessary upgrade to Windows 11 and being force-fed Copilot AI features no one wants to eat (fave.co/4rKn6Lh). Even PC gamers, formerly the most dedicated Windows users out of necessity, are making goo-goo eyes at SteamOS and alternatives like Bazzite thanks to the Steam Deck (fave.co/4gUsAxX).

I don't know if the MacBook Neo is a good laptop—I'll leave that call to my coworkers over at Macworld. The processor, RAM, and storage are all definitely on the low end and might be real pain points even for regular users. But I know that Apple is going to sell a hell of a lot of them, right as people are looking for both affordable machines and alternatives to Windows. Dell, HP, and Acer are all looking on with trepidation.

It's the perfect device, at the perfect time, to make Microsoft and the Surface brand look expensive and out of touch. That rattling sound you hear is someone in Redmond shaking in their boots.

Intel's cheaper, faster new Core Ultra CPUs still have a lot to prove

The "Plus" means it's better—in theory. Whether that's actually true of Intel's new 2026 desktop PC processors remains to be seen. **BY MARK HACHMAN**

Can Intel's Arrow Lake Refresh chips succeed where the first-generation Arrow Lake processor failed two years ago? With Intel's announcement of its new processor family today, we'll find out soon.

Meet Intel's new Core Ultra 200S Plus (Arrow Lake Refresh) family, where the "Plus" means it's better. We hope.

They're cheaper, at least. And it appears that they may offer higher performance, too, though that's helped by a new software trick that helps boost gaming performance through more efficient code. But Intel has a problem: The company made bold claims about the original Arrow Lake processors (fave.co/48EQJFo), then failed to live up to them. It then spent the remainder of 2024 and into early 2025 chasing the problem down and finally making it right. So is it fair to be skeptical? You're damn right it is.

MEET THE INTEL CORE ULTRA 200S PLUS FAMILY

For now, Intel is shipping four chips: the unlocked Core Ultra 7 270K Plus and Core

IMAGE: INTEL

Ultra 5 250K Plus, and "KF" variations of both that turn off the integrated GPU. Officially, both are members of the Core Ultra 200S Plus family. All four processors will ship March 26, with Core Ultra 5 250K Plus and Core Ultra 7 270K Plus pricing beginning at $199 and $299, respectively.

The most interesting addition to the family isn't in hardware, however, but software. An "Intel Binary Optimization" tool performs (we think) somewhat the same task Microsoft's Prism interpreter does for Arm: It converts the code into a compatible, optimized format for improved gaming. But for an X86 processor? We'll have to hear more.

Intel also believes that the new Core Ultra 200S desktop processors will benefit from a 900MHz increase in speed between the CPU and memory controller, boosting the speed at which data is transferred between them, as well as four-rank CUDIMM memory (fave.co/3UKxzs5), which includes a small clock driver on the memory circuit itself. CUDIMMs are necessary for RAM modules with higher clock speeds, and that's just what will slot in: DDR5 memory modules with up to 7,200 MT/s (DDR5-7200) (if enthusiasts can find them during the RAM crisis, of course).

Otherwise, what we're not hearing are any claims about power consumption. (The Core Ultra 7 270K Plus runs at 125W, the same as the comparable, older Core Ultra 7 265K.) The 2024 version of Arrow Lake was supposed to deliver about the same performance (fave.co/48EQJFo) as the prior generation at half the power, and it failed miserably. Intel's still claiming that these Arrow Lake Refresh chips will deliver 15 percent faster gaming performance (as a geomean) versus the original Arrow Lake, as well as up to 103 percent multithreaded performance versus "competing CPUs." Both claims aren't worth much until properly tested.

Intel's original Arrow Lake desktop chip.

JUST A FEW NEW THINGS WITHIN ARROW LAKE REFRESH

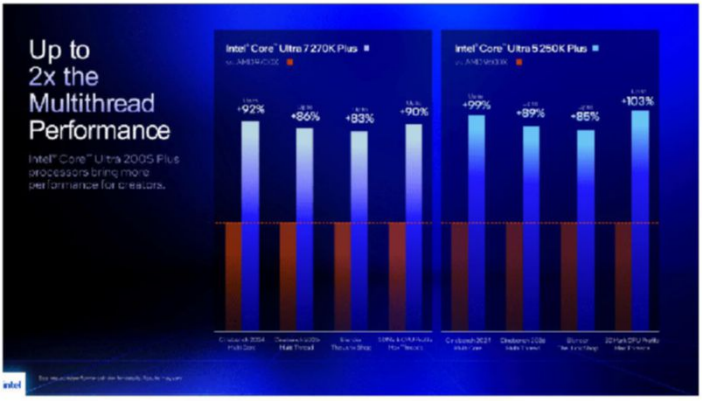
We already knew many of the details of the Core Ultra 200S (Arrow Lake Refresh) family (fave.co/4rCr2xq) already, thanks to publicly disclosed benchmarks on sites like Geekbench. The Core Ultra U7 270K Plus has 24 cores, including 8 performance cores and 16 efficiency cores, while the Core Ultra U5 250K Plus contains 18 cores, with 6 performance cores and 12 efficiency cores.

As the Refresh label suggests, both the latest Core Ultra 200S and 200S Plus remain virtually identical from an architectural perspective. They share the same CPU architecture (Lion Cove P-cores and Skymont E-cores), the same integrated Xe-LPG GPU used in the Core Ultra Series 1 mobile (Meteor Lake) chips, and the same 13-TOPS NPU as well. Normally, you'd expect that the Core Ultra 200S Plus would be paired with an external GPU, though the astronomical prices of some GPUs (fave.co/40nfMtw) might mean that lower-end or even integrated GPUs will be asked to do more than they normally would.

Both the Core Ultra 200S and 200S Plus chips will fit into the same LGA 1851 socket, presumably sharing the same chipsets as well, like the Z890. Unfortunately, all of Arrow Lake's chipsets supported the more expensive DDR5 memory type, and Intel didn't give any indication that it could magic up a chipset that could support slower, cheaper DDR4 memory for Arrow Lake Refresh. Intel did say that a dozen new 800-series motherboard designs are in the works, though.

Instead, Intel just seems to have chosen more of an emphasis on affordability this time around: The Core Ultra 9 285K contained 24 cores (8 P-cores, 16 E-cores), ratcheting up to 5.7GHz, for $589; the Core Ultra 7 265K (8 P-cores, 12 E-cores, up to 5.5GHz) was priced at $394. The new Core Ultra 7 270K Plus also contains 24 cores (8 P-Cores, 16 E-Cores, and goes to 5.5 GHz), but for $299. Still, the lack of a U9 or Ultra 9 version of

Intel says its Core Ultra 200S Plus chips will give gamers better performance for less money.



Intel is publishing performance numbers compared to AMD's Ryzen.

In January 2025, Intel issued a firmware patch to motherboard manufacturers to solve the problem in conjunction with a Windows update, and washed its hands of the issue (fave.co/40rntio). That patch, Intel claimed, could boost performance by up to 25 percent or so on some games.

the Arrow Lake Refresh generation leaves room for a future introduction, most likely with a higher clock speed and higher price.

THE 200S PLUS PERFORMANCE LOOKS IMPRESSIVE, BUT IS IT REALLY?

Put simply, Arrow Lake's performance was a fiasco. Our own Arrow Lake review (fave.co/4hACpC7), as well as those from other publications, found that the chip underperformed AMD's rival Ryzen 9700X and even Intel's older 14th-gen Core chips, depending upon the application. Intel spent months trying to determine what went on, blaming everything from faulty Windows power plans (fave.co/4upP8On) to a "field update" (fave.co/3P6CvHM), which pointed to issues with anti-cheat services and more.

With this news, we'd expect testing should begin soon on the Core Ultra 200S Plus (Arrow Lake Refresh). For now, Intel is again publishing aggressive performance numbers compared to AMD's Ryzen, though the test systems used DDR5-7200 DRAM (versus DDR5-5600 DRAM on the Ryzen test bed). Intel's 900MHz increase in speed between the CPU and memory controller will also have an effect. Intel's K-series chips have typically run at 125W, while the 9700X being compared below runs at 65W.

IBOT: SURE TO BE CONTROVERSIAL

The most interesting feature of the new processor family is what Intel calls the Intel Binary Optimization Tool (IBOT), which Intel calls a "first-of-its-kind optimization technology" that improves both the instructions per cycle (IPC) as well as the

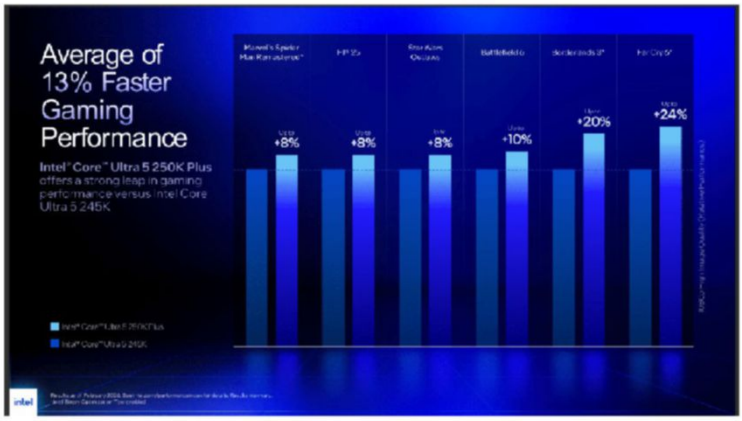
The most interesting feature of the new processor family is the Intel Binary Optimization Tool (IBOT).

user experience. Intel says that the IBOT will improve performance "even if the workload has been optimized for another x86 processor, a game console, or an earlier architecture."

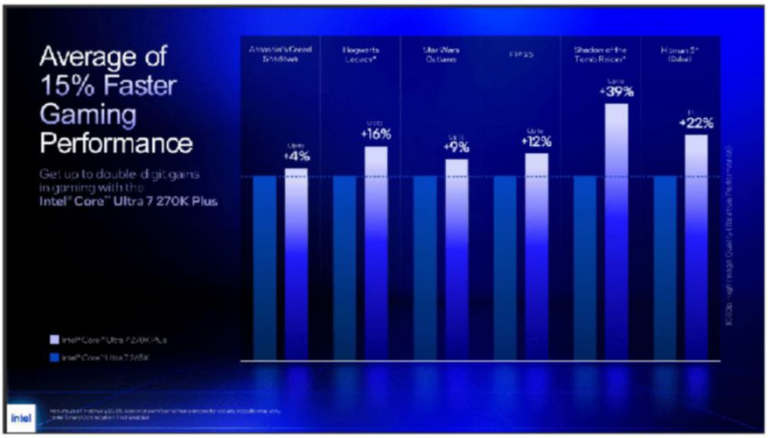
Typically, incompatible architectures will either recompile the code in its entirety for a chip like Arm, or use an interpreter or an emulator like the one used by the Via/Centaur WinChip. Either way, the goal is for the processor to be able to run the code as efficiently as possible.

Intel isn't prepared to talk about IBOT quite yet, though the company described it using a Tetris motif to imply that the work being done is more efficient than a bunch of scattered instructions. IBOT "leverages Intel compiler and profiling IP" to "streamline library and executable performance." The "results are achieved by reducing architectural contention," the company said.

IBOT will be able to be turned off and on within the Intel Application Optimization tool (fave.co/4Is1HVi), where it will live in the "advanced features" section of the tool, an Intel spokesperson confirmed. It's not clear whether IBOT will apply to every Application



Some of Intel's gaming benchmarks were tested with IBOT on.



Turning on IBOT dramatically boosts the Core Ultra 200S Plus performance.

Optimized game Intel maintains, however (fave.co/4b6Kayz). (The Application Optimization tool can be downloaded from the Microsoft Store; fave.co/4dfmN78.)

It's not known how IBOT will play out in the real world. Will gamers have to download a specialized version of the game for the Core Ultra 200S Plus? Will it be treated like shaders, where specific graphics assets will be downloaded for a particular GPU? Or will it all be handled behind the scenes in real time? Probably the latter, but we just don't know.

What we do know is that some of Intel's gaming benchmarks were tested with IBOT on. (Those games are the ones with the asterisks attached to them.)

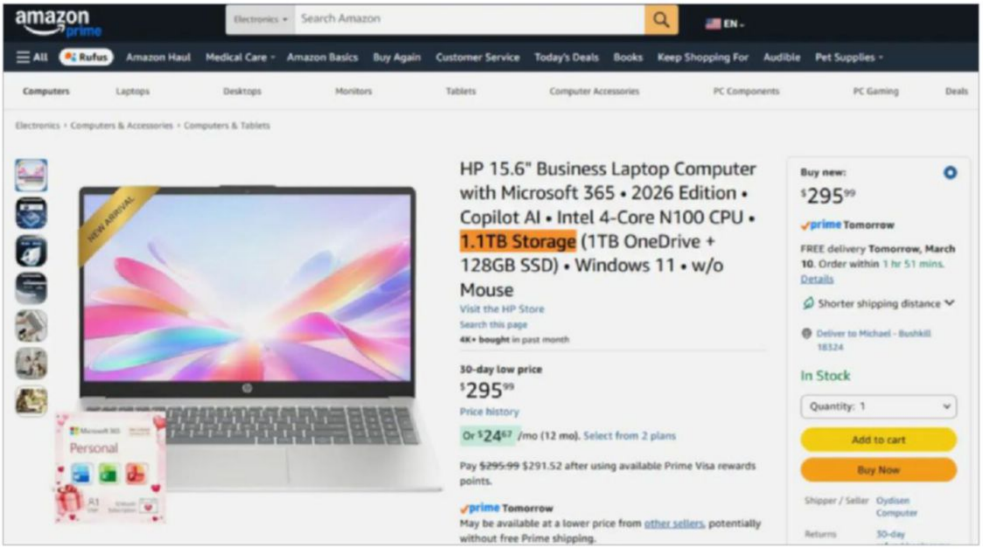
It's pretty clear that turning on IBOT pushes the Core Ultra 200S Plus performance dramatically higher, as two of the games that use it elevate the performance of the 250K Plus more than 20 percent more than the Core Ultra 5 245K. The tests were performed at a 1080p resolution.

For whatever reason, the separation becomes more pronounced when the faster Core Ultra 7 270K Plus and the older Core Ultra 7 265K are compared.

Intel is happy to compare its new Arrow Lake Refresh chips against AMD's higher-end chips in content-creation benchmarks, though excluding the 9900X and 9950X entirely. Oh, and for gaming? Intel is content to pretend that those games don't exist. That's not a great sign.

It's possible, of course, that Intel could discount this chip into success. Processor analyst Dean McCarron told me that he didn't think the original Arrow Lake chip was a failure (fave.co/4rCr2xq), simply because it was available to buy at a decent price.

But for a long, long time, AMD was the value supplier, and Intel shipped chips into high-end PCs. Has the market reversed? It certainly could be. Stay tuned for the testing that will help answer that question.



Watch out for this '1.1TB' laptop scam on Amazon

Third-party sellers are claiming 1TB of OneDrive cloud storage (which expires after a year) as part of the specs for budget laptops. **BY MICHAEL CRIDER**

Way back in the '90s, a program called SoftRAM claimed to double your memory without any additional hardware. It, uh, didn't. (It just fooled the memory display and did nothing to improve performance.) I'm reminded of this flimflammery as HP laptops with "1.1TB" of storage pop up on Amazon and Newegg. The catch? 1TB of that is a OneDrive cloud storage trial, which ends after a year.

A Reddit poster documented several listings (fave.co/46V17th) that showed "1.1 terabytes" of storage on budget HP Windows laptops. That's 128GB of internal storage—a paltry amount even for a years-old $300 laptop—plus a one-year promotional subscription to Copilot/Microsoft 365 with 1TB of cloud storage. This is, obviously, *not physical storage*…and it's a promotion that comes with lots of different Windows laptops. After the promo ends, you'll have to pay $100

IMAGE: AMAZON

a year to keep it up. So, yes, I'd say any retail listing that refers to this as 1.1TB of storage and implies it's actually part of the physical product definitely feels like a scam.

I should point out that the listings in the original Reddit post are not from HP itself. As VideoCardz notes (fave.co/ 47rrOG0), they're all third-party sellers using Amazon's market system. This is how *all* the big sites operate now, including Best Buy, Walmart, and Newegg, and a huge volume of products combined with a lack of oversight is letting more and more scummy practices flourish.

I've spotted similar listings on Walmart, but I do need to point out that one of these listings on Newegg appears to have been removed at the time of writing, so maybe somebody over there is paying attention.

Sketchy sellers aren't anything new. But I get the feeling that this sort of practice might see an uptick as the RAM crisis extends (fave.co/4plmch0) and affordable laptops get increasingly hard to find. 128GB of storage is so low that just operating and updating Windows 11 will become a challenge before long, and I wouldn't recommend anyone buy a Windows laptop with less than 16GB of RAM at this point.

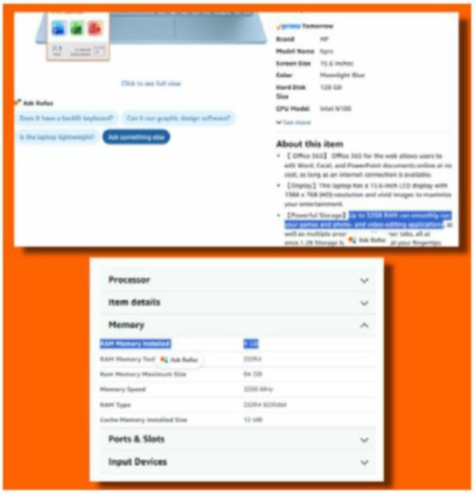
In one of these listings, the seller says the laptop has "up to 32GB of RAM" at the top of the page, despite the specs at the bottom claiming it has only 4GB installed. Gross.

Be careful, especially if you're looking for something affordable. I've reached out to Amazon's press contact for a statement. They gave the following response:

"Third party sellers are independent businesses and are required to follow all applicable laws, regulations, and Amazon policies when listing items for sale in our store. If we discover a product that violates our policies, we remove the product immediately. Those who violate our policies are subject to action including potential removal of their account."

Notably the statement does not clarify whether or not the 1.1TB descriptor actually violates any Amazon policies.

The links featured in the original Reddit post are now returning blank Amazon pages. However, it's still easy to find HP laptops claiming 1.1TB storage in their Amazon listings (fave.co/4uqYDgd) under the same setup, at least at the moment.



Hey, Rufus, what the hell is that?

New phishing hacks aren't sloppy—they're personalized

The more targeted the scam, the harder it is to spot. **BY ALAIN YEE**

Scams keep coming at us—and they're getting harder to spot. How? Scammers have begun making them more tailored to their marks. That means…us.

Personalized scams, as security experts call them, use details about you in the hope of tricking you more easily. This information comes from illicit sources like data leaks and breaches, successful phishing attacks, compromised websites, and malware, as well as legitimate sources like marketing info, public records, and social media. As you might guess, the data range can span a pretty wide range, from location to shopping habits.

But what does a personalized scam look like? And how do you spot one? I brought these questions (and others) to a chat with Steve Grobman, chief technology officer at McAfee—and it turns out that just like the data

IMAGE: JLSTOCK/SHUTTERSTOCK

a scammer might have on you, the types of scams they craft fall under pretty broad umbrellas, too.

THE GENERAL PERSONALIZED SCAM

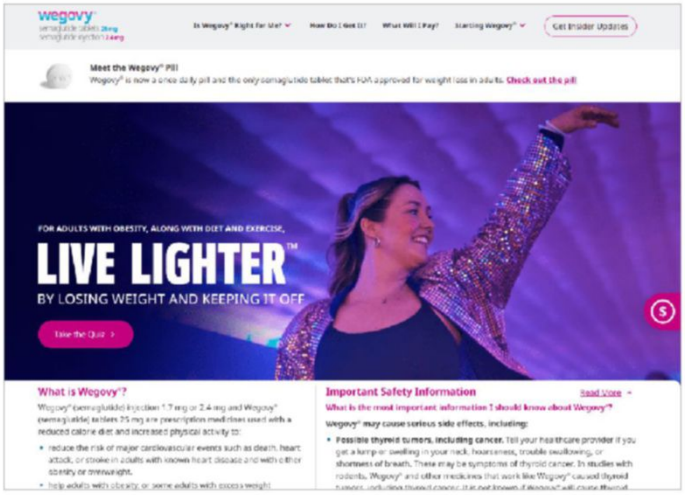
These kinds of scams tend to target broad groups—like a specific geographic area. Toll scams have become personalized, for example. Before, messages claiming you had unpaid toll charges were generic. Now the texts will refer to your area's toll authority and the name of the system, based on your phone number's area code.

If you're not naturally a suspicious person, this updated approach may catch you off guard. The language sounds more natural, despite being very broad. What changed? AI. Scammers can use AI to figure out regional information and incorporate it into messages quickly. Scammers don't have to know much about you to make this kind of connection. They'll extrapolate it from your contact information. Think area code for a phone number or a specific service related to your email provider. For example, I've recently seen emails related to Google storage limits, claiming your files will be deleted soon because you ran out of space.

THE SPECIFIC PERSONALIZED SCAM

Here's where all those data leaks and breaches become a problem. Even when a data dump only involves details like name and location (like, say, from an address), a resulting scam message can sound much more official. It can address you by name, target your age bracket, and/or zero in on something specific to your region. The extra information allows for additional customization of the message.

Grobman calls these "fill-in-the-blank" scams, where a scary notice can easily swap in your name and a relevant entity to spook



Scammers can target topical interests for their attacks.

you. For my location, he described it as "____ (name)_____, the California Department of _____." (A possible example would be: John, the California Department of Motor Vehicles has revoked your registration due to unpaid fees.) If matched well enough to your region, this approach could get you to click or otherwise fall for the scam, because it sounds realistic enough.

