

A close-up photograph of a silver tablet lying on a wooden desk. The tablet is positioned diagonally, with its top-left corner towards the upper left. It rests on an open notebook with cream-colored pages. A black pen with a silver clip is tucked under the tablet, lying on the notebook's pages. The tablet's screen is dark, showing a blurred green light reflection. The background is a warm-toned wooden surface.

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tablet buying guide

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by Joshua Sherman

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1. Introduction

So what makes an iPad worth all the hype? What's Android? Windows 8? From Samsung to Surface, the list of tablet terms goes on and on. There are many manufacturers making tablets of all shapes and sizes running a great variety of software, and how do you know which one is right for you? This guide will put in simple language the facts you need to know about all the kinds of tablets out there, and based on some key facts which one you should ultimately purchase.



Tablets are in a sort of sweet spot between a laptop and a smartphone. Tablets themselves are a sort of successor to something called the Ultra-Mobile PC, back before the iPad, Kindle fire, or any of the buzzwords for tablets you may have heard today. The idea of a UMPC was to bring Windows to a tiny (but still bulky and quite heavy) device in the palm of your hand. These clunkers were slow and useless to most people, but once smartphones went wild in 2007 the UMPC helped set the stage for the tablets to arrive a few years later.

Today, tablets serve as these sort of smartphone-laptop hybrids, offering often similar software you'd find on a smartphone (though some few DO run a fully-fledged edition of Windows) with the screen real estate akin to your laptop. While there are a multitude of screen sizes and operating systems you can find on today's tablets, this guide hopes to break down the many flavors of devices that are tablets and help you decide which one meets your needs, interests, and of course your budget.

1.1 What makes it a tablet?

This guide is about tablets, not PCs, not smartphones, and not laptops. However, as it turns out some tablets seem a lot like laptops: they run Windows, they have a keyboard, and they even cost as much as laptops! However, let's distinguish a few things that will set the guidelines for what