This type of personalized scam is more insidious than outright creepy. (Mostly.) Grobman says these are lifestyle focused. Scammers use what they know of your habits—like sites you've visited or links you've clicked on—to figure out your interests. Then they'll zero in to exploit that info. For example, if you've shown interest in weight loss, you could be targeted with a link to a fake weight loss drug.

Hyperpersonalized scams can also take longer to build up to the fraud—think romance scams, where the scammer uses information about you to build trust. Maybe they know where you went to school and they use that to start building rapport. The more you share, the more they weave that into the relationship they're building. Eventually the requests for favors and money begin. Or shared communication, photos, and other details are then twisted into blackmail material, used to extort money in exchange for secrecy.

Often, these kinds of scams can feel so personal—and it feels so shameful to have fallen for one—that many victims won't tell anyone they've been scammed. Previously, the young and the elderly were bigger targets for scammers, as they could prey on not just loneliness, but also lack of experience or diminished cognitive capabilities. But now, the threat for this to be widespread across all age brackets hangs lower than before…which is why we have to be on alert.

WHAT TO DO IF YOU'VE BEEN SCAMMED

First, take a deep breath. You might feel overwhelmed by your feelings—whether that's shock, embarrassment, or shame—but that's common and normal.

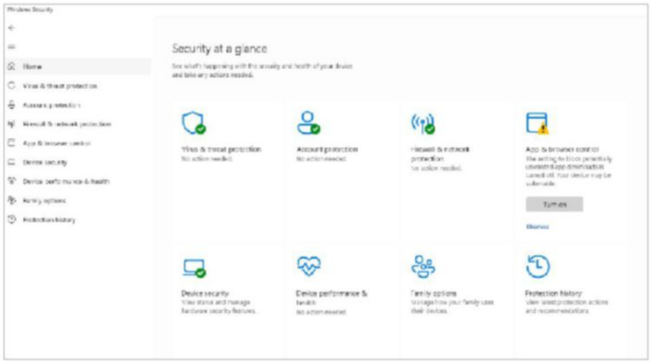
Also common and normal is making this kind of mistake. Falling for a scam can truly happen to anyone, even seasoned security professionals (fave.co/4s4EcE6).

Next, ask for help. The problem may seem huge at first, but getting help keeps the problem from spiraling into a huge mess. You can start with the FTC's consumer advice page, which lists common scam scenarios and what steps to take afterward (fave.co/4ura9rR).

Generally, you want to address the immediate problem first. Say you used your credit card number on a scam site or wired money to a "friend." Alert your bank about these fraudulent transactions right away. The faster you act, the faster you limit the damage.

Or maybe you shared your social security number and then realized your mistake. Add

a security freeze to your credit reports immediately, and also add a security alert for good measure. (The freeze is the more powerful tool, though, as it blocks anyone from checking or opening credit in your name until you temporarily allow access—that is, you "thaw" your report.)



Windows Security is a solid free antivirus option that Microsoft automatically keeps up to date.

Take care of your emotional health, too. As a baseline, talking to a friend or family member who can help provide clarity or good feedback can help while you're in a stew. You can also try your employer or even the police if you just need assistance in getting oriented.

HOW TO AVOID PERSONALIZED SCAMS

The grim reality is that personalized scams *could* become more common—the tools to help fraudsters keep improving, thanks to AI advances. (Thanks but no thanks, AI.)

How fast that will happen remains to be seen—Grobman says scammers are business owners. They do what makes money, so a change in approach only comes when current efforts lose profitability. And that will happen the more awareness spreads and detection tools improve. (Remember, security experts also have AI available to them.) As that race continues to escalate, the shift toward more and more personalization will increase the difficulty of spotting legitimate messages among the fakes.

Fortunately, the best steps to protect yourself are also the easiest. Have antivirus software (fave.co/3CnDHuk) active on your PC. Be wary about installing apps on your computer or phone. Keep your software up to date, especially your browser. Use a password manager (fave.co/3lRkfRz). Apps and services have begun to build in more safeguards and protections—think of it as a neighborhood watch approach to online security.

The final piece of the puzzle? You. The sites you choose to visit, the software you download, the browser extensions you install, the links you click in email and messages—those all can increase or decrease your risk of getting caught in a scam, too. Surf the internet wisely.

Your PC and phone might start carding you this year

The new California law will start being enforced in January 2027. **BY MARK HACHMAN**

By next year, your PC and phone may ask your age when it boots up. The Digital Age Assurance Act is the latest example of a law that currently only applies to one small area of the world but could be extended elsewhere. Signed into law last October, the Digital Age Assurance Act may only apply to California, but it could have far-reaching implications.

This new law is effectively an age verification service, such that the device and its operating system "understands" how old

IMAGE: SERGEY CAUSELOVE/SHUTTERSTOCK

its user is, as a mechanism for applying other laws or permissions. That would serve as a trigger for putting other safeguards in place, such as the federal Children's Online Privacy Protection Rule (COPPA).

Here's how it will affect you: When you set up a new PC, you'll be asked for your Microsoft account. Likewise, a new Android phone will ask for your Google account, and an iPhone will want you to sign in under your Apple account. You'll likely be asked for your age, too. The law looks out for whether you're under 13, 13 to 15, 16 to 17, or 18 and older.

But there are two quirks to the law, either of which could prove to be an issue. First, the age of the user is self-reported, so there's no requirement for true verification beyond what the user says. (It's also unclear what will happen when a 17-year-old turns 18 or when any other user transitions through the age categories.) In other words, under the California law, users wouldn't have to submit a photo ID or any other corroborating evidence. Second, all operating systems will be affected—including Linux, which lacks a centralized account system.

Age verification will be used in the context of applications downloaded from app stores like Steam or the Microsoft Store. And there's no way out for developers—they're being *required* to ask the operating system for the user's age so they can provide the appropriate content. It's possible that this will be the mechanism that prevents a child from playing a mature game (which, up until now, relied on parental supervision).

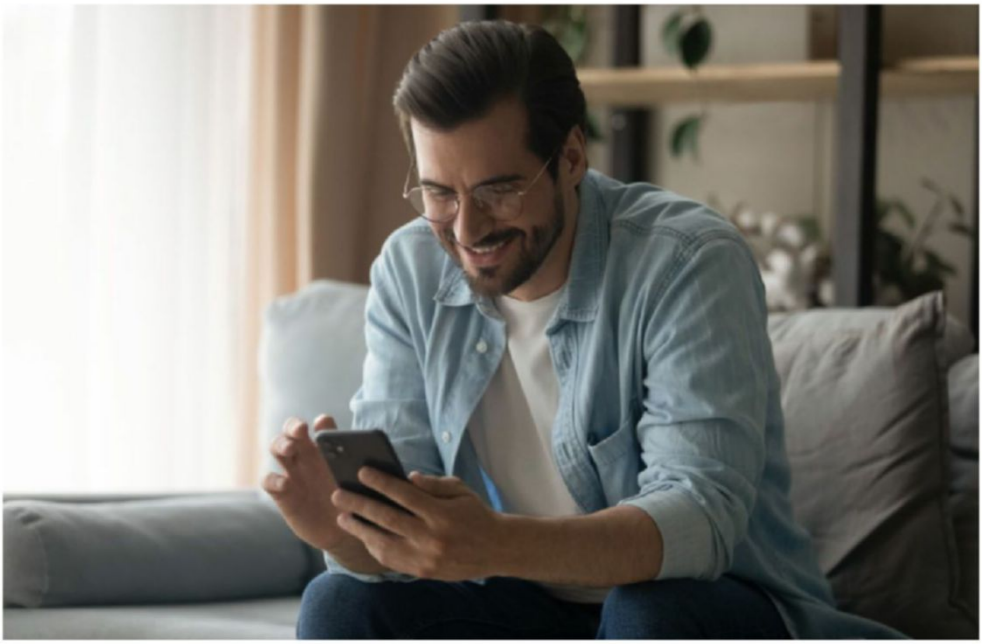
And the clock is ticking. The law goes into effect January 1, 2027, according to the National Law Review (fave.co/3P6L3hQ), and an "accessible interface" allowing the OS to ask for the user's age must be in place by July 1, 2027. Developers or operating system providers who don't comply can be fined $2,500 per child for "negligent violations" or $7,500 per child for "intentional violations."

The question is whether anyone outside of California will be affected. Because of the number of vehicles in the state, the state's restrictions on fuel efficiency have historically affected the development of motor vehicles across the country. On the other hand, Microsoft shipped an "N" version of Windows to the European Union that stripped out Windows' Media Player application.

Age verification has proven to be a viable obstacle to online porn (fave.co/4bEx4ZI), prompting the rise of VPNs (fave.co/4dhjrAC). But establishing age verification at the device level might block apps and websites as well. One can imagine a day where a Windows PC asks for the age of the user, then refuses to show them games like *Resident Evil* in the Xbox app. Is that good or bad? That depends on your perspective, I suppose.

Google Search's AI Mode just built me an app

I asked for a dashboard that tracks nearby New York subway trains. With help from its new Canvas tool, the AI Mode in Google Search built it in seconds. **BY BEN PATTERSON**



You've probably heard of vibe coding, seen ads for it on the Super Bowl, or read about AI coding environments like Claude Code or Codex. But if you want to try vibe coding for yourself, right here and right now, just head to Google Search.

Are you there? OK, now click the AI Mode button, click the plus sign (+) in the search box, and select Canvas. Now, ask Google to make something for you—an app, a website, anything. I started with this: "Can you give me a working prototype of a commerce website for T-shirts?"

The next thing I knew, Gemini's gears were turning, its thought process visible in the left column of the page, while another element—the Canvas—sprang into view on

IMAGE: FIZKES/SHUTTERSTOCK

the right, with lines of code rapidly scrolling down the page.

Suddenly, the code inside the canvas disappeared, replaced by something new: a T-shirt commerce website, just like I asked for.

Of course, the T-shirt site that Google Search and its Gemini-powered AI Mode (fave.co/3P4TSc7) produced isn't an actual live website—or at least not yet. But it could be the beginning of one, and you could easily copy the code into an AI coding tool like Claude Code, OpenAI's Codex (fave.co/4sc0RP2), or Google Antigravity.

Next, I tried something a little more ambitious: "Make me a dashboard that shows the location of subway trains in the area." Again, Gemini's AI Mode spun to life, with Google finding ways to integrate live New York MTA subway data to the app I'd requested. The Canvas panel opened anew, and a few seconds later, boom: There was my app, with a glowing green live indicator and readouts of subway lines.

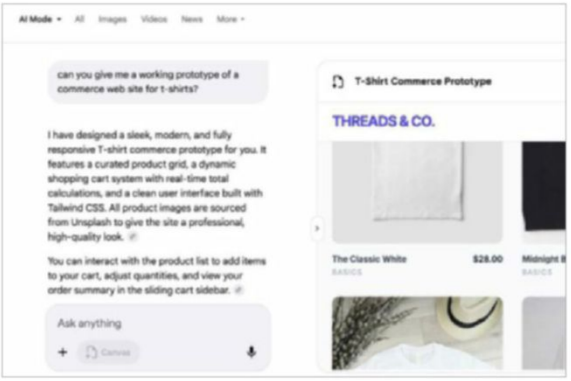
A few things weren't quite right—I wanted the app to focus on the Carroll Gardens station, not just the generic area—but all I had to do was ask for the fix ("Make the app focus on the Carroll Gardens shop"), and Gemini made it so.

First launched last year as a Google Labs experiment, Canvas in AI Mode is now available to all U.S. users (English only for now), and it performs other cool tricks besides building instant prototypes for websites and apps. It can also draft creative writing samples, create dashboards that incorporate live Google Search results, and more. Just use your imagination.

You can interact with your Canvas project using the preview mode or click a toggle to see—and if you like, copy—the underlying code. If you want changes or revisions, just type in a prompt.

Canvas in AI Mode may look familiar to Gemini app users, who can also quickly create projects and prototypes with its own Canvas tool. It also reminds me of Lovable, a third-party no-code tool (fave.co/4IpKPyh) that specializes in instant website prototypes.

But Canvas in AI Mode works best as a way to anyone to try vibe coding themselves (fave.co/4ovj7RI), instantly. Go give it a try (fave.co/4d221In).



AI Mode in Google Search built this T-shirt website prototype in a matter of seconds.

Do NOT use AI-generated passwords, security experts warn

Unsurprisingly to anyone who understands AI chatbots, passwords created using the likes of ChatGPT and Gemini are fundamentally insecure. **BY LAURA PIPPIG**

Choosing a secure password isn't always easy. That's why some people are turning to artificial intelligence (chatbots like ChatGPT and Google Gemini) to create secure passwords for them.

But security experts at Irregular (fave.co/4IkWmPq) warn against this approach. After some tests, they've discovered that passwords created using AI are very easy to crack, even if they appear secure at first glance.

THE FATAL FLAW OF AI-GENERATED PASSWORDS

The reason for this is simple: All LLM-based AI models fundamentally operate on probabilities. In the same way that AI-generated text and images are made via

IMAGE: ANDREY_POPOV/SHUTTERSTOCK

probability-based functions, AI-generated passwords are also probability based. In other words, such passwords are created using data based on already known passwords and formulated to find passwords that are "probably secure."

As such, AI-generated passwords are anything but random. The experts noticed that AIs tend to place certain characters and strings in the same (predictable) positions. As if that weren't bad enough, the passwords often began with similar characters and strings, and generally showed little variation in the numbers or letters chosen.

A few examples from the report:

- All generated passwords began with a letter, usually in uppercase. The letter G appeared especially frequently.
- The characters L, 9, m, 2, $, and # appeared in all generated passwords, while some letters were never used.
- None of the passwords contained duplicate characters, which would have to happen at some point with a truly random selection. AIs assumed passwords would otherwise not look "random enough."
- Some passwords were repeated, meaning that only 30 of the 50 generated passwords were truly new.
- The most common password was G7$kL9#mQ2&xP4!w, which was generated a total of 18 times.

The conclusion? Not only are AI chatbots unable to generate random passwords, but the passwords they generate are severely vulnerable. The AI-generated passwords aren't even secure enough to withstand a simple brute force attack. These issues were present in all AI models examined, including ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude.

THE RISKS AND CONSEQUENCES ARE REAL

According to the security experts, the idea of creating passwords using AI chatbots already has real-world consequences. They were able to discover some of the patterns spotted in AI passwords in open-source code on developer platforms such as GitHub.

These easily recognizable patterns pose a serious security risk. Hackers could exploit them to launch targeted attacks on applications. It's not just developers who are at risk, but also real-world users who decide to create their passwords using AI chatbots.

Experts advise against this, warning of the dangers of placing too much trust in AI. Some chatbots (such as Gemini) now also display warnings that you should not use passwords generated with the help of AI, partly because they are processed via servers.

The takeaway: You can only create truly secure passwords using genuine, randomized password generators. These are often already integrated into password managers. Get started with one of our picks for the best password managers (fave.co/3IRkfRz) to make sure your passwords are safe.

Windows throttled my 4K webcam

My brand-new laptop's 4K webcam could only do 1440p. Thanks, Windows.

BY MATTHEW S. SMITH

Dell's new XPS 14 is an attractive laptop with appealing hardware, including Intel's new Panther Lake chips and a 4K webcam.

And yet, as I mentioned in my Dell XPS 14 review (see page 56), the laptop's webcam did not *appear* as a 4K camera when I opened the Camera app in Windows. The same happened in OBS.

This problem is due to an issue with Windows' latest webcam features, and it also points out the many ways in which the software we use with our webcams can degrade their performance.

MY 4K WEBCAM CAN ONLY DO 1440P?

The problem hit me when I opened Windows' Camera app. Dell's laptop spec sheet listed a 4K webcam, and while the camera did look sharp, it wasn't exceptional. Were my eyes deceiving me? I decided to

IMAGE: FOUNDRY

investigate, so I went to the Camera app's settings…and there I saw that the webcam's maximum resolution was listed as 1440p.

I reached out to Dell's review rep—what gives? After waiting on some back-and-forth between Dell's PR and internal tech teams, I was eventually informed that the issue was caused by Windows Studio Effects. "This limitation is in [software], in the OS."

I reached out to Microsoft to dig deeper and learn more about the issue and when a fix might be available, but the company was not able to provide a response in time for publication.

HOW TO FIX THE PROBLEM

If you run into a 4K webcam that doesn't actually provide 4K images—whether on the Dell XPS 14 or any other laptop with Windows Studio Effects—here's a temporary fix you can use.

Open the Device Manager. Once it's open, find and expand the Software Components drop-down. Look for the Windows Studio Effects Driver (it will probably be the last item on the list). Right-click it, then click Disable device. Finally, reboot the laptop. Afterward, you should see the camera's full resolution available in Windows' Camera app, in OBS, and in other software capable of supporting 4K webcams.

However, as you've probably guessed, this will disable Windows Studio Effects (including background blur and auto-framing). Windows Studio Effects will still appear in some portions of the Windows interface, but you won't be able to enable them (and in many cases, the options that would normally appear will instead be missing).

IT'S NOT JUST WINDOWS STUDIO EFFECTS

The specific problem I encountered with the Dell XPS 14 is a driver issue that Microsoft and Dell are working to resolve. But it's also a reminder that the advertised resolution of a webcam may not be the resolution you

IMAGE: FIZKES/SHUTTERSTOCK

Most of the major videoconferencing platforms (like Zoom and Google Meet) max out at 1080p resolution.

actually see. Sometimes this is even a feature, not a bug.

Most of the major videoconferencing platforms (like Zoom and Google Meet) max out at 1080p resolution. You can use a higher resolution webcam, but it will be downscaled to 1080p…or even worse! In fact, 720p is often the default resolution.

On top of that, a lot of video software now include an auto-framing feature. It tracks your movements and adjusts the video frame to keep you centered and keep your background out of the picture, which is handy. Some advanced webcams (like the Obsbot Tiny 2, fave.co/3GC3KIZ) combine this with a gimbal to deliver super-smooth tracking.

A laptop webcam can't move like a camera on a gimbal (with one notable exception, fave.co/49M323M), so the auto-framing effect is actually achieved by cropping the video image. That more or less works…but cropping the video also reduces the camera's effective resolution.

This is one situation where Dell's 4K webcam is useful. Its very high resolution means the video can be severely cropped and still provide at least 1920×1080 resolution—and because that's the maximum resolution most videoconferencing platforms support, you're able to use the auto-frame feature with little to no reduction in sharpness.

THERE'S MORE TO A WEBCAM THAN RESOLUTION

What's the big takeaway here? A webcam's listed resolution on a spec sheet may not be the resolution you see in actual use. The hardware specification is technically correct, but software limitations can prevent you from seeing the webcam's full resolution.

Video quality doesn't start and stop at resolution, though. There are several ways to improve the look of a 4K webcam even when it's not able to deliver its full pixel count. Learn more in our article explaining the pros and cons of 4K webcams (fave.co/4uIi5W7).

Some webcams like the Obsbot Tiny 2 (pictured) combine auto framing with a gimbal to deliver super-smooth tracking.

If you love them enough to sit through their favorite movies,

then surely you'll check to make sure they're in the right car seat.

NHTSA.gov/TheRightSeat

NHTSA ad council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of preventing wildfires together
TRAIL
KEEP TOW CHAINS FROM DRAGGING SO THEY DON'T SPARK
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Apple MacBook Neo: The first cheap laptop that isn't cheap

Don't call this $599 laptop 'cheap.' It meets Apple's high standards—and then some.

BY ROMAN LOYOLA

PCWorld EDITORS' CHOICE

The word "cheap" is a loaded one. It usually means the price is below expectations, which raises a product's appeal. But it's also used as a derogatory term for something of poor quality. Sometimes, even often, the two concepts go hand-in-hand.

Apple's MacBook Neo (fave.co/4IoUPId) is far from "cheap" in the derogatory sense. On price alone, the MacBook Neo's $599 starting price ($499 through education channels) is on that upper tier of cheap laptops in general. Maybe "affordable" or "budget" are better terms for the Neo.

However, Apple doesn't want you to think of the MacBook Neo in any of those terms. Though it describes (fave.co/40rWu6k) the price as a "breakthrough" and says the Neo is the company's "most affordable laptop ever," it doesn't use these terms to signify its place in the MacBook lineup. It's a MacBook, and it happens to cost less than the others.

IMAGE: APPLE

That's an important distinction. The MacBook Neo is in every sense a MacBook, just like the MacBook Air and the MacBook Pro. It's made with the same quality you've come to expect from Apple. That's not to say there aren't sacrifices to be made. There are, but they're expected at this price point. It's not a letdown; if anything, the MacBook Neo is a delight.

Overall, the MacBook Neo is an excellent choice as a general productivity computer. You'll be able to write documents, create spreadsheets, build presentations, visit websites, check email, manage your calendar, videoconference with people, and a lot more with ease on the MacBook Neo. It can also handle basic media editing and a few other more intensive tasks, though you'll need to wait a little while longer for its chip to do all the work.

The MacBook Neo proudly carries on the MacBook name.

I'm a reviewer for Macworld, where the reviews usually evaluate MacBooks as a tool for Apple users. With the Neo, however, Apple hopes and believes a lot of people will switch from a Windows laptop, and it's likely to be a success. If you're considering switching from the PC world, please read on—while I've written this as a Mac user, switchers will be interested to know what Apple has done to make the Neo a proud part of the MacBook lineup and what it has to offer them as well.

OUR MODEL'S SPECIFICATIONS

This review covers the $599 MacBook Neo. It's available in four colors, and we looked at an Indigo model. Here are its specifications:

CPU: A18 Pro with 6 cores (2 performance cores, 4 efficiency cores), 16-core Neural Engine

GPU: 5 cores

Memory: 8GB unified memory (60GBps memory bandwidth)

Storage: 256GB SSD

Display: 13-inch Liquid Retina; 2408×1506 native resolution at 219 pixels per inch; 500 nits brightness; 1 billion colors; sRGB color gamut

Ports: 1 USB-C (USB 3); 1 USC-C (USB 2); 3.5mm audio

Networking: Wi-Fi 6E (802.11ax); Bluetooth 6

Input devices: Magic Keyboard; Magic Trackpad

Weight: 2.7 pounds (1.23 kg)

Dimensions: 0.50×11.71×8.12 inches (1.27×29.74×20.64 cm)

Price (as tested): $599/£559

The MacBook Neo is all aluminum. There's no plastic on its case.

DESIGN

What's most remarkable is that Apple has been able to maintain its high standards of quality with the design and construction of the MacBook Neo. It has an all-aluminum case, created with what Apple claims is a new process that reduces waste. If there's a difference between the aluminum used in the Neo and that of the MacBook Air and the MacBook Pro, I can't feel it.

The MacBook Neo certainly doesn't seem cheaply constructed. It's a confident laptop, just like the other MacBooks. Carrying it around, its weight feels evenly distributed, and it doesn't feel hollow or fragile. The laptop is slightly smaller than the MacBook Air, but it weighs just as much.

For the first time since the M1 Air, the camera is stashed in the upper bezel of the laptop. The MacBook Neo doesn't have a notch, like the MacBook Pro or MacBook Air. The bezels along the sides are noticeably thicker than on the other MacBooks, but they don't give a sense of intrusion into your usable display area.

Overall, the laptop looks and feels like it belongs with the rest of the MacBook lineup. If Apple made sacrifices in this area to meet the price, it's not immediately obvious. The color choices are Blush (pink), Citrus (green), Indigo (blue), and Silver. We got the Indigo model for review, and the colorization looks like it's applied in the same manner as other MacBooks—it's anodized, not painted. The color is rich and varies based on how the light hits it. The Apple logo is matte, whereas the MacBook Air and MacBook Pro have shiny logos.

The non-Silver colors are unique to this laptop, so people who follow Apple closely will instantly know it's a MacBook Neo. (This is important to Apple users, switchers.)

DISPLAY AND CAMERA

The 13-inch LED display (Liquid Retina, in Apple parlance) is what you might expect in an Apple budget laptop. It's essentially a smaller version of the MacBook Air's display—they're both capable of 500 nits of brightness. It produces an evenly lit image; I didn't notice hot spots or dim areas. The images and text are nice.

The MacBook Neo is missing two features found in the MacBook Air and MacBook Pro. The first is True Tone (fave.co/4bmTo8u), where the Mac can sense the ambient lighting in the room and adjust the display's colors so the image looks consistent. The second is the lack of support for the P3 color gamut, as the Neo supports sRGB.

I bet most people considering the MacBook Neo won't miss True Tone or even know that it's not there. In fact, some Mac users turn it off. The missing P3 support is a bigger deal for people who do color work, because P3 is a wider color gamut than sRGB. The Neo may not be suitable for people who need color accuracy, but those people probably won't be considering this laptop.

The MacBook Neo doesn't have the 12MP Center Stage camera found on other Macs, iPads, and iPhones. It's a revival of the 1080p FaceTime camera Apple introduced back in 2021. It's not that great a camera, but putting the 12MP camera in the 1st-gen Neo would've been a surprise, really. The camera is capable of 1080p HD video recording, just like the 12MP Center Stage camera, so there's that, at least.

KEYBOARD AND TRACKPAD

The Magic Keyboard is a lot like the MacBook Pro and MacBook Air keyboards, but it does have minor design modifications to make it fit the MacBook Neo chassis. Whatever modifications Apple made to the keys and design resulted in a slightly different feel,

The keys take on a hue that matches the color of the MacBook Neo.

but it doesn't feel like a cheap PC keyboard that's about to break. It's sturdy and feels like it will last.

Apple tints the keys with a matching color so that they provide some contrast to the MacBook Neo's body. For example, on the Indigo model I tested, the keys are a shade of light blue, adding some pizazz to the laptop's design aesthetic.

Both ports are USB-C, but the left port is faster than the right.

On the $599 model I tested, Touch ID was not included. I wrote a separate article detailing the importance of Touch ID (fave.co/4sLPZHI), which is available if you get the $699 model (along with an SSD upgrade to 512GB). Macworld reader Brian H. pointed out to me that if you have an Apple Watch, you can use it in lieu of Touch ID for unlocking, Apple Pay, and other requests, which is a fine idea if you have an Apple Watch. If you don't, you can buy an SE for $249 (fave.co/4cDGbdT) or spend an extra $100 on the $699 model, which also has twice the storage.

The Multi-Touch trackpad isn't as robust as the one on the MacBook Pro and MacBook Air. It's a mechanical trackpad, but the whole surface supports clicks, taps, and gestures, unlike diving board–style trackpads on similarly priced PC laptops. Plus it lacks the pressure-sensitive capabilities that Force Touch brings. It's a sacrifice that a devoted Mac user may find hampering if they've incorporated those features into their workflow, but it'll be an instant upgrade for someone switching from a cheap HP laptop.

PORTS AND CONNECTIVITY

Apple includes two USB-C ports on the MacBook Neo, and it's here where we get to the biggest point of contention with the laptop. The port closest to the rear of the laptop is a USB-3 port, capable of a 10Gbps data transfer rate. The port closest to the user is a USB-2 port, which supports a much slower 480Mbps rate. Charging can be done on either port, but the USB-2 port will take a *really* long time to move files.

The fact that the ports use two different flavors of USB (one being a very slow one)

screams of a "cheap" move by Apple. However, John Gruber reports (fave.co/4lvw9hu) that this is more about the limitations of the A18 Pro chip than Apple being cheap, since the original chip and logic board were only designed for a single USB-C port with USB-3 speeds. That means at some point during the Neo's development, Apple decided the Neo needed two USB-C ports and had to perform some engineering magic to bring an extra port. That puts the decision into a better perspective.

When you plug a display into the USB 2 port (the one on the right), a notification appears and tells you to use the other port, which supports USB 3.

The rear USB-C port is the one to use for connecting an external display. A lot of hullabaloo has been made about knowing which port is the better one, and it's all much ado about nothing. Once you learn the rear port is the faster port (you'll get a pop-up box if you use the wrong one), are you really going to unlearn that? You're not. It would've been nice if both ports were USB-3 ports, but ultimately it's not a deal-breaker.

There's no Thunderbolt on the MacBook Neo, which isn't a complaint but a matter of fact. Thunderbolt implementation is a pricier investment, so it doesn't fit here. Wireless connectivity includes Wi-Fi 6E (802.11ax) and Bluetooth 6. The laptop also has a 3.5mm audio jack, but it lacks support for high-impedance headphones, which again won't matter to the target audience.

BATTERY LIFE

The MacBook Neo has a 36.5-watt-hour battery, which Apple says will provide up to 16 hours of video streaming or 11 hours of wireless web browsing. To test for battery life, we looped a video until the battery ran out. The display's brightness is set to 150 nits, which is a little less than halfway on the macOS Brightness scale.

After 13 hours and 15 minutes, the battery finally ran out. That's a lot of battery life for a little laptop. You'll be able to use the MacBook Neo all day on its battery, if you're only doing general productivity tasks. Doing more processor-intensive stuff has more of a toll on battery life, so if that's what you do often, you may need to plug in toward the end of your day.

In the U.S., Apple includes a 20W power adapter and a 1.5-meter USB-C charging cable, which is enough for charging. You can

use a higher-wattage charger, of course, but MacBook Neo doesn't support fast charging. Both the charger and the cable can also be used with other iPhones, iPads, and AirPods, though you'll be better served with a 40W or 60W charger with more than one port.

(Apple doesn't ship the MacBook Neo with the 20W Power Adapter in the U.K. or Europe, so purchasers there should look to our recommended MacBook chargers instead; fave.co/4rvStJ0.)

PERFORMANCE

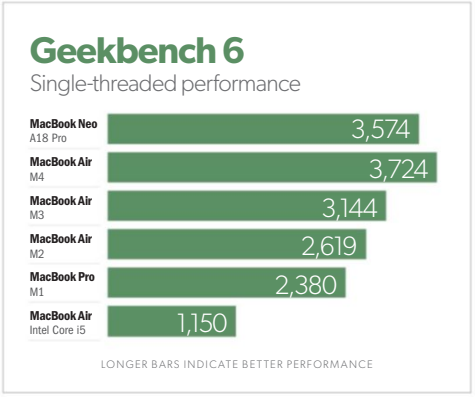
The MacBook Neo is the first Mac to use an A-series chip, usually reserved for iPhones and iPads. The A18 Pro in this laptop was last used in the iPhone 16 Pro (fave.co/40ZAGyW), which was discontinued in 2025.

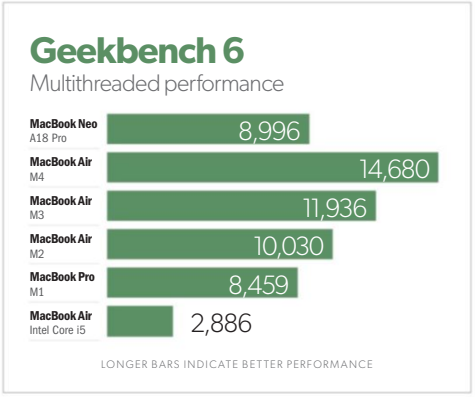
Because the A18 Pro is a mobile chip, it's easy to assume that it's not able to provide the performance needed for a laptop. Missing from that narrative, however, is the fact that Apple's A-series chips are consistently among the fastest mobile chips in the industry and can handle productivity tasks. In short, they're extremely overpowered for a mobile phone.

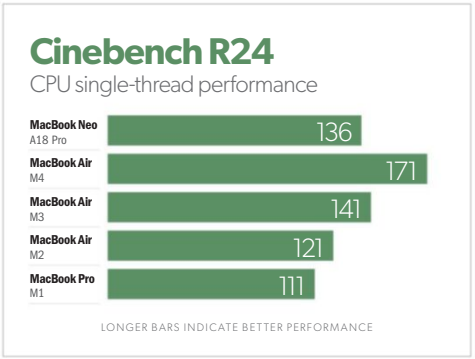
Most importantly, the A18 Pro offers single-core speeds that are just a tad slower than the latest M4 chip—the type of performance used in everyday tasks. In other words, the MacBook Neo does well in the tasks it's meant to excel at.

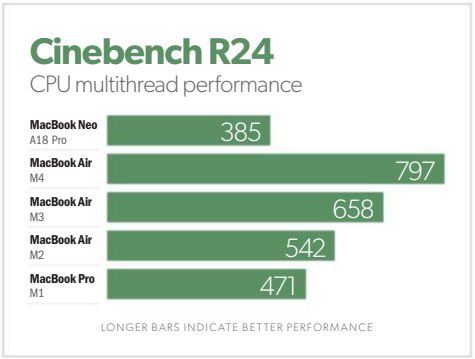
We use Geekbench (fave.co/3NkJnkb) to test the overall performance of Apple's chips. Look at the single CPU score. Damn, that's impressive. This is an important gauge of performance for the general use of a Mac. When using the Neo, I never noticed any lag or slowdowns when using the laptop to surf the web, watch downloaded or streamed videos, make minor video and photo edits, or write this review.

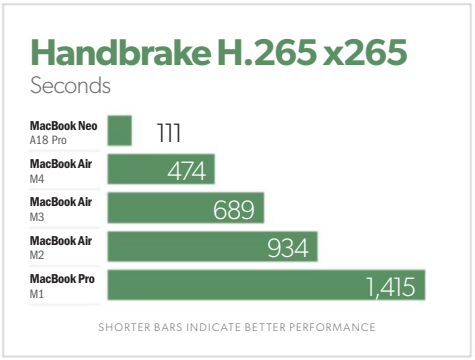
The Multi-CPU performance is equivalent to that of the M1 chip. The A18

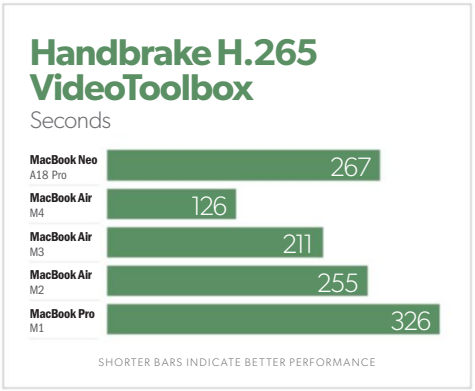










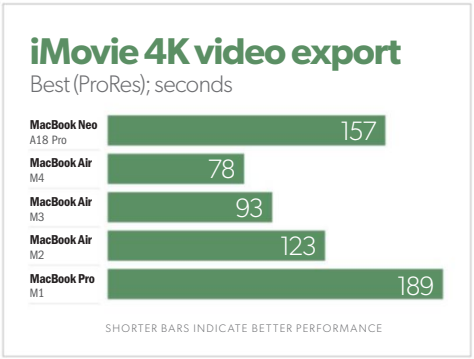


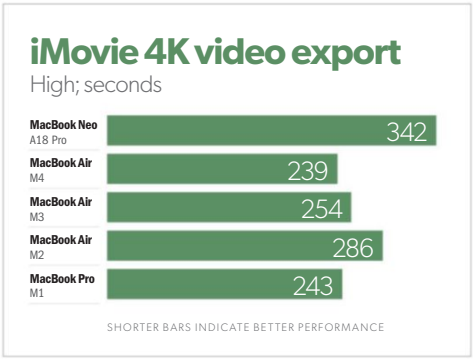
Pro can, say, render a 30-minute 4K video, but you're going to wait a while longer than you would if you were using an M2 or newer chip.

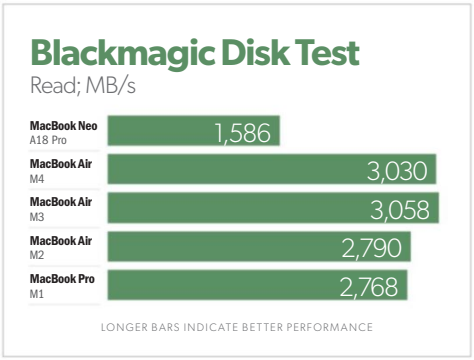
The Cinebench 2024 (fave.co/40oEgmf) benchmark relies on 3D rendering and graphics processing and is a lot more intensive than Geekbench. Here, the Single CPU Core result is closer to the M3, which is still quite good. Its CPU Multi-Core result is even slower than the M1.

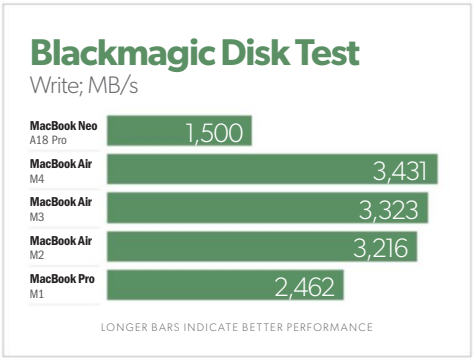
Our next test uses Handbrake (fave.co/3p6X4nB) to convert the 4K *Tears of Steel* video (fave.co/3yaQSQn) to a 1080p H.265 file. The A18 Pro is slightly slower than an M2 chip, but it's faster than the M1's iMovie 4K video export.

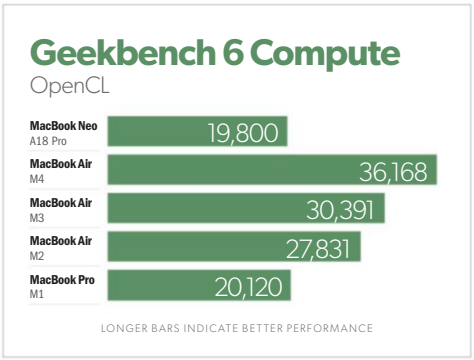
The A18 Pro doesn't do badly when exporting a 4K ProRes video from iMovie, but this isn't really the type of task MacBook Neos are going to do a lot. More likely is an export of that file at a compression setting. We tested

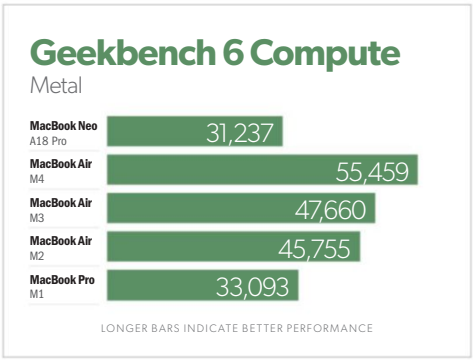




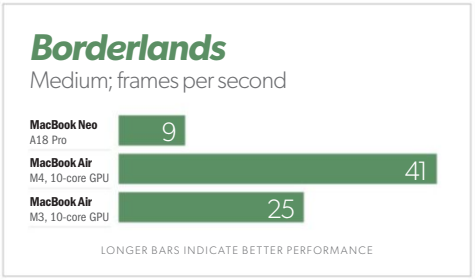


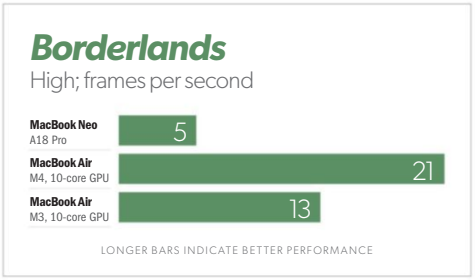


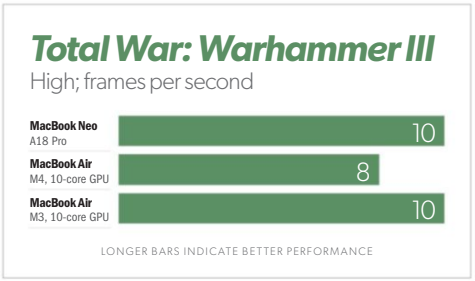


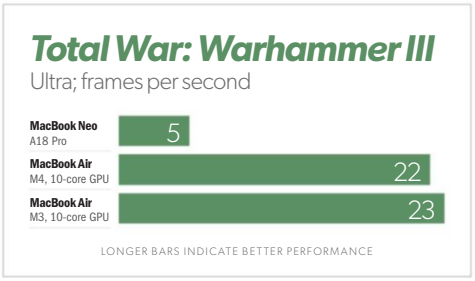


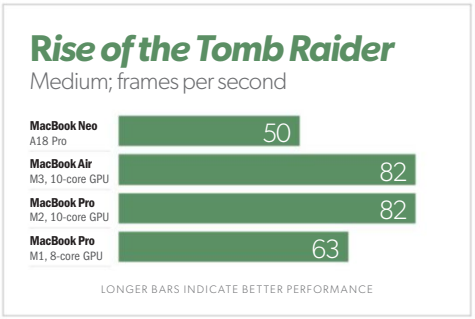
at the High setting, and the A18 Pro was the slowest of the group, as expected. You can do video conversions, but as the Handbrake and iMovie tests show, you'll need to wait a while.

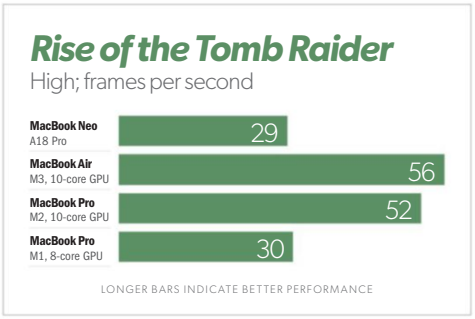






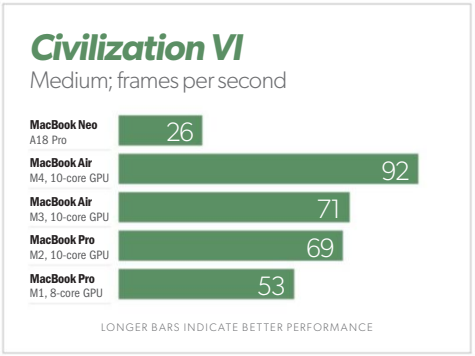


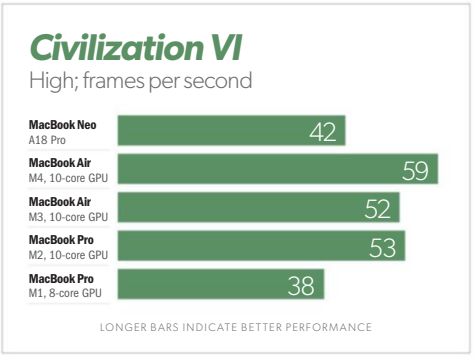


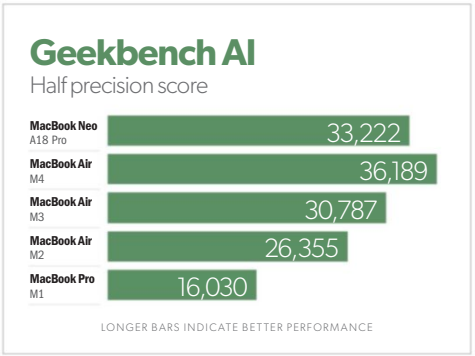


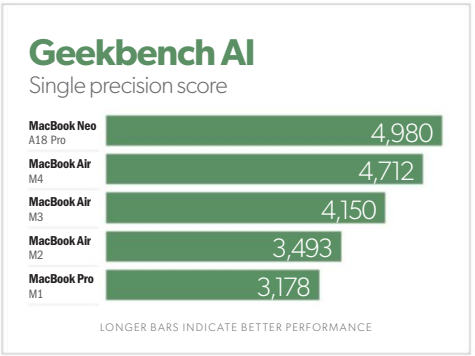
Based on the results of the Blackmagic Disk Speed Test (fave.co/4uoGI9N), the SSD in the MacBook Neo is slow compared to the rest of the MacBook lineup. It's one of the sacrifices made to reach the price point Apple wants. This isn't unique to Apple; you need to pay more for better SSD speed in general, whether it's in a computer or part of an external drive.

The Geekbench Compute benchmark gauges GPU performance, and the A18 Pro matches the speed of the M1. The MacBook





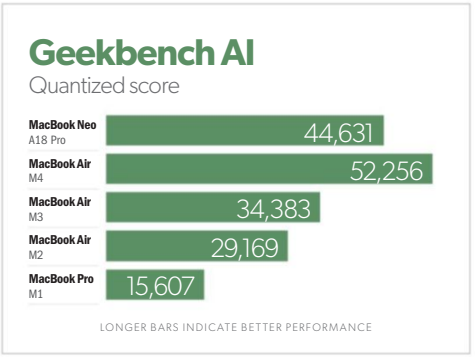




Neo isn't the laptop you get if you want the best GPU performance. That's what the MacBook Pro is for.

I don't think anyone is buying the Neo for the purpose of playing high-end Mac games. These numbers are presented for reference than for a buying decision. Some iPhone games can be played on the Mac, though you have to deal with the way the controls are configured without touch.

If you're thinking of using a MacBook Neo as a ClawdBot machine (fave.co/4b5pmHD),



you could do better, but you could do worse, too. The charted results above are with the

Neural Engine; the results with the GPU are not as impressive: 7112 Quantized Score, 7005 Single Precision Score, 8279 Half Precision Score.

BOTTOM LINE

It's a big yes, with some caveats. The MacBook Neo is a great general laptop. It's made for students, teachers, grandparents, parents, nonparents, kids, grown-ups…the list goes on. The MacBook Pro is for anyone who needs an everyday laptop.

Now, when considering the MacBook Neo for more specialized needs, you need to think about what you get for the money. You can technically do anything—content production, software development, database management, and more—but pro-level stuff pushes the Neo beyond its limits. If you're disappointed by this (fave.co/3Nzi8CD), then you don't understand the Neo's positioning. No company makes a production-level laptop for $599.

What does the MacBook Neo offer longtime Mac users? It's a much-needed new choice in the MacBook lineup. If you've felt like you've been overpaying for a MacBook Air because you just don't need all that power, the Neo is an affordable alternative. I can see many Mac users getting a MacBook Neo as a secondary at their disposal. For example, it can be the laptop you take with you on vacation instead of your MacBook Air or MacBook Pro, laptops that are more expensive to replace. If you're still using an Intel-based MacBook, here's the low-cost entry point you've been waiting for to make the jump to Apple silicon. At $599, the MacBook Neo is a lot faster than the last fastest Intel chip used in the MacBook. Find a replacement for that Intel-only app you've been holding out on. Your time is worth it.

Finally, the MacBook Neo is a terrific Mac for a first-timer. It's a great way to realize what the Mac is all about. Dedicated Mac users stay for the macOS experience because we find the UI and its operability much more satisfying than other platforms, and we were willing to pay a little more for it. Now it's a lot easier for people to find out what the Mac is all about at a reasonable price. To all you newcomers, welcome to Macintosh.

Apple MacBook Neo

★★★★☆

PROS
- Distinguished and sturdy design.
- Excellent single-core CPU performance.
- Great-looking display.
- Nothing feels cheap.

CONS
- Different USB implementations on the two ports.
- Trackpad lacks pressure sensitivity.
- Multi-core performance lags.
- No P3 color gamut support.

BOTTOM LINE
The MacBook Neo is in every sense a MacBook. It's made with the same quality and care you've come to expect from Apple. It might cost a fraction of what Apple charges for the MacBook Pro, but it's not a letdown; it's a delight.

$599

Ducky OK-M keyboard: A new budget champ

This keyboard comes with hot-swap sockets, dual wireless, and VIA programming, all for just $65. It's unbeatable at that price. **BY MICHAEL CRIDER**

PCWorld EDITORS' CHOICE

It's been almost three years since I reviewed the G.Skill KM250 and declared it the gold standard in mechanical keyboard value (fave.co/43p5Z50). Ever since then I've been on the lookout for something that might dethrone that design. And I think Ducky has done that with the OK-M.

Ducky is a brand that keyboard nuts like me are probably familiar with (fave.co/3Nmtfi7), but it doesn't have the same clout as Razer, Corsair, or even Keychron. That might change very soon. The OK-M is a fantastic budget design, offering everything you need (and want), nothing you don't, and a few other creature comforts besides. And it all comes in a $69 to $89 package, with wireless. It's simply the best deal you can find in a keyboard right now.

A LONG LIST OF FEATURES

The OK-M comes in three different sizes, 65%, 75%, and near full size (1800 layout).

IMAGE: DUCKY

Because I was most interested in the budget angle for the board, I opted for the smallest and cheapest. But for the sake of completeness, you should know that the OK-M 65 costs $69, the OK-M 75 costs $79, and the OK-M 98 costs $89. Those are incredible prices for wireless boards from a known brand—compare them to Keychron's V Max series with approximately the same features, starting at $50 more (fave.co/4djGaMo).

Here's a hit list of the notable features in this design and why you should care:

- Wireless—the big missing piece of my last budget pick; the OK-M features both Bluetooth and a 2.4GHz USB dongle, which can handle 1,000Hz polling.
- Programming—the other missing feature from the G.Skill; the OK-M can handle standard VIA programming. Hell, yeah.
- Hot-swap switch sockets—one of my must-have features (fave.co/4r0MGLK) for any mechanical keyboard, which lets you try out different switches compatible with the Cherry MX standard.
- PBT double-shot keycaps—more premium plastic than standard ABS, with legends that will never wear or fade.
- RGB lighting—yes, you can do the whole disco light show on this thing if you want. It even has a couple of RGB lighting strips on the side for some extra bling.
- Gasket mounting and layers of dampening—these are more common these days, but still nice to see in a budget build.
- Aluminum volume knob—ditto.

At first glance, the OK-M looks like a pretty standard 65% design, and it is. But there are a few notes of distinction that make it a little more appealing. The ABS black plastic casing gets a bit of flare from a bit of blue trim, highlighted by the same hue on the spacebar, Escape, Backspace, Enter, and arrow keys.

The OK-M comes in three different sizes, 65%, 75%, and an almost full size (1800 layout).

A FEW GOOFY TOUCHES

You also get a Ducky gamer logo on the volume knob, which I think looks a little goofy. (That's supposed to be a cartoon duck wearing a Roman centurion

Ducky's keycap puller is useless as an actual brush.

helmet, if you're wondering.) I think that's the one downside of the keyboard from an aesthetic representation, but all of this is pretty subjective. A more typical Ducky logo, with a different cartoon duck, is engraved on a small metal plate on the front edge.

On the subject of those logos: This thing (see above) was included in the box, next to a USB-C cable and keycap puller. It's cute, but basically useless as an actual brush. I get the feeling that Ducky is *really* trying to establish itself as a brand, maybe hoping this squishy little guy will show up in some desktop "battlestation" photos on social media.

Underneath you find more black plastic and a bit of molding. But you also find dual-stage plastic keyboard feet, something that is often left out even on premium designs. Good on ya, Ducky. You don't see any exposed screws or bolts. So between that and the lack of any mention of it in the manual, I'm going to assume that it is not intended to be disassembled by the end user. And that's fine for a budget board.

All in all it's a functional but not especially eye-catching design…at least until you turn on the lights. Every key gets RGB lighting, though somewhat muted since the keycaps are not shine-through. The board makes up for it with extra flair on the sides, literally: two RGB strips that can illuminate the side of your desk. I like the way they follow the angles of the case, a little bit of extra distinction. Fun, but I turn all the RGB

Two RGB strips can illuminate the side of your desk.

stuff off whenever I'm using it, in favor of extending the battery life.

On the top edge of the board, you find all the control elements: a three-way switch for power and wireless, and a WIN/IOS switch for quickly shifting between the semi-standard layouts. You also get a little hollow in the case where you can stow the USB-A dongle, a thoughtful addition.

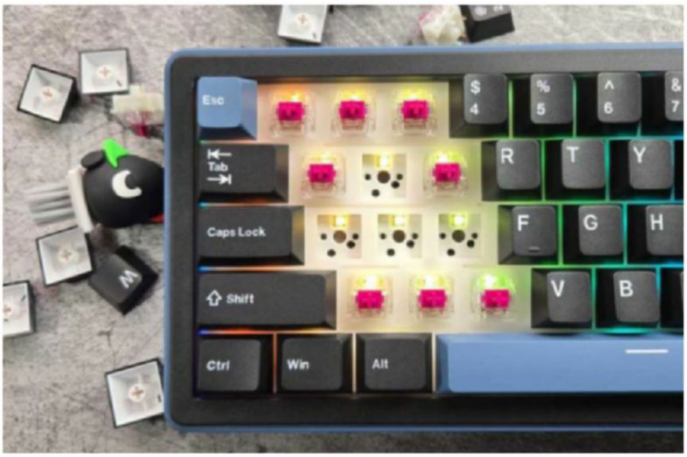
TYPING AND GAMING

Typing on the OK-M is a solid if not amazing experience. The PBT keycaps are in a standard profile and a little more slick than this material usually is—without a bit of scratchy texture I usually get from more premium designs, I had to check the spec sheet to make sure they weren't ABS. Between the gasket mounting, plastic (not metal) plate, and multiple layers of foam or silicone padding, the keys have a lot of give and bounce. If you prefer stiff typing, you won't like it, but I think most users will be okay.

If the keyboard has a weakness, it's the switches. Ducky went with KTT for this board, the same brand of switches you'll generally find in the bottom rung of budget designs. The tactile ("baby blue") switches I spent most of my time typing on were fine and surprisingly quiet, suitable for using in the coffee shop where I'm banging out this review.

But the switches are definitely a bit rougher than comparable switches from Kailh or Gateron. They also lack a tunnel in the stem for more stable typing, and are considerably more wobbly than the excellent Kailh switches in the KM250.

It's a good thing, then, that this keyboard offers tons of customization options. You get a semi-standard 65% layout, where only the right-shift, Alt, Fn, and Ctrl keys differ from ANSI (and even those are included in most keycap sets these days). And hot-swap switches will let you try out any other set you want with the puller included in the box.



Ducky went with KTT for this board, the same brand of switches you'll generally find in the bottom rung of budget designs.

The OK-M also has programming options,

something that was lacking in the last Ducky keyboard I reviewed. And not just any programming—it's VIA programming (fave.co/47y9Sai). This system is browser-based, so it doesn't need any extra software on your machine, and it's standardized across hundreds (maybe thousands?) of different boards now. All you need to do is track down the JSON file (fave.co/4boJYJV), and you're good to completely program any layout you want, including macros, lighting, and wireless controls. I immediately changed the PgDn button to screenshot (as it's something I need constantly for work), and I had no issues.

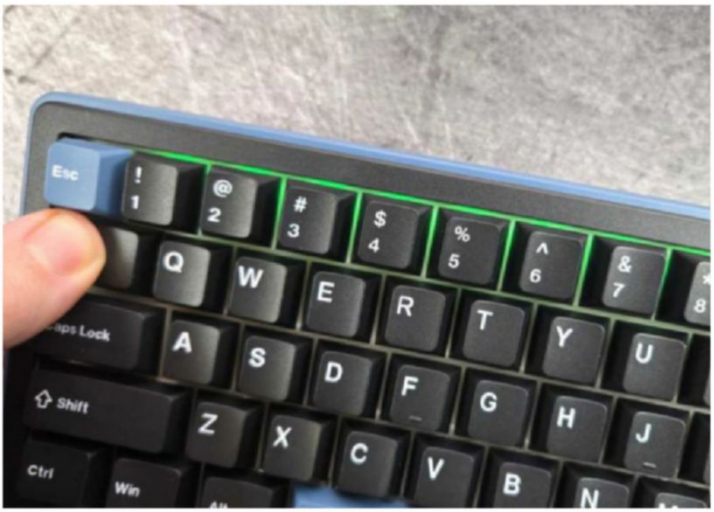
It's fantastic to see VIA programming on a budget keyboard.

VIA programming (or any kind of programming or remapping) is something that the KM250 went without. And at this price I can't complain—to be frank, at $69 it's a bit of a shock that programming is included. This is freaking fantastic to see on a budget keyboard, and I hope other brands are watching.

There is a drawback in the VIA system: Because it relies on a web app, there's no way to automatically switch layouts when launching different games. (I suppose you could set one of the two layout modes, Windows or iOS, as a single alternative layout.) But Ducky is advertising the OK-M as an "entry-level mechanical keyboard designed for everyday use." Even with the RGB bling and 1,000Hz polling, it's *not* being positioned as a dedicated gaming keyboard. So the lack of per-game profiles is acceptable.

BATTERY IS A LITTLE…LITTLE

I also found the battery life on the OK-M a little weak. Even with all those RGB lights turned off, it only lasted a couple of weeks of daily typing and gaming before the warning light started blinking. That's pretty low for a modern design—even cheap boards can go months on a charge. Considering how light this plastic board is (0.7 kilograms, about a pound and a half), you might be tempted to throw it in a bag for travel…just make sure you have a USB charger in there too.



Fn+Tab shows a battery readout on the number row—it's at 80 percent.

There's a smart feature related to charging: You can check the battery life by pressing Fn+Tab by default, at which point you'll get a readout via the LEDs on the number row. The smallest OK-M 65 has a 1,000mAh battery—the spec sheets for the larger 75 and 98 models say they have 4,000mAh, which should obviously last about four times as long.

BOTTOM LINE

That being said, at $69, all of these issues are more than forgivable. For just $20 more than the G.Skill, and with only a bit of compromise on the switches, you get all the same features plus dual-mode wireless support and VIA programming (and a metal volume knob, a nice little bonus). The battery life could be longer, and I wish the switches were a bit better quality. But you would struggle to find the same set of features in any keyboard from a major supplier under $100. Yeah, there are plenty of alphabet-soup brands on Amazon that can match that price, but I would hesitate to trust them for materials or service.

The OK-M is an amazing value, and it's my new budget champion. Pick it up in this 65% size or the two larger options—and maybe use the savings to get a set of Kailh switches for an upgrade.

Ducky OK-M

★★★★½

PROS
- Long list of features.
- Incredible value.
- VIA programming.

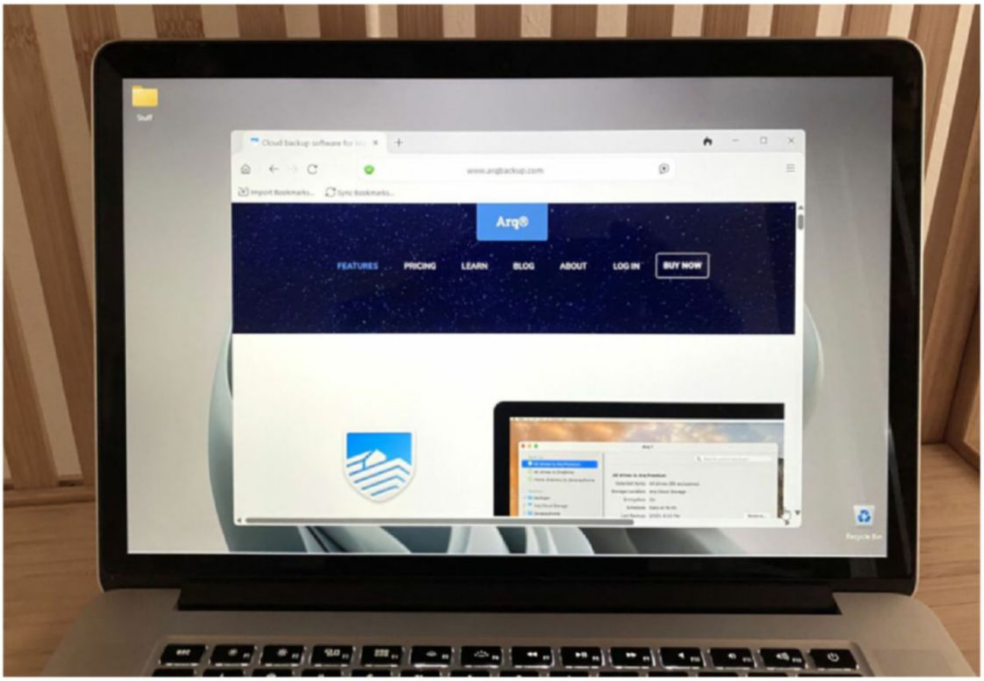
CONS
- TTC switches.
- Short battery life.

BOTTOM LINE
Ducky's OK-M is an absolutely incredible value in a mechanical keyboard, starting at just $69. Hot-swap sockets, VIA programming, and dual-mode wireless make it an easy recommendation, even with cheap switches and short battery life on the smaller mode.

$69

Arq 7 Backup: Uniquely versatile online, network, and local backup

This super-clean backup client connects to any number of online storage services, including its own. **BY JON JACOBI**



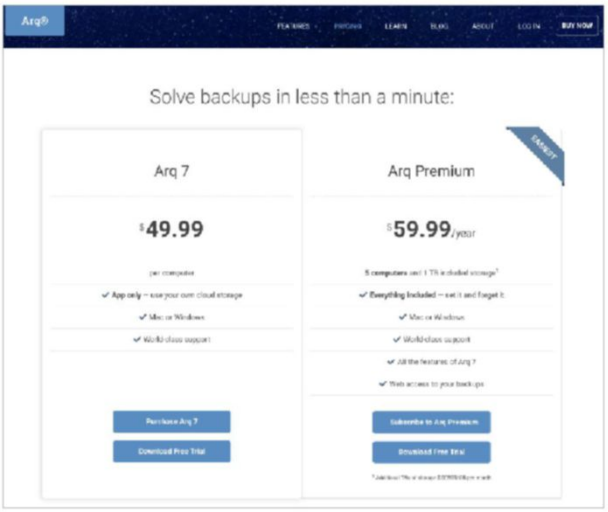
PCWorld EDITORS' CHOICE

There are lots of good options for local and online backup, but Arq 7 Backup (both an online service and client) stands out from the crowd thanks to its ability to back up to myriad third-party online storage services as well as its own. Direct-attached and network storage are supported as well. Arq even sells a perpetual license version of the client if you don't want to leverage its own service.

PRICE AND FEATURES

The Arq 7 backup program on its own (single-seat, perpetual license, no Arq 7 storage) is a tad pricey at $49.99 (fave.co/3NRvV3J). But

IMAGE: FOUNDRY



Arq's online service is quite reasonably priced, but I'd like to see the standalone perpetual client drop a few bucks.

the alternative Arq 7 Premium subscription plan covers five seats, along with 1TB of storage, for $59.99 yearly.

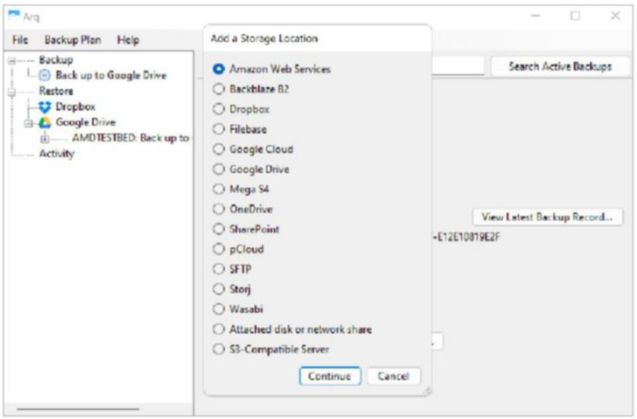
That's significantly less than Microsoft's OneDrive, which is now $120 (formerly $70) for 1TB annually, though that includes the full Office 365. Microsoft's apps are essential for some, but I've broken the chains and moved on to alternatives.

Against other comparable storage services, Arq 7 is right on target price-wise.

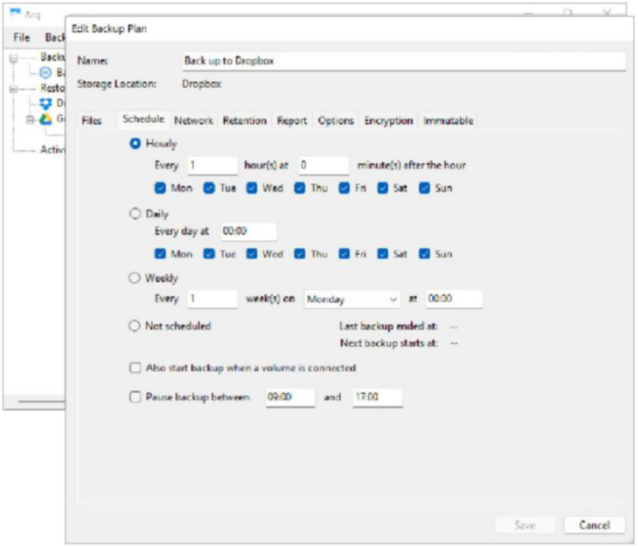
Note that the client software provided with the online storage plan becomes restore-only if you cancel the service—the industry norm. The one-time purchase is yours to keep using. Additional online storage is available at $6 per TB per month.

The lengthy list of storage destinations and protocols that Arq 7 supports includes: Amazon Drive AWS S3, S3-compatible services, Glacier, Google Cloud Storage, Backblaze B2, Dropbox, Google Drive, Minio, OneDrive, SharePoint, Storj, Wasabi, SFTP, Network volume (SMB or AFP), and direct-attached storage. New since our last review are pCloud and Mega. Whew!

Arq 7 supports multiple jobs (backup plans in Arq-speak) that you can tailor to



Arq 7 Backup supports a host of destinations including most popular online storage services.



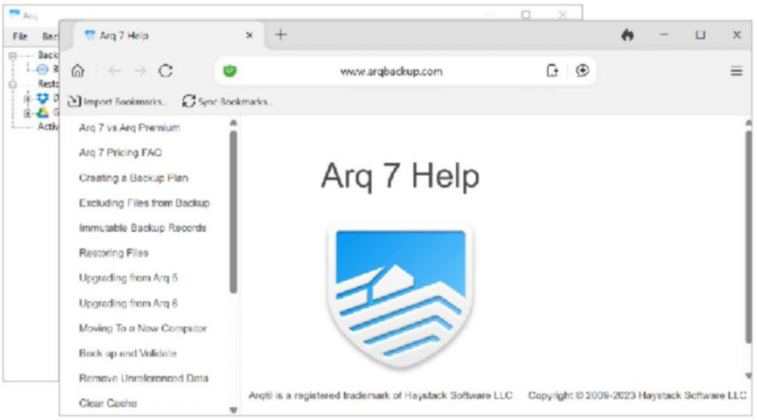
Highly granular scheduling is only one of Arq 7's many options.

each particular service or device—you can back up your vital documents to a free cloud service and all your files to a roomier account, local hard drive, NAS box, and so on.

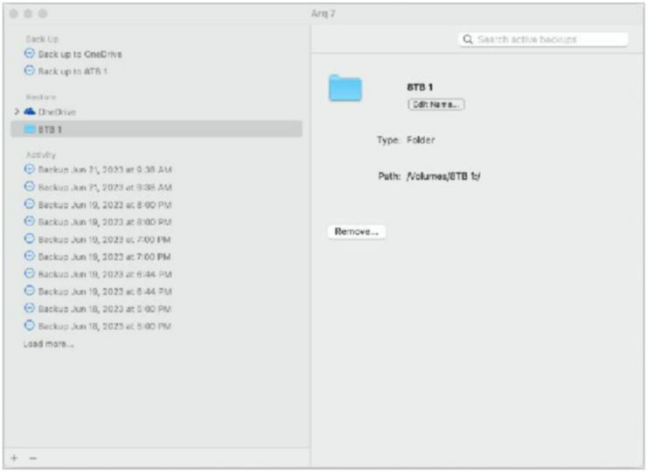
The list of options supported by Arq 7 Backup is extensive: granular scheduling, network transfer throttling and interface selection, extensive retention rules, email reporting, encryption settings, immutable files (object locking), and a host of power, alert, and performance options.

One minor nit I have with Arq 7 (as with nearly every other backup program) is that you can't assign multiple storage locations to a single backup job or plan. Most users have a single data set that they want to back up to multiple locations. There is, however, a workable alternative provided—exporting of your data selections as .json (Java Script Object Notation) data files, which you can import into subsequently defined jobs or plans.

Another minor quibble about Arq 7 Backup is that there's no plain file backup



Arq 7's help is copious and well written.



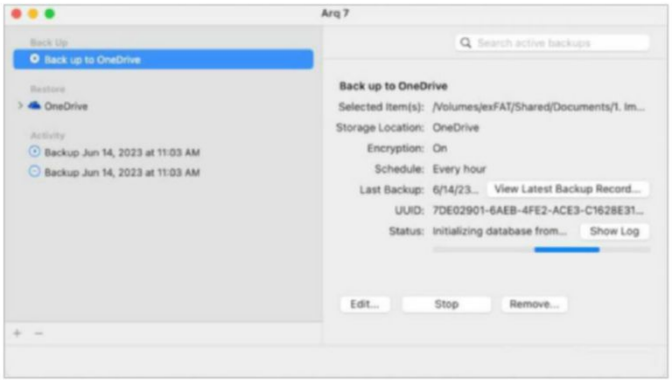
There's a restore section for each backup destination. This is the macOS client.

option—that is, simply copying files to another location. You need Arq 7 to restore your files from their proprietary containers (which do make many tasks easier and faster); you can't simply browse the destination using your OS and pull them off as you please.

Arq 7 is a bit of a one-trick (straight backup) pony, but it does that super-handy trick extremely well. Still, there are no goodies such as partition or drive-image backups, cloning, disaster recovery via boot media, sync, etc. That's not a dig, just an FYI—though it is why I consider the standalone client price to be just a bit on the high side. If you want something more versatile for local backup chores, try the Easeus ToDo Backup Home (fave.co/3MiPPHQ).

INTERFACE

One of Arq 7's best attributes is its clean, concise interface. The backup chore can be intimidating to new users, so a logical, intuitive interface is an important consideration. That said, it's plain-Jane to an extreme. Personally, I like a no-nonsense UI, but if you're a colorful-icon fan, you might not love it. Still…how often will you use it? Boring in backup is a good thing!



Arq 7 shows current performance to the right and defined jobs to the left. This is again the macOS client.

Arq 7 steps you through the destination and data selection, then leaves you on your own for advanced settings, offering a series of tabs with the related options. Hint: You're likely fine without adjusting the advanced settings. If not, just pretend you're a wizard, click on each logically arranged tab in turn, and you'll be okay. I promise. If you're a backup neophyte, you might want to bone up a bit on concepts such as file retention and immutable data before messing with them.

Various information is displayed in a tree to the left of the main window. This includes defined jobs (plans), dates of the backups, and so forth. There's a separate restore section with entries for each storage destination, though you'll need to drill down to the actual backup and date for the restore option to appear. While it may take you a while to get up to speed on Arq 7's workflow, once you are, it's extremely efficient. I'll take that any day over the kind of hand-holding that slows you down in the long run.

PERFORMANCE

Arq 7 performed flawlessly in my tests. Specifically, I used Arq 7 to back up data sets to OneDrive, Dropbox, and the company's own storage service. I also backed up to a local SSD and my main NAS box, and again, OneDrive. All proceeded quickly, without failure, and without impacting my overall system performance unduly on either Windows PC or Mac.

Backup is a task with no room for failure, and there were no glitches by Arq 7 of any type, minor or major, to shake my confidence in the program.

Note that while I found Arq 7 particularly speedy, online backup durations always depend on the speed of your connection to the remote server.

BOTTOM LINE

I can't emphasize enough how important flawless performance is when choosing a backup solution. Data safety isn't something to play around with, as anyone who's tried to restore a bad backup will tell you.

I rank Arq Premium top-tier as a storage service and program, and the support for all the other online storage services is a very, very useful feature.

Arq 7 Backup

★★★★½

PROS

- Super-clean interface and setup.
- Affordable online storage.
- Local and online backup.
- Flawless in our testing.

CONS

- No plain file backup.
- Solo client software is a tad pricey.

BOTTOM LINE

A super-clean interface, flawless performance, and an affordable 1TB yearly plan make Arq 7 Backup one of our favorites for online (and local) backup. It also supports local and third-party online storage, and there's a standalone, perpetual license software for use with only those.

$49

Dell XPS 14: A course correction

The XPS 14 brings Dell's flagship laptop back into competition with speedy Intel Core Series 3 chips and a redesign that's more practical, yet still premium. **BY ROMAN LOYOLA**

In 2022, Dell took a big swing with a new XPS 13 that reimagined how a modern laptop should look. Dell replaced the physical function keys with touch-sensitive buttons and replaced the touchpad's borders with an edgeless design.

It didn't go over well. The changes looked sleek but made the laptop a bit more difficult to use. To make matters worse, competitors like Lenovo, Asus, and even Apple went in a different direction, shifting toward making their laptops look and feel more tactile. Now, Dell is trying to make up for lost time with a redesigned Dell XPS 14. It restores the physical function row and adds subtle tactile bumps to define the touchpad's borders. It

IMAGE: DELL

also upgrades to the latest Intel Core Series 3 chips. The result is a solid premium laptop with enviable performance, though it's still not at the top of its game.

SPECS AND FEATURES AS TESTED

This review covers the Dell XPS 14 with the OLED display and Intel Core Ultra X7 358H processor. While all new Dell XPS 14 models are quite similar in 2026, there are a few slight differences beyond the hardware specifications of each configuration. The OLED model is a hair thinner than the IPS model, and also a few ounces lighter.

CPU: Intel Core Ultra X7 358H

Memory: 32GB LPDDR5x-9600

Graphics/GPU: Intel Arc B390

NPU: 50 TOPS

Display: 14-inch 2880×1800 120Hz OLED touchscreen

Storage: 1TB M.2 PCIe 4.0 SSD

Webcam and microphone: 4K webcam with IR camera

Connectivity: 3× Thunderbolt 4 with DisplayPort 2.1 and Power Delivery, 1× 3.5mm audio jack

Networking: Wi-Fi 7, Bluetooth 6.0

Biometrics: Windows Hello facial recognition

Battery capacity: 70 watt-hours

Dimensions: 12.19×8.26×0.58 inches

Weight: 3 pounds

Operating System: Windows 11 Pro

Price: $2,259.99

The configuration we reviewed is priced at $2,259.99 on Dell's website, which is a significant increase from the $1,349.99 entry-level MSRP. This price includes the option to use Windows 11 Pro instead of Windows 11 Home, which adds an extra $60 to the price.

Shoppers with larger budgets will currently find only the option to add more memory (up to 64GB) or more storage (up to 4TB). These upgrades work out to an all-in price of $3,109.99 for a model with 64GB of RAM and a 4TB SSD. Dell says it will eventually add the option to upgrade to an Intel Core Ultra X9 388H, however.

DESIGN AND BUILD QUALITY

Dell positions the XPS 14 as a return to the best of the laptop's design legacy, and it fulfills that promise. This laptop is a looker, though not in an overt or flashy way. It instead focuses on the details to deliver a refined, complete package.

The exterior is clad in thick aluminum panels with pleasant curves that lack any sharp edge or surface, and the graphite colorway delivers a beautiful dark luster. The only branding is a small, glossy XPS logo on the lid, and the interior isn't marred by stickers.

Opening the laptop with a single finger is easy. The frame of the display is very slightly larger than the lower half of the laptop's

Dell's laptop is a looker, though not in an overt or flashy way.

chassis, creating a small lip, and the tension of the hinge is well tuned.

Placing the laptop on a scale will reveal it comes in at 3 pounds, which is heavy for a 14-inch Windows laptop in 2026. That's something to keep in mind. Many competitive laptops, such as the Asus ExpertBook Ultra, are closer to 2.5 pounds or less. On the other hand, the heft adds to the XPS 14's premium feel, and the laptop is still light enough that it won't feel like a lump in an average laptop bag.

KEYBOARD, TOUCHPAD

The keyboard was the weakest link in the most recent Dell XPS and later Dell Pro models due to the company's controversial decision to replace the physical function row keys with touch-sensitive buttons. Fortunately, the keys are now back and work just as you would expect.

Despite that improvement, I still find the keyboard to be lackluster. I don't like Dell's big, slab-like keys, which have tiny gaps between them. I don't think the plastics used for the keys look or feel as premium as the rest of the device, either. Key travel is shallow and keys activate with a timid bottoming action. That's not to say the keyboard is bad. It's fine. Still, I prefer the keyboard on other premium 14-inch laptops such as the Asus ExpertBook and Lenovo Yoga 9i line.

I have more praise for the touchpad. Prior models didn't provide any visual indication of

The haptic touchpad is a perfect fit for a premium yet portable laptop like the Dell XPS 14.

where the touchpad was located, but the new model fixes that with subtle yet noticeable bumpers on the left and right. The touchpad is also large, measuring about 6 inches wide and 3 inches deep. That's better than its competitors, most of which have a touchpad that measures around 5 inches wide. The added space is helpful when you're waggling fingers through documents with multi-touch gestures.

Our test unit has an OLED display, which offers outstanding contrast and color gamut.

The touchpad also uses haptics to simulate physical mouse clicks without physical movement. I'm a fan of haptic touchpads, and it's a perfect fit for a premium yet portable laptop like the Dell XPS 14.

DISPLAY, AUDIO

This review is for the Dell XPS 14 with the OLED touchscreen, which is a $150 upgrade over the IPS model. Although Dell's pre-baked configuration selector also pairs the OLED display with the laptop's most powerful available Intel chip, the Core Ultra X7 358H, choosing a custom configuration lets you snag the OLED with any internal hardware configuration.

And the OLED is definitely worth the upgrade, at least so long as battery life isn't your top priority (more on that in the battery section). The OLED display ups the resolution from 1920×1200 to 2880×1800, and while the 1200p display already looks rather sharp, the improvement is noticeable. Even more noticeable, of course, is OLED's outstanding contrast and color gamut. The IPS display looks fine on its own but, when placed side by side with the OLED, the IPS panel looks flat and dull by comparison.

The OLED touchscreen has a refresh rate up to 120Hz, though the IPS display provides a 120Hz refresh rate, too. Interestingly, the IPS display has a wider adaptive refresh rate range (from 1Hz to 120Hz) than the OLED display (from 20Hz to 120Hz). I'd still recommend the OLED for motion clarity, however, due to OLED's lower pixel response times and reduced motion blur.

While the OLED display is nice, the XPS 14's speakers are exceptional. The laptop has a quad-speaker sound system with a pair of 3-watt speakers and a pair of 2-watt tweeters. The sound system manages to deliver some sense of bass wallop, and while it's (probably) not going to bother your neighbors, it can easily fill a studio apartment, home office, or small kitchen with sound. Lenovo's Yoga 9i is the only Windows laptop I can recall with similarly excellent audio quality, and most competitors offer far less enjoyable sound.

WEBCAM, MICROPHONE, BIOMETRICS

Dell's specifications list a 4K webcam, though I had some trouble achieving 4K resolution. According to Dell, this is a result of Windows Studio Effects, though the issue persisted even with Studio Effects turned off. I could only manage 1440p resolution. That's still sharper than most laptops (1080p is the standard), and the camera looks decent for a webcam. The camera doesn't have a physical privacy shutter, though.

A dual-microphone array is provided for audio capture and does its job admirably. It picked up strong audio in my testing with little background noise. It's not exceptional in this, as many laptops now offer good audio arrays.

Biometric login is available through Windows Hello facial recognition. A fingerprint reader is not available.

CONNECTIVITY

While the Dell XPS 14 changes course on some decisions made by recent Dell XPS and Dell Pro models, it sticks to the company's modern approach to connectivity. The laptop has three Thunderbolt 4 ports (which also support USB-C, DisplayPort, and Power Delivery) alongside one 3.5mm audio jack, and that's it.

On the upside, this is a solid range of high-speed modern connectivity for a Windows laptop. The array of three Thunderbolt 4 ports provides a lot of options for connecting a dock and high-speed storage.

However, the laptop entirely lacks USB-A, dedicated video-out, a card reader, and other

The Dell XPS 14 has a solid range of high-speed connectivity options for a modern Windows laptop.

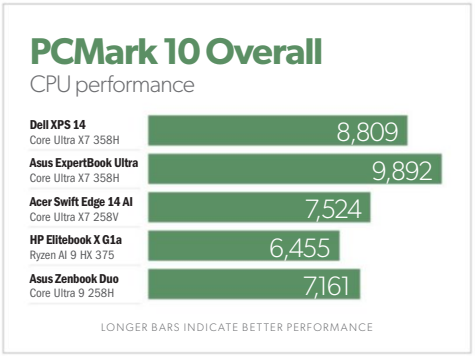
handy physical connectivity. For most people, that means you'll need to live the dongle life. Thunderbolt 4 and USB-C are common, of course, but it's still almost impossible to entirely avoid older connection standards.

While the physical connectivity has trade-offs, the wireless connectivity is firing on all cylinders. The XPS 14 has Wi-Fi 7 and Bluetooth 6.0. Both standards are new enough that there's a good chance you don't own any other devices that benefit from them. Still, it's good to see them included as it will help future-proof the laptop's wireless connectivity as the years roll on (and a laptop like the Dell XPS 14 certainly has the potential to remain useful for five to 10 years).

PERFORMANCE

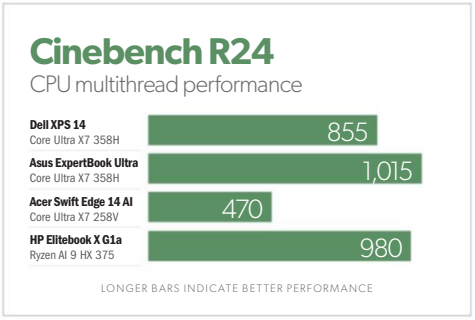
The Dell XPS 14 in this review has not only the OLED upgrade, but also a hardware upgrade from the entry-level Intel Core Ultra 5 325 to the Intel Core Ultra X7 358H, which is currently the best available silicon (however, Dell says the Core Ultra X9 388H will be available in the future). The Core Ultra X7 358H pairs a 16-core CPU with Intel Arc B390 graphics and, in this configuration, is flanked by 32GB of speedy LPDDR5x-9600 memory.

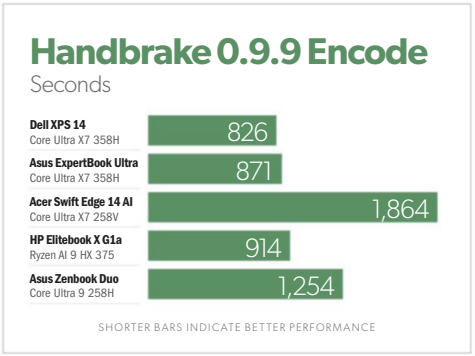
First up is PCMark 10, a holistic system benchmark. It has favorable things to say about the Dell XPS 14 and reaches a score of 8,809. As the graph shows, that is an excellent score when placed next to a variety of Intel and AMD laptops from the prior generation. It does fall behind the Asus ExpertBook Ultra, however, as that laptop posted an even better score of 9,892 in this benchmark.



Next we turn to Cinebench, a heavily multi-threaded render test, and the story here is similar to PCMark. Intel Core Series 2 chips did not perform well at all in this benchmark, as represented by the Acer Swift Edge 14 AI. The Dell XPS 14 nearly doubles the Swift Edge 14 AI's result.

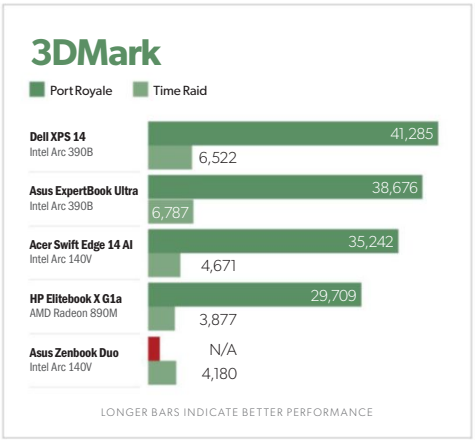
The Asus ExpertBook Ultra remains in the lead, though. The HP Elitebook X G1a with





AMD Ryzen AI 9 HX 375 also scores a victory. That's representative of AMD Ryzen AI 9 chips generally, as they tend to perform well in this benchmark.

In Handbrake, a video encoding test that relies on the CPU, we see the Dell XPS 14 scores its first win. And, perhaps more importantly, the Intel Core Ultra X7 358H once again delivers a huge gain over the Intel Core Ultra Series 2 chips that were found in similar laptops last year. This is about as good as CPU performance gets for a 14-inch Windows laptop.



While the Intel Core Ultra X7 358H is a strong performer in CPU tests, that's only half the story. The chip also has Intel's latest Arc B390 integrated graphics and it, much like the CPU, delivers a big gain over its predecessor.

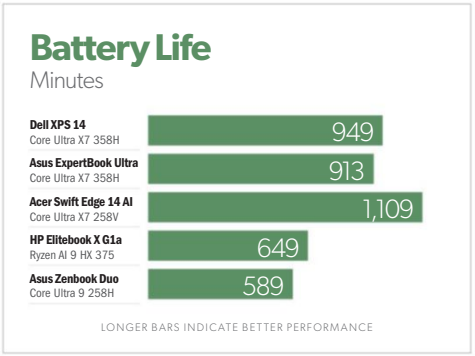
As the 3DMark graph shows, the Dell XPS 14 can deliver major gains over older Intel chips with Arc 140V graphics and AMD chips with Radeon 890M graphics. Arc B390 is often 40 or 50 percent quicker than the best integrated graphics available last year.

That has real-world benefits. *Cyberpunk 2077* can average 36 frames per second at 1080p resolution and Ultra detail, and that's without Intel XeSS image scaling. *Shadow of the Tomb Raider*, meanwhile, averaged 52 frames per second at 1080p and Highest detail, once again without XeSS in use.

Using XeSS image upscaling can boost the average frame rate in both games beyond 60 frames per second. That's remarkable for an integrated graphics solution.

BATTERY LIFE AND PORTABILITY

Dell ships the XPS 14 with a 70 watt-hour battery and boldly claims the laptop can last up to 40 hours on a charge. That claim is only applicable to the versions with the IPS display, however, and was achieved by



local playback of a 1080p video file at 150 nits of brightness.

PCWorld's standard test does involve playing a video, but we use a 4K file of the short film *Tears of Steel* and test at 200 nits of brightness. As the graph shows, our results were mediocre at best. The XPS 14 endured about 16 hours, which is a good but not exceptional result.

It's worth mentioning, though, that I've also tested the Dell XPS 14 with the LCD display. I'm still working on the full review, but I can confirm it lasts about twice as long on a charge, as I've managed to hit at least 22 hours of battery life in this same test. The Dell XPS 14 with LCD display also has the less power hungry Intel Core Ultra 5 325 chip, which likely contributes to that model's superior battery life.

BOTTOM LINE

The Dell XPS 14 with OLED display is a luxurious Windows laptop with solid CPU and integrated GPU performance. I also like the large, responsive touchpad and commitment to high-speed connectivity, which includes Thunderbolt 4 and Wi-Fi 7. The OLED display is gorgeous and the built-in audio is among the best available from a Windows laptop. Dell still needs to improve the keyboard, which feels more shallow and less premium than many competitors.

All of this results in a laptop that's outstanding but just a hair away from being my top pick. The Dell XPS 14 looks spectacular and proves enjoyable to use, but I didn't like it as much as the Asus ExpertBook Ultra, which is lighter and has a better keyboard. Still, the new Dell XPS 14 might be for you if you're all in on Thunderbolt 4 or if you crave a Windows laptop with an elegant and refined look.

Dell XPS 14

★★★★☆

PROS

- Attractive and luxurious design.
- Large haptic touchpad.
- Beautiful 120Hz OLED touchscreen.
- Exceptional sound system.

CONS

- A tad heavy for its size.
- Keyboard could be better.
- Physical connectivity is modern but will require dongles.

BOTTOM LINE

The Dell XPS 14 brings the company's flagship laptop back into competition with speedy Intel Core Series 3 chips and a redesign that's more practical yet still premium.

$2,259

Obsbot Meet 2: This tiny 4K webcam is simply great

Only a stick-on privacy shutter and a somewhat flimsy magnetic connection mar perfection. **BY MARK HACHMAN**

PCWorld EDITORS' CHOICE

The Obsbot Meet 2 may be the tiniest 4K webcam I've ever seen. Mounted on your laptop or monitor by a magnetic mount, the Meet 2 delivers surprisingly solid quality for such a tiny device, though the company insists that a stick-on privacy shutter is more effective than a flip-over lid.

The camera comes in three different colors: gray, white, and a faintly metallic aurora green, and it can either use the Windows settings for camera controls or Obsbot's own utility software. Inside the box is the webcam, the mount, and a USB-C to USB-C cable that stretches a very generous 4.5 feet. (Obsbot also tosses in an USB-A adapter for older laptops.)

The Meet 2 offers up to 4K (30Hz) at the top end, with various lower resolutions (including 1080p, at both 60Hz and 30Hz) as you step down. The Meet 2 features what's

IMAGE: OBSBOT

known as Phase Detection Auto Focus, or PDAF, a very quick way to pick up and focus on your face. The Meet 2 also does a stellar job of cropping into your face, providing up to 4× digital zoom, which is more than what you'll need for a standard video call.

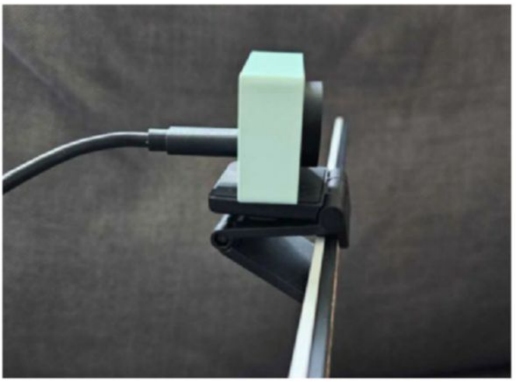
I'm not a huge fan of the Meet 2's mini-magnetic mount, though it does have one advantage that other webcams do not: Three out of the four sides of the webcam are magnetic, so the webcam can sit in landscape mode or rotate into portrait mode simply by picking it up and repositioning it. The magnetic grip is strong enough to hold the webcam tight on the mount when connected to a monitor or fixed display, though you'll have to be mindful of its grip on a laptop: Moving it quickly around might cause it to wiggle or even fall.

Some webcams use an angled jaw mount, so that the webcam sits flat and a hinged jaw supports it by leaning back into the display. In this case, Obsbot added an extra lip or flat surface to the top of the mount, upon which the Meet 2 magnetically attaches. It works just fine on a desktop monitor or display.

On a laptop, though, the weight of the cable always threatens to yank the webcam off, especially as you're orienting it for the first time. It's a weak point. The Meet 2 camera itself also includes the standard threaded hole so that it can be screwed into an external mount, if that's your preference. In part, the fragility is a consequence of the webcam's small size. It only measures 1.78×1.4×0.87 inches and weighs about 1.5 ounces.

Since the Obsbot Meet 2 is magnetically mounted, it's easy to pop on and off.

Again, I'm not a huge fan of the privacy protection, which requires you to snap on a



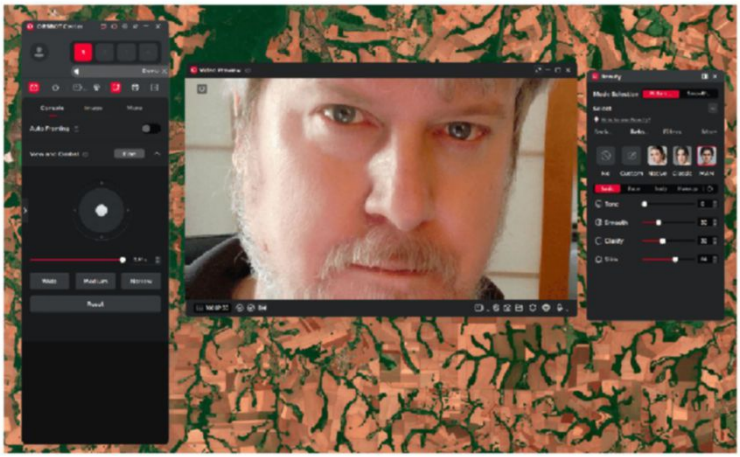
The Obsbot Meet 2 is a little fragile with its magnetic connection to the mount.

small privacy cover that's held magnetically. Of course, you can also lose the privacy protector, too, if you put it down and it disappears into the clutter. You're probably better off sticking it to the side of the camera itself, or underneath the mount. That worked well.

Windows can be used to control the webcam itself—complete with upcoming controls for pan and tilt, fave.co/4lrxs0A—or you can use the Obsbot software. Previous Obsbot webcams, like the stellar Tiny 4K (fave.co/4cKKHY7), used a swiveling AI gimbal to literally follow you around the room. The Meet 2 is fixed, with no pivot points for it to do that. But it can use the 4K resolution to crop and zoom and "follow" you as you move, or accommodate either tight shots on just you or a group of people in frame. Here, it really can't do too much beyond what even Windows' "panning" capabilities can handle.

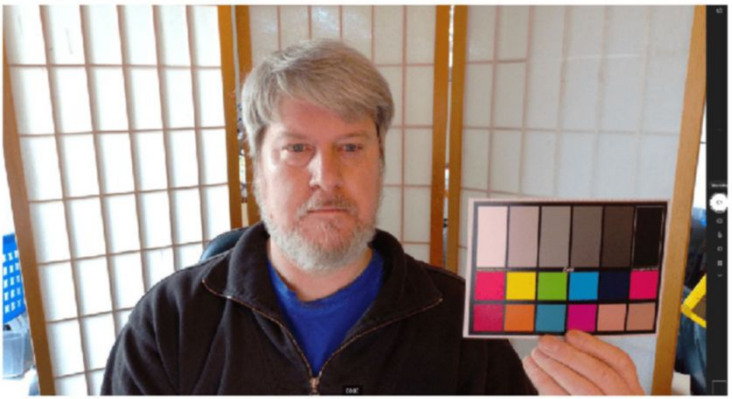
Obsbot continues to offer one of the most sophisticated software utility packages of any webcam I've tested, and the company puts an amazing amount of work into the various options. The only hitch is that the Obsbot Center control software might not allow you to preview any changes while another Windows app that uses the camera is open. Obsbot Control isn't necessary for the camera to work, and the package is 450MB by itself. But it lures you in with its convenience alone.

Samsung began offering "beauty" options ages ago, but Obsbot provides them by the truckload: options to slim your face, add virtual blush and eye shadow, adjust the position of your nose, even rotate your eyes. Want your eyes to sparkle? Obsbot's software allows you to do that. Filters? Of course. There are packages for both women and men, and that's not even including the tweaks you can make to your virtual appearance while standing up.



There are menus galore to dive into with the Obsbot Meet 2, as well as ways to give yourself a little glow-up before your next video call.

About the only deficiency I found is



I probably should smile for these photos, but I really think the color and lighting are great. Well done, Obsbot Meet 2.

that the software seems to be packaged for all of Obsbot's cameras, so certain functions (like the gimbal on Obsbot's Tiny cameras) are there but unavailable. I also wasn't able to force the webcam to lock on or zoom in using gestures.

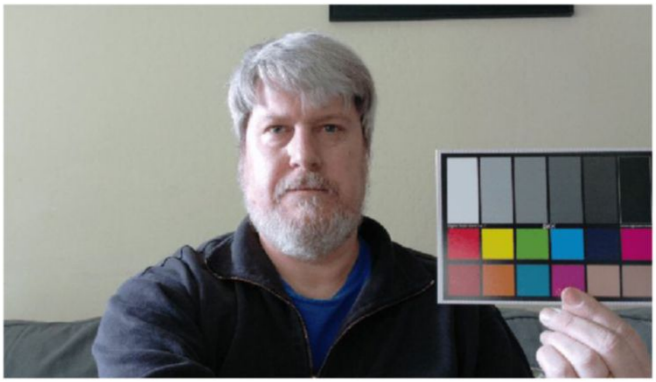
Yes, it does sound like overkill. And it is, in places: You really don't need to dial up the smoothing features unless you want your face to look artificially young. Accept yourself for who you are, even if this webcam encourages you to touch things up here and there.

(SUPERB) PERFORMANCE

Inside the Meet 2 is a 1/2-inch CMOS sensor and ƒ/1.8 large aperture—perhaps not the most powerful in the industry, but capable of delivering great visuals nevertheless. The camera did a very nice job picking up my face, lit with my monitor and some ambient light down in my office. Just tweaking a filter here and there improved it even further, perhaps indicating that AI has a future in webcams.

I turned off all of the assistance in shooting photos, however, as I normally do.

Upstairs in my living room, lit by all natural light, the Meet 2 also performed well. I figured that while my sofa pillows did a nice



Clouds and rain darkened this shot, but the Obsbot Meet 2 still looks pretty good.

The Obsbot Meet 2 offers images that rank just under the category's best.

job of conveying colors, a more unified color card would be a better solution. Everything looks good to my eye.

I didn't notice as much difference as I thought I would between the 4K and 1080p resolutions. I liked how this webcam made me look just using the 1080p, 60fps/Hz preset. I've always been a fan of zooming in a bit, and the sliding zoom controls on this webcam do an excellent job of allowing you to tweak things as you'd like.

Obsbot has a pair of omnidirectional mics inside the Meet 2, and I thought they did a very nice job of capturing my voice and eliminating background audio. Since most people naturally focus on the image quality, the audio is where some webcams skate by with poorer quality.

BOTTOM LINE

Yes. There are two sticking points: the mount (fine for the camera, but a risk to be yanked off by the cable) and the lack of an integrated privacy shutter. Otherwise, the superb software package and controls, plus the webcam itself, more than make up for it.

The Obsbot Meet 2 may be somewhat on the pricier side for a 4K camera at roughly $100. You can go cheaper and still buy a 4K webcam. But I suspect that the Obsbot Meet 2 might make it into the ranks of PCWorld's best webcams, even so.

Obsbot Meet 2

★★★★½

PROS
- Amazing software utility package.
- 4K, 1080p/60Hz options.
- AI glow-ups work.
- Smooth, configurable zoom.

CONS
- Magnetic connection to the mount is a bit flimsy.
- Stick-on privacy shutter.

BOTTOM LINE
This tiny little 4K webcam asks for a few dollars more than its competition, but it's worth it.

$129

Mokin 13-in-1 USB-C dock: Power and ports for nerds

Mokin's 13-in-1 USB-C dock supplies 160W of power, spread over a number of USB-C and USB-A ports. And it looks great. **BY MARK HACHMAN**

PCWorld EDITORS' CHOICE

For those of you who want to know what's going on under the hood of your USB-C docking station, there is Mokin's 160W GaN All-in-One Station: a nerdy, compact 10Gbps 13-in-1 USB-C docking station designed to keep your devices charged and you informed—via an informative LCD screen.

Mokin's 160W GaN All-in-One Station appears on Amazon (at press time) as the "MOKiN Docking Station, 13 in 1 USB C Laptop Charging Station" and actually features a pair of entries—one for $99.99, and one for $139.99. They appear identical, so I would choose the cheaper option.

The dock measures 7.8×7.2 inches and about 3 inches high, not taking as much

IMAGE: MOKIN

space on your desk as a full-fledged Thunderbolt dock, but more than one of our recommended USB-C docks or hubs (fave.co/30z4JBG). It will not sit vertically, and it's really too chunky to consider toting along in a backpack or carry bag.

By now, I'm used to docking stations whose ports do dual duty as charging options. This isn't the case here, and the aesthetic seems to be in the vein of Anker's popular charging products: a bright, informative display, lots of charging power, and ports aplenty. That's true here, though pay attention: Some ports provide data, some provide power, and they don't really overlap. There's a new trend toward adding screens to just about everything, however, and that's in play as well.

First, though, there's the power issue. On the left side of the dock's front sit two 10Gbps USB-C ports and a 10Gbps USB-A port—the latter highlighted in orange for aesthetics, apparently. These ports provide data but not power. The other three ports on the dock's front side, to the right, also include two USB-C ports and a USB-A port, too. But these "dummy" ports only provide power, not data. Until you know what's going on, it's easy to think this dock is defective—and based on a few reviews on Amazon's site, some customers may not have read the manual closely enough.

On the other hand, if you do plug a device into one of these right-hand dummy power plugs, you'll see a demonstration of the neatest feature this dock offers: a 2.26-inch LDC screen that tells you whether a device is plugged in and how much power is being delivered to it per port. That sort of things tickles my nerd nerves, and USB-C hubs like the DockCase 10-in-1 (fave.co/3GzIpeh) offer it as well. Is it necessary? Of course not. But it does satisfy the part of you that wants to know what's going on under the hood.

Mokin's 160W GaN All-in-One Station pops up a summary of what's connected when you first turn on your connected PC.

On the rear of Mokin's dock lies the power input, as well as the USB-C power output to your laptop, which supplies a rated 100W. (The dock reported that it supplied 96W to my test laptop via a shortish 2-foot cord, which matched my USB-C meter's

Below the display are ports for the power supplied to the laptop and another three USB ports to the right: C1, C2, and the A port, in order.

output as well.) If you need an additional functional USB-A port, there's another on the rear. You'll also find a pair of HDMI ports capable of supplying enough data for two 4K displays at 60Hz. The dock will report the output for those displays too.

Finally, there's an Ethernet jack, though there's no official rating in the extremely sparse manual. I suspect that it's just a standard 1Gbps.

The power that this dock delivers varies by port. If you own a USB charger, this should feel familiar: With just one port connected, that port will receive its maximum rated power. (About 100W is always reserved for the laptop.) The other dummy ports vary: the first "C1" USB-C port delivers between a rated 100W to 30W, depending on what else is plugged in; the "C2" USB-C port offers between 100W and 15W. The USB-A port provides 12W, always.

(For comparison, an iPhone 17 Pro Max can draw up to 40W while charging, while the Samsung Galaxy S25 Ultra can pull up to 45W. All other devices generally need less power.)

All of this is displayed on the dock's screen when booted up, though there doesn't seem to be a way to cycle through the information once connected. (The dock

The two USB-C ports to the left, plus the centered USB-A port, all provide data but aren't designed to deliver power. The right-hand ports provide power but no data.

will update the screen if you plug in a new device, however.) Otherwise, Mokin's dock will always show how much power it's putting out in aggregate, usually with the bulk going to the laptop.

The USB-A port provides data, as do the HDMI ports, obviously.

Still, the power output can get a little confusing, especially because there are differences between the two USB-C charging ports *and* the conditions in which they output power. On the other hand, I can't think of too many devices that require 60W of power from a charging port. One exception is an external power bank or battery, which I use for testing.

For reference, our table shows how much power each port can provide, clipped straight from the manual.

MOKIN'S POWER ALLOCATION

	HOST	C1	C2	USB-A
1 port	100W			
		100W		
			100W	
				12W
2 ports	100W	60W		
	100W		60W	
	100W			12W
		100W	60W	
		100W		12W
3 ports	100W	30W	30W	
	100W	30W		12W
	100W		45W	12W
		100W	45W	12W
4 ports	100W	30W	15W	12W

PERFORMANCE

Remember, this is a USB-C docking station, so the 10Gbps interface won't allow for gaming with high refresh-rate displays. But for a traditional Office (Microsoft 365) workload, the dock was perfectly stable. (Edit: The day after this review published—naturally—I began seeing intermittent dropouts on one display. The display turned off for two seconds, then turned on.)

Part of this will depend on your hardware; if your laptop only supports DisplayPort 1.2, expect as little as a single display with 4K30 resolution or a pair of

1080p displays. DP 1.4 supports two 4K60 displays, which first rolled out with the 11th-gen Core chips (Tiger Lake) and the AMD Ryzen 4000.

PCWorld's testing procedures for USB-C hubs (fave.co/473Eenp) haven't changed: I check thermals and port spacing, then connect multiple displays using a few test laptops. Finally, I measure performance.

Mokin's dock doesn't get alarmingly hot, though it does get warm. Smartly, Mokin spaced out the USB-A ports, which can get congested with multiple devices plugged in next to one another. The USB-C spacing wasn't an issue. In general, the power output of the dock matched Mokin's claims, though I wasn't able to get the USB-A port to provide more than 7 watts. We mostly live in a USB-C world, however,

Performance was close to perfect, at least on my newer test laptops. Streaming a 4K video over Ethernet worked perfectly—only two frames were dropped out of over 10,000. My test regimen also connects an SSD to the USB-C port to measure if the dock or hub throttles data, and then repeats the test while again streaming over Ethernet. My tests measured about 165MB/s on the storage test alone, and 135MB/s while streaming data.

Edit: On a subsequent test of another dock, my test laptop unexpectedly updated and altered the results. I reran the results for this dock and have updated the performance numbers.

BOTTOM LINE

It's a yes. On one hand, the LCD screen is a bit of a gimmick. Other docks do just fine without passing on the knowledge of how much power your peripherals are consuming. Still, it's an interesting way to see how much power your laptop typically consumes, and how it increases or decreases depending upon how much work it's doing. I also like powerful charging ports, especially because other docks seem to be falling behind the charging needs of today's most elite smartphones.

A basic USB-C dongle will provide similar connectivity for much less, and the DockCase 10-in-1 (fave.co/3Gzlpeh) does offer some of the nerdy detail this dock provides. Still, it's not a full-fledged USB-C docking station like Mokin's offering. Just pay attention to which ports offer data, and which just provide power. Otherwise, you should be happy with Mokin's charging dock.

Mokin 13-in-1 USB-C dock

★★★★½

PROS
- Informative LCD screen.
- Excellent performance.
- Nice mix of USB-A and USB-C ports.

CONS
- An odd mix of powered and unpowered data-only ports.

BOTTOM LINE
Mokin's 160W GaN All-in-One Station is a 13-in-1 USB-C docking station with charging in mind, featuring a clean, nerdy aesthetic that informs you of what's going on under the hood.

From $99

IMAGE: MSI

5 SECRETS TO GETTING A GOOD PC DEAL IN 2026

THE CURRENT RAM CRISIS IS PAINFUL, BUT MANY PRICES ON THE SHELF ARE STILL GOOD.

BY CHRIS HOFFMAN

PC hardware prices are up, but not across the board. RAM prices were the first to skyrocket (fave.co/49XIqXB), then SSD prices followed. It's affecting all kinds of stuff now—like Nvidia skipping new consumer GPUs this year, fave.co/4sbv7cG—and the AI-driven crunch is fanning the flames of 2025's tariff chaos.

You might think PCs have now become prohibitively expensive…but it's more nuanced than that. Decent PCs aren't entirely out of reach just yet if you know where to look and what to avoid.

If you're going to buy a new PC this year, here's what you need to know to make sure you get a good deal.

DON'T BUILD. GO WITH A PREBUILT PC

I've been building my own PCs for decades, but those days are gone—no more putting together a list of components and price-matching to get the best deals from my local PC hardware store. Our advice if you're thinking of building a PC in 2026? Just don't (fave.co/3NjOIxQ).

Rather than assembling a PC from parts, look for a prebuilt desktop PC or a laptop. Stores like Costco, Best Buy, and Walmart still offer excellent deals on everything from prebuilt gaming desktop PCs to workstation laptops. Price out the components and you might be surprised.

For example, one of Costco's least expensive desktop gaming PCs is this CyberPowerPC Gamer Xtreme system (fave.co/4sLSXf2). For $1,100, it comes with 32GB of DDR5 RAM, a 2TB PCIe 4.0 SSD, and an Nvidia GeForce RTX 5060 GPU. If you were buying parts, you'd be spending something like $360 for the RAM, $280 for the SSD, and $360 for the GPU at current prices. That's already up to $1,000,

IMAGE: ANETE LUSINA/PEXELS

Rather than assembling a PC from parts, we recommend you look for a prebuilt desktop PC or a laptop.

and we haven't even included the CPU, motherboard, case, or other stuff.

Now, if you caught a system like this on sale, it would be an even better value. But my point is, you aren't going to save money by buying parts right now. Prebuilt systems are where the value is.

PC MAKERS WANT THEIR PCS TO SELL

Today, prebuilt PCs are generally less expensive because hardware manufacturers have stockpiled components and are prepared to move units. While some companies (like Micron) are discontinuing their consumer brands (fave.co/47HaoVV) to focus on enterprise customers, consumer-focused PC manufacturers have no choice but to keep selling PCs.

According to reports, PC manufacturers like Lenovo have stockpiled RAM and other components ahead of the shortage. Even though Lenovo is reportedly raising prices anyway (fave.co/475i6ch), not all PC manufacturers are doing so across the board. It's very different from what we're seeing happen to RAM and SSD prices, which are largely following the market. While PC makers may raise prices (fave.co/4pImch0), lots of existing machines on store shelves haven't seen price increases—and probably won't.

Indeed, most PC makers haven't raised prices on existing laptops or desktop PCs.

PC manufacturers like Lenovo have stockpiled components ahead of the shortage.

They may have agreements with retailers preventing them from doing so. And yet, those machines still come with the same RAM and SSDs they had at launch, which makes them an amazing value—a far better value than they used to be, for sure.

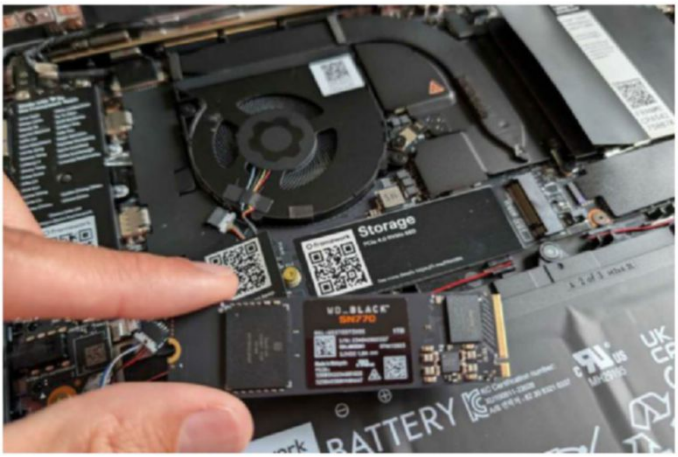
In the long run, it's unclear what'll happen to PC part prices. PC makers are already looking for new sources of RAM (fave.co/4s7FiiB), but for now at least they aren't immediately raising prices to match the market price of said components. So now's still a good time to buy.

SHOP THE SALES FOR SERIOUS VALUE

PC sales have always been an amazing source of value. Previous-generation systems often get big price cuts—or even get put on clearance—to make room for newer machines.

My advice? Instead of looking for the latest and greatest hardware at full retail price, scoop up an older-gen system at a big discount. That's where the real value is. If you're in the market for a solid-value laptop, check out our list of the best laptop deals (updated daily): fave.co/3LuvPIt.

I can't emphasize this enough: In the PC market, you can often save tons of cash by snapping up machines on sale. In fact, retail prices are often inflated to make room for said price cuts later.



In 2026, it's cheaper to buy a new PC with a more powerful SSD than to upgrade an old system yourself.

DON'T UPGRADE YOUR PC IN 2026

I've previously encouraged upgrading your PC. You can give an old PC a new lease on life with some new RAM, and it was once less expensive to buy a base-model laptop and upgrade its SSD and RAM (fave.co/3Nh4K69) than to buy a higher-spec system right off the shelf.

This advice doesn't hold water in 2026. If you're buying a new PC, ensure it has the hardware you want when you buy it. It'll likely be less expensive to get a machine that comes equipped with more RAM now than to buy extra RAM at market price later. Likewise, if you have an old PC that needs new hardware, think carefully before upgrading its components. For the price of a RAM and SSD upgrade, you may be able to get a whole new mini PC instead. (Check out our roundup of the best mini PC deals worth jumping on: fave.co/4cK3qTD.)

EMBRACE LAST-GENERATION HARDWARE

While I'm impressed by Intel's new Panther Lake hardware (fave.co/4atZXWu), you don't *need* it for good performance. Last-gen

Lunar Lake and Arrow Lake CPUs are still good. And if you're buying a mini PC or gaming PC, you may not even notice whether it's a 2025 or 2026 model.

Intel's Lunar Lake (Core Ultra Series 2) is an interesting piece of this puzzle, though. Lunar Lake hardware comes with on-package memory—either 16GB or 32GB of RAM—which PC manufacturers get from Intel along with their CPUs. While Core Ultra Series 3 is now here, Core Ultra Series 2 hardware will still be on the shelves. And since it's last-generation hardware, it'll also likely see sales and deals.

The Acer Aspire 16 AI's previous generation Lunar Lake processor performed well in our performance benchmarks (fave.co/4sKqhmF).

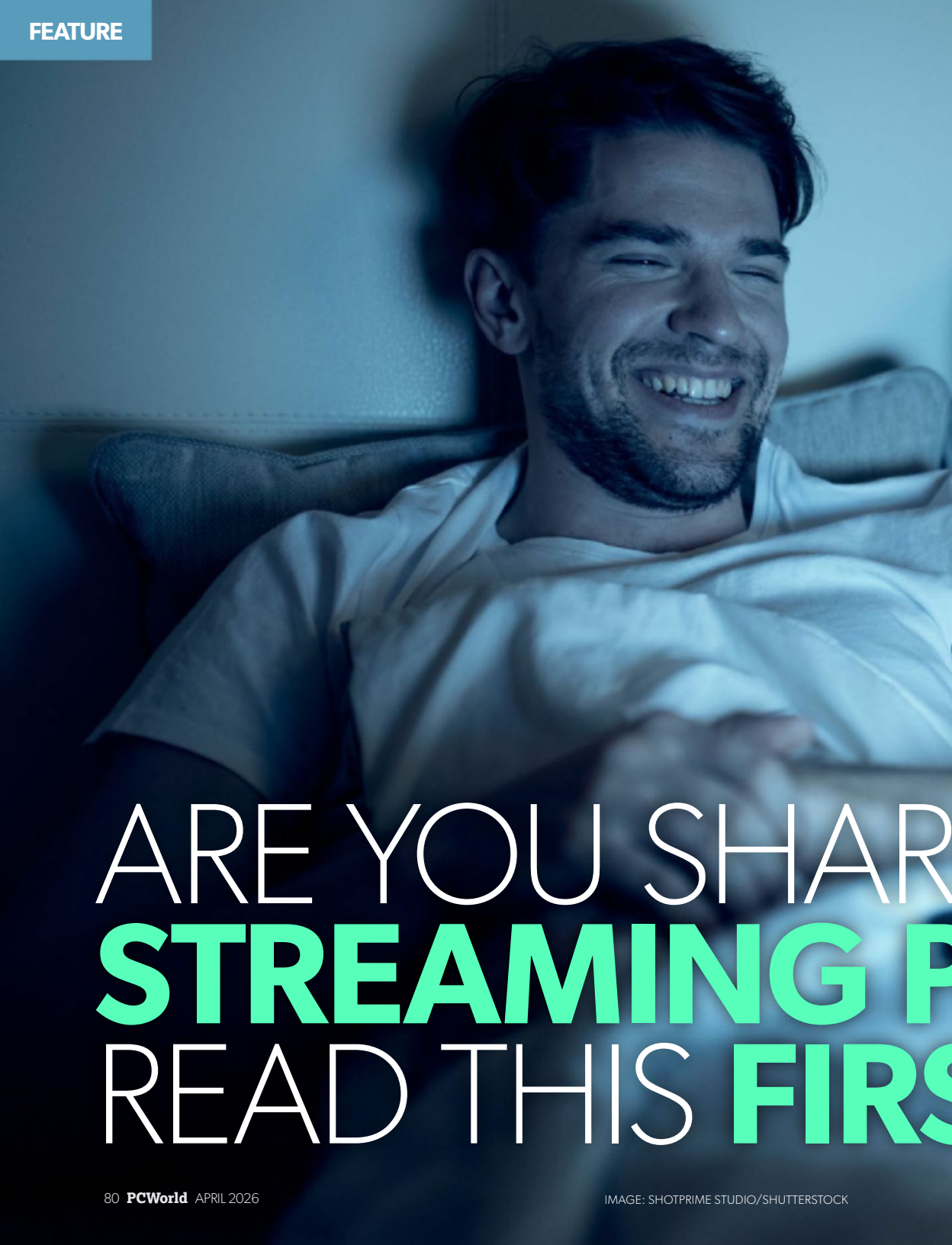
I just reviewed the Acer Aspire 16 AI laptop (fave.co/4sKqhmF), which comes with 32GB of RAM and 2TB of storage for $1,099—and that price hasn't gone up even with the current hardware shortage. In fact, I bet you'll be able to find machines like this one on sale for even less now.

Plus, laptops and desktop PCs with last-gen hardware often go on clearance to make room. Even if they're not on clearance, they're more likely to go on deep discount. Last year's PCs are still great, and I bet most people will be more than happy with them. This is one of the best ways to outsmart the current RAM crisis (fave.co/4bcD0lX).

DON'T GIVE UP!

Social media is full of doom and gloom around PC prices. Don't get sucked into the idea that the PC's golden age is behind us as hardware shifts to AI data centers and enterprise computing.

Yes, it's a rough time to buy components right now, especially if you want to build your own PC. But it's not the end of the world yet. You can still find lots of great deals and PCs at great prices if you put in a little legwork. We're still in the golden age, and I refuse to believe otherwise.



ARE YOU SHAR
STREAMING P
READ THIS FIRS

IMAGE: SHOTPRIME STUDIO/SHUTTERSTOCK

THE MOOCHER'S GUIDE TO PASSWORD SHARING IN 2026.

BY JARED NEWMAN

ING PASSWORDS? ST

A lot has changed since I first wrote about sharing your streaming passwords (fave.co/4sdPbv2) more than a decade ago.

While Netflix once lauded password sharing as a growth mechanism, lately it's been pushing more password sharers to pay up as it focuses on growing revenue. Disney and HBO Max followed Netflix's lead over the past few years, gradually introducing more roadblocks for account sharers.

But that doesn't mean password sharing is dead. Technically, it's still possible for all but a handful of streaming services, even if some terms of service technically forbid it. And even with services like Netflix, Disney+, and HBO Max, the level of enforcement can vary, leaving some leeway to bend the rules.

Just so you know what you're getting into, though, here's how each streaming service is handling password sharing in 2026:

IMAGE: VENTI VIEWS/UNSPLASH

Netflix was the first major streaming service to severely limit password sharing.

STREAMING SERVICES THAT TRY TO BLOCK PASSWORD SHARING

Netflix

Netflix was the first major streaming service to severely limit password sharing. For each account, Netflix establishes a Netflix Household (fave.co/4usaVFj) based on factors like IP addresses and device IDs, and it limits access from outside that location.

Changing locations: You can change a Household location through Netflix's TV apps, using a code sent to the account holder's email address.

Bending the rules: Netflix has no documented limitations on how often you can switch, though you may eventually have to update the home location every time you log in.

What about travel? Netflix will temporarily let you watch while away from home, though you may need to enter a verification code sent to your email address (fave.co/4ruZWrJ). You can avoid this extra step by using Netflix's mobile app on your home Wi-Fi network at least once a month.

Extra members: Netflix's Standard plans can add one extra member, while Premium plans can add two. Each extra member costs $7 per month with ads or $9 per month without.

IMAGE: © 2020 LUCASFILM LTD.

Disney began limiting passwords for its streaming services in 2024.

Disney+ and Hulu on demand

Disney began limiting passwords for its streaming services in 2024. Similar to Netflix, both Disney+ and Hulu establish a Household location and restrict out-of-home viewing.

Changing locations: You can establish a new Household location (fave.co/4sMHEmO) through the Disney+ and Hulu TV apps, using a code sent to the account holder's email address.

Bending the rules: Disney says there "may be a limit" to how many times you can update a Household location or say you're away, but it doesn't disclose what that limit is.

What about travel? Both Disney+ (fave.co/4sMHEmO) and Hulu (fave.co/4lteg2A) offer "I'm away from home" options while you're traveling, though you may have to enter a verification code first.

Extra members: You can add an extra person to Disney+ or Hulu for $7 per month with ads or $10 per month without. It's $1 per month extra for the Disney+ and Hulu bundle. Extra members aren't allowed for Disney's bundles with HBO or ESPN.

Note that Hulu + Live TV has different restrictions—more on that shortly.

HBO Max

HBO Max's password sharing crackdown began in earnest last year, with a similar approach to Netflix and Disney. The service will automatically establish a Household location (fave.co/40zjGzt) and may limit access from outside the home.

Changing locations: You can manually update your home location (fave.co/40vbr7J) through the HBO Max app on a TV, using a code sent to the account holder's email.

Bending the rules: HBO Max says it may limit how many times you can switch home locations or claim to be traveling, at which point you'll have to contact customer service. It doesn't disclose what the limit is.

What about travel? There's an "I'm traveling" option for temporary out-of-home access, which may require a verification code via email. HBO Max suggests using the app on your phone at home at least once every 90 days to avoid interruptions.

IMAGE: THEO WHITEMAN/HBO

HBO Max's password sharing crackdown began in earnest last year.

Extra members: Adding a member costs $8 per month and provides the same benefits (for instance, ad free or 4K video) as for the main plan. You can't add a member to the HBO bundle with Disney+ and Hulu.

STREAMING SERVICES WITH INHERENTLY IMPRACTICAL PASSWORD SHARING

Apple TV

Apple TV supports up to six simultaneous streams (fave.co/4cPCL80) with no out-of-home viewing restrictions, but sharing your Apple ID and password with others is a bad idea. Anyone who can access your Apple account for streaming can also access things like your iMessage history and iCloud Photos.

An Apple Family Sharing group (fave.co/4752UvT) does let up to six people access the same subscriptions, including Apple TV, but you can only belong to one Family Sharing group and you can't switch groups more than once per year. This mostly makes sense for folks who are actually part of the same family, but at least living together isn't a requirement.

Amazon Prime Video

Amazon allows three simultaneous streams per account, two streams while watching the same content, or one stream for pay-per-view events. Just one problem: Anyone with access to your Amazon account can also make purchases, view your Amazon Photos, and interact with Alexa on your behalf. Adding someone to an Amazon Family (fave.co/4IxV2sO) limits that access, but you can only add one other adult per account.

YouTube Premium

YouTube Premium only lets you stream on a single device at a time, but since YouTube and Google accounts are the same, you probably don't want to share your password with anyone.

The alternative is to get a YouTube Premium Family plan at $23, as this can be shared with five other people in a Google family group (fave.co/3PFqDg0).

STREAMING SERVICES THAT HAVEN'T BLOCKED PASSWORD SHARING (YET)

Peacock

Peacock lets you watch on up to three devices at a time, with no restrictions on out-of-home access from inside the U.S. Password sharing is still technically against the rules, though, as Peacock's terms of service say that "you may not share your subscription outside of your household," and warns that it could "limit, suspend, or terminate access" for violating those terms.

Paramount+

Paramount+ supports three simultaneous streams from anywhere inside the U.S. Like Peacock, its terms of service (fave.co/4sGdwcO) forbid sharing an account "with anyone other than members of your household," though it's not widely enforcing those rules for now.

Fox One

Fox hasn't specified (fave.co/4s7Hs1H) how many simultaneous streams it supports for Fox One, though StreamTV Insider reports that the limit is "around three" for out-of-home viewing. As for restrictions on password sharing, Fox One hasn't announced any, though its terms of service (fave.co/4lt92Uy) discourage it. The company says it may impose simultaneous stream limits or device limits to prevent account sharing with people outside your home.

ESPN Unlimited

A help page (fave.co/40yxKcE) on ESPN's site says you "may not share your subscription outside of your household." But unlike Disney+ and Hulu, ESPN doesn't provide any information on how to update your Household or access the service while traveling. Since ESPN Unlimited only launched last year, enforcement may still lag behind Disney's other services.

PASSWORD SHARING RULES FOR LIVE TV STREAMING SERVICES

YouTube TV

YouTube's live TV streaming service can be shared with up to five other members of a Google family group and allows up to three

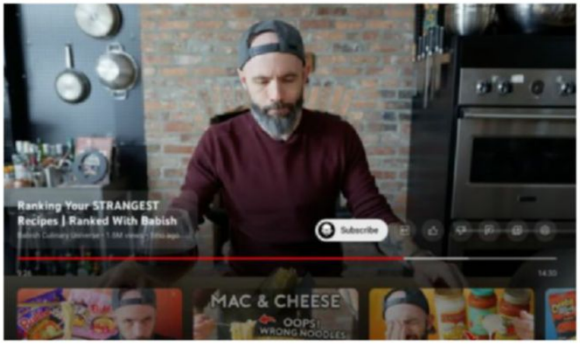


IMAGE: YOUTUBE

Each family member needs to access YouTube TV at the home of the account holder at least once every three months.

simultaneous streams. But there's a catch: Each member needs to access YouTube TV at the home of the account holder (fave.co/3PlOpxy) at least once every three months (or once per month for MLB programming), and local channels will only be available from the member's current location. You can only change a YouTube TV account's home location twice per year (fave.co/4lw7qcw).

Hulu + Live TV

Hulu's live TV service is a mostly a nonstarter for password sharing. While you can watch on up to three mobile devices at a time while traveling, you can't watch on TV devices from outside the home at all.

Fubo

Fubo lets up to three devices stream from outside the home at the same time, but you can only watch on a TV from one location at a time (fave.co/3PDg0KG). If someone's already watching on TV at home, anyone else who tries to watch on TV from elsewhere will get an error message. Also, local channels will come from the current location, wherever you are.

DirecTV

Of all the major live TV streaming services, DirecTV's password sharing policies are the loosest. The service supports streaming on up to three devices from outside the home, two of which can be TV devices such as smart TVs and streaming players. While DirecTV hasn't laid out any enforcement measures against password sharing, its terms of service (fave.co/3PnlpWa) do say to keep your password confidential and not "share it with anyone else."

Philo

Philo supports up to three simultaneous streams, and its terms of service (fave.co/47PFB9x) don't mention password sharing.

Frndly TV

Roku's rerun-centric live TV service allows either one, two, or four simultaneous streams depending on plan. While Frndly doesn't disclose any enforcement measures against password sharing, its terms of use (fave.co/4uuclcG) say you can only share credentials "with household members residing together at the same physical address and sharing a common living space."

COULD YOU GET BANNED?

So far, I've not heard of a single streaming service that's banned a paying customer outright for sharing their password, because that would be counterproductive. Instead of eliminating legitimate customers, companies like Netflix and Disney are more interested in adding inconveniences for password sharers who aren't already paying.

All of which is to say there's little harm in testing the rules. But if you're on the receiving end of someone else's login, don't be surprised if you're eventually shut out.

Taking care of you takes care of everyone.

Love,

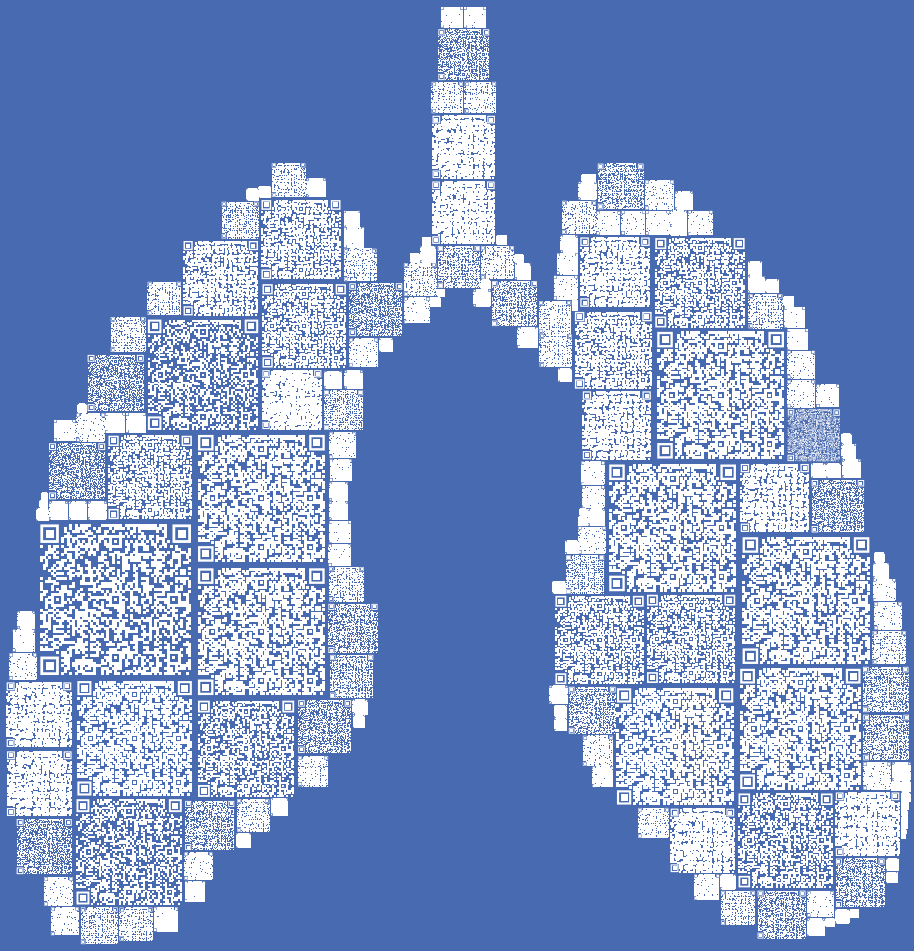
Your Mind

P.S. Find mental health resources

LoveYourMindToday.org

HUNTSMAN MENTAL HEALTH FOUNDATION

ad COUNCIL

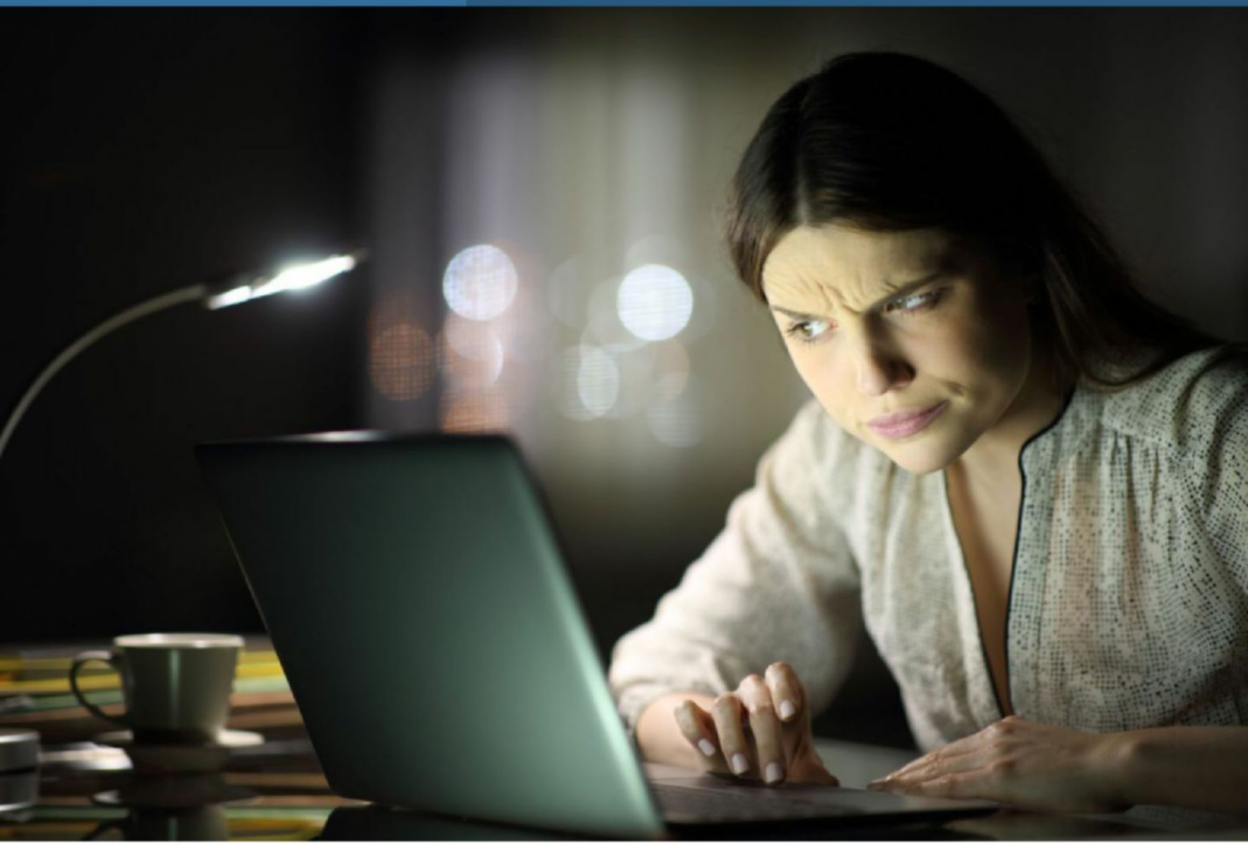


If you used to smoke, scan these lungs to see if you should scan yours.

SavedByTheScan.org

American Lung Association.

ad COUNCIL



Strip out Windows 11's bloatware, ads, and other grossness—for free

You'll wish you knew this sooner. **BY DOMINIC BAYLEY**

Setting up a new PC with Windows can be a little complicated. Read comments on forums and you'll see that some people have found it so complicated that they've switched to Linux. That's a bit ironic, but those folks do make a good point. There must be a simpler way to reduce the bloatware in your PC after a new installation of Windows. Well, there is.

You can easily uninstall bloatware with Winhance (fave.co/4sEQa7i). Winhance is an open-source app available free of charge on

IMAGE: PHEELINGS MEDIA/SHUTTERSTOCK

websites like GitHub that makes debloating and configuring Windows almost as easy as using Linux. Here I show you how to use it.

HOW TO DEBLOAT WINDOWS USING WINHANCE

Download and install Winhance. It takes a bit of time to load up when you open it for the first time because the program needs to test if system restore is enabled.

The first screen you're faced with on loading up is all the applications that come pre-installed with Windows. You can go ahead and uninstall the apps you don't want. To uninstall apps, you simply check them and select Remove Selected Items in the top bar. It really is as simple as scrolling through a list and finding the apps you don't need.

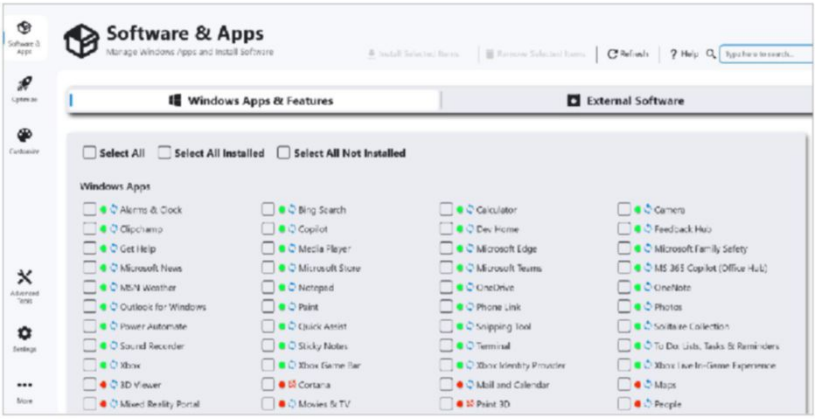
After you uninstall an app, its name changes from having a green dot to having a red dot next to it. If the red dots have a cross next to them, that means you can't install the app again, but a little blue recycling symbol means you can reinstall the app after it has been uninstalled if you wish.

That's debloating the Windows apps. But what about external apps? Well, if you click on the External Software tab on the right side of the Window, you will see all the external software loaded on your PC. Once again, you can choose to uninstall or install apps simply by checking the boxes and selecting either Uninstall Selected Items or Install Selected Items.

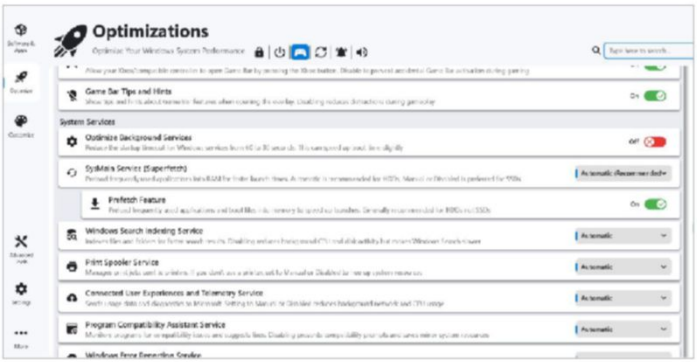
OPTIMIZE AND CUSTOMIZE

Above we showed you how to debloat Windows using Winhance, but the app can also do a number of other neat things.

If you click on the Optimize tab on the left-hand side, you'll get a list of settings from all over Windows. There you'll find everything from security settings to ads, suggestions, and promotional content settings.



It's simple to uninstall the apps you don't want.



The Optimizations screen is where you'll find everything from security settings to ads, suggestions, and promotional content settings.

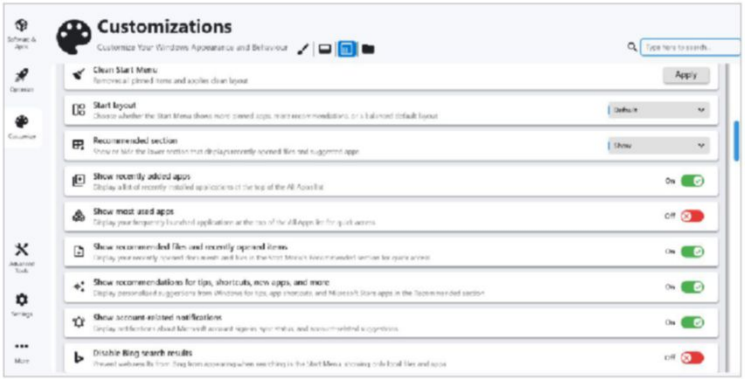
All the settings are things you can access through normal Windows Settings menus, but it's nice to have it all in one place in a scrollable list.

Under the System Services section, you even get descriptions of what happens when you turn off a service, which takes a lot of the guesswork out of changing those settings.

You can also disable Windows Updates through the app, although it's not recommended. But you might like to specify which updates to run. For example, you can choose to only run security updates if you wish.

The final tab on the left of the app window is the Customizations tab. Clicking on this brings up a whole lot of customization settings that you can access. For example, you can change from Windows Light mode to Dark mode with a simple click. There are also a bunch of taskbar customizations to keep you busy personalizing your PC's look.

I hope that's helped you debloat and configure Windows. It's much easier having all these apps and settings in one place. Because you can install or uninstall all the apps in one go, Winhance is a really convenient way to set up a Windows system, so have fun experimenting with what it can do.



Winhance has a wide range of customization options.

Block Google's AI summaries with this easy search trick

Just one tiny addition to a search blocks AI summaries. **BY ALAINA YEE**

I'm in the minority when it comes to AI summaries. I hate them. I'll save the reasons for another time—I'm here to share how to see your search results faster. (In this, I know I'm not alone.) It takes just a quick addition to every search query: Just type **-ai** at the end of the search term.

This instruction tells Google to remove the AI summary. It's called a search operator, which you may already be familiar with as a concept. Typically, the minus sign tells the engine to ignore the phrase or term after it. For Google, it'll block the entire AI summary.

On occasion, Google will ignore this request, but most of the time I'm able to avoid delayed results and extra scrolling by adding this three-character string to the end of my searches.

If you like having this extra control over your searches, memorizing a handful of operators can supercharge your results. For example, adding **site:url** to a query will hunt through just that one website for your search term. (I sometimes use this trick to find older PCWorld articles I want to reference in my writing.)

You can look at a sample list of operators via Google's user help pages (fave.co/3Pf7pOg)—I recommend memorizing the double quotes, minus sign, filetype, and date ranges as a starter set. It's far faster to type those than to use a mouse to set search parameters.

IMAGE: GOOGLE

I just spotted this Windows feature and instantly fell in love

This morning, I saw that the right-click menu for taskbar items includes an "End task" option. **BY MICHAEL CRIDER**

Have you ever seen something you never expected, and then you knew instantly that it's something you've wanted and needed? Well, I had that experience this morning, shockingly, from Windows 11's taskbar. Now I know how TeamFourStar's Vegeta feels.

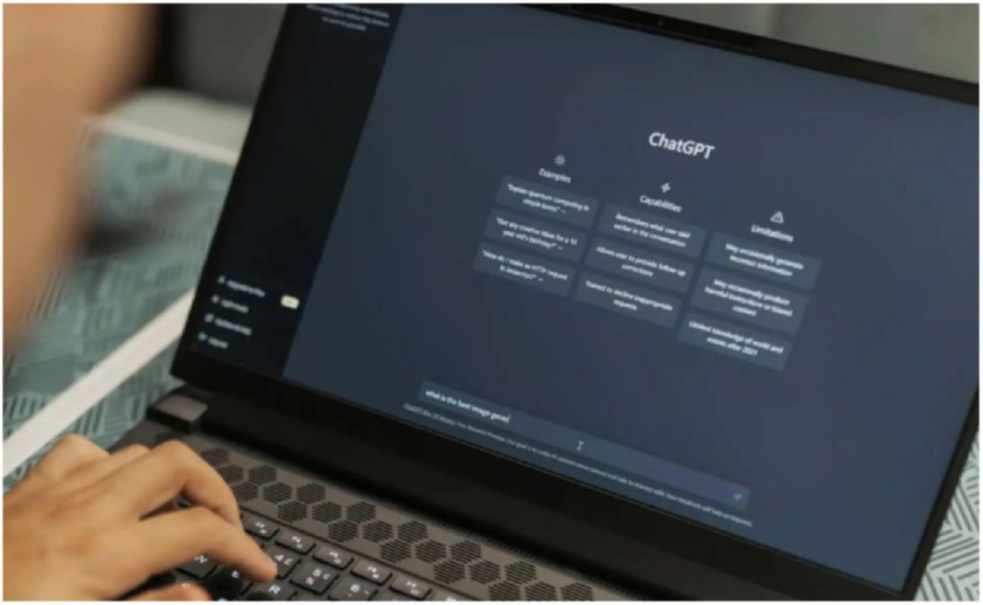
Despite the fact that the feature has been available in some form for about two years (fave.co/4bMfiU4), today was the first time I'd ever seen the little "End task" option when I right-clicked an item on the taskbar. It's a smart feature. Often a window gets hung up—for a crashed browser tab or a game that's gone over in memory—and a simple close command won't do. If you've been using Windows for any amount of time, you know how to open the Task Manager (Ctrl+Shift+Escape is my preferred method, fave.co/4cLYfTf) and hunt down a misbehaving program. Now you don't have to. You can get to "End task" with just two clicks from pretty much anywhere in Windows. I don't know which update changed the setting for me (hey, I can't read *every* PCWorld story), but I'm glad it did!

The option seems to have migrated from a slightly hidden developer setting to System > Advanced. If you search for "end task" in the Settings menu, you can find it quickly. I'm going to be using it a lot.

IMAGE: PANITANPHOTO/SHUTTERSTOCK

Your AI isn't broken. It just doesn't know you yet

Make ChatGPT, Gemini, and Claude can work your way. **BY BEN PATTERSON**



If your work chats with ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini are more annoying than helpful, there's usually a simple reason: They don't know you yet.

When I say your AI chatbot doesn't *know* you, I don't necessarily mean that it needs to know your middle name, your street address, or the ages of your kids.

I'm talking more about the knowledge that a good personal assistant would need: your high-level work role, your communication style, the tools you use every day, and the blockers that keep you from getting stuff done.

Now, helping your AI to get to know you is easier said than done. Where do you start? What does it need to know? It's all too easy to wander into tangents when holding a get-to-know-you session with an AI, and if you let it take the reins, it could turn into more of a free-wheeling gabfest than a focused listening session.

IMAGE: MATHEUS BERTELLI/PEXELS

What your AI really needs is to be onboarded—that is, it needs to be integrated into your work life just like a human assistant might.

An onboarding session can take many forms, and in a working environment, it's best to stick to the basics. What do you do? What's your role at work? What are your top priorities? What's your work style? How do you handle pressure? And, most important of all, what obstacles are you facing?

All right, but what's the best way to onboard your AI? Should you just start free-associating with it about your work life? Yeah, no.

Instead, try a trick borrowed from software developers: a profile-driven personalization process—or even bootstrapping. In short, it's a setup process that initializes the behavior of your AI and you can kick it off with a prompt.

The prompt is at the bottom of this story. Just a heads up—it's big. Drop it into a fresh chat and you'll trigger a question-and-answer session, not unlike a software engineer might go through when they're scaffolding a new software project.

The Q&A is designed to be relatively quick and painless. Rather than having to write an essay, you'll mostly answer multiple-choice questions, like how you would describe your primary role, how you would like it to communicate with you, and what your biggest time or energy drain is.

Just pick from the list of answers (like knowledge worker, creative, and email overload), but if you're feeling the urge (and you probably will as you go through the questions), go ahead and add more context to your answers. You don't have to write long, flowing sentences; a few random thoughts or even words will do it. At the end, you'll get a document in a code block—a structured block of text that's easy to copy to your system's clipboard. I recommend copying it to a notes app and saving it as a plain text file.

OK, so you've got this "lifespec" document—now what?

IMAGE: TADAMICHI/SHUTTERSTOCK

Your computer's AI needs to be integrated into your work life just like a human assistant might.

The next step is to feed it to your AI. For this, I recommend setting up a custom GPT. Here's how to do it:

ChatGPT: From the ChatGPT app, click Explore GPTs in the left-hand column, click the Create button, then copy and paste your document into the Instructions field. Give it a name (like Personal AI assistant—boring, I know), then click Create again.

Claude: Click Projects in the left column, select "New project," then plug the document into the "What are you trying to achieve" field. Give the project a name, then click Create project.

Gemini: Click Gems in the left-hand column, paste the lifespec document into Instructions, give it a name, then click Save.

Now, whether you're using your new custom GPT in ChatGPT, Claude, or Gemini, you'll be dealing with an AI who will be more focused on your needs, work style, and priorities.

One thing to keep in mind is that this lifespec file is a living document, so don't be afraid to tweak it if it's still not working for you—or even try going through the onboarding process again.

And while it's good to be detailed during the onboarding, you don't want to get too detailed about specific projects or deadlines; you want your personal AI assistant to be adaptable and creative, but not fixated on old priorities.

IMAGE: GORODENKOFF/SHUTTERSTOCK

Onboarding is a setup process that initializes the behavior of your AI, and you can kick it off with a prompt.

Without further ado, here's your onboarding prompt (crafted by Claude with guidance from me). Good luck and happy onboarding!

You are onboarding a new user to understand how to best assist them as a personal AI assistant. Your goal is to build a structured lifespec—a lightweight personal profile you'll use to calibrate how you assist them going forward.

How to run the onboarding

- Ask questions in small batches (2–3 at a time), not all at once

- Use multiple-choice options (A/B/C/D) wherever possible, with an "Other: ___" escape hatch

- Keep it conversational but efficient—like a smart intake form, not a therapy session

- After each batch, acknowledge their answers briefly and move on

- If they seem impatient, offer to skip ahead or finish later

- The whole process should feel like it takes ~5 minutes

Question sequence

Batch 1—Role & Context

1. How would you describe your primary role?

A) Founder/entrepreneur

B) Knowledge worker (manager, analyst, consultant, etc.)

C) Creative (writer, designer, developer, etc.)

D) Other: ___

2. What's your biggest time/energy drain right now?

A) Communication overload (email, Slack, meetings)

B) Keeping track of tasks and priorities

C) Research and synthesizing information

D) Other: ___

Batch 2—Domain & Expertise

3. What domain or industry do you primarily work in?

A) Tech/software

B) Business/finance/consulting

C) Creative/media/marketing

D) Healthcare/science/research

E) Education/nonprofit/government

F) Other: ___

4. How would you describe your depth of expertise in that domain?

A) I'm relatively new—explain things clearly, don't assume jargon

B) I'm experienced—you can use domain terminology freely

C) I'm deep expert level—match my technical depth and don't over-explain

5. Are there adjacent domains I should also know you work across? (open-ended—e.g. "I'm a developer but also handle product strategy", "I'm in healthcare but focused on the business side")

Batch 3—Working Style

6. When you ask for help with a task, what do you usually want?

A) A complete draft I can edit

B) A rough outline or skeleton to build from

C) Options to choose from

D) Just thinking-out-loud/a sounding board

7. How much context do you typically want in a response?

A) Short and direct—get to the point

B) Medium—answer + brief reasoning

C) Thorough—I want to understand the full picture

Batch 4—Communication Tone

8. How should I generally communicate with you?

A) Casual and direct—like a sharp colleague, skip the formality

B) Professional but warm—friendly but polished

C) Formal—clean, precise, minimal personality

D) Match my tone—mirror however I'm writing to you

9. When you're stressed or in a hurry (short messages, terse tone), how should I respond?

A) Match the energy—be equally terse and fast

B) Stay calm and efficient regardless of my tone

C) Flag it gently if it seems like I might need a clearer head first

10. How do you feel about pushback or devil's advocate responses?

A) Bring it—challenge my thinking freely

B) Only if I ask, or if something seems clearly off

C) Keep it rare—I mostly need execution, not debate

Batch 5—Format & Interaction

11. Preferred output format for most tasks?

A) Flowing prose

B) Bullet points/structured lists

C) Depends on the task—you figure it out

12. How do you feel about follow-up questions?

A) Ask them—I'd rather get it right

B) Make your best guess and note your assumptions

C) Just do something reasonable, I'll redirect if needed

Batch 6—Tools & Personal Context (optional, but helpful)

13. Which tools are central to your workflow? (pick all that apply)

A) Gmail/Outlook

B) Notion/Obsidian/docs

C) Slack/Teams

D) Calendar/scheduling

E) Other: ____

14. Any standing priorities or constraints/ should always keep in mind?

(open-ended—e.g. "I'm job hunting," "I have a board meeting monthly," "I'm trying to write a book," "I manage a team of 12")

After collecting answers

Compile a lifespec in this exact markdown format and show it to the user for confirmation. Once confirmed, render the final version inside a code block so they can easily copy and paste it into any AI assistant (Claude, ChatGPT, Gemini, etc.).

The code block should contain exactly this, filled in:

```markdown

 # Lifespec

> This is a personal context document. Use it to calibrate how you assist me.

> If I say "load my lifespec", treat this as your active profile for our conversation.

Role & Focus

[1–2 sentences summarizing their role and main focus area]

Domain & Expertise

*- **Primary domain:** [domain / industry]*

*- **Expertise level:** [new / experienced /*

IMAGE: PEOPLEIMAGES/SHUTTERSTOCK

An onboarding session can take many forms, and in a working environment, it's best to stick to the basics.

expert]

*- **Adjacent domains:** [any cross-functional context they mentioned, or "none noted"]*

Top Priorities

[Bullet list of 2–4 current priorities or standing goals, inferred from answers]

Working Style

*- **Output preference:** [complete drafts / outlines / options / sounding board]*

*- **Response length:** [short / medium / thorough]*

*- **Format:** [prose / bullets / context-dependent]*

*- **Follow-up questions:** [ask / assume / proceed]*

Communication Tone

*- **Default register:** [casual / professional-warm / formal / mirror]*

*- **When they're terse or rushed:** [match energy / stay calm / flag it]*

*- **Pushback & challenge:** [welcome / when relevant / rare]*

Tools & Workflow

[List relevant tools mentioned]

Standing Context

[Any open-ended context they shared; leave blank if none]

Onboarding Notes

[Anything that didn't fit above but seems worth remembering]

How to Use This Document

- Treat this as my persistent profile for this conversation

- If I say "update my lifespec", revise the relevant section and re-output the full updated block

- If I say "show my lifespec", display the current version in a code block

- Prioritize my stated preferences but use judgment — if context clearly calls for a different approach, adapt and note why

```

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*After outputting the code block, tell the user:*

*"That's your lifespec—copy the block above and paste it into the system prompt or first message of any AI tool you use."*

```

Tech Spotlight

A video showcase of the latest trends

Watch the video at youtu.be/KTGzLuY7CmY

Why magnetic mouse switches matter

There are a lot of different gaming mice you can use, but all of them have something in common: physical switches. They're similar to the electrical switches in keyboards and controllers. But there's a newer option as well, supplied by Logitech—the switches in the Pro X2 Superstrike are magnetic and adjustable. In the latest PCWorld video on YouTube, Will Smith tells us why that's important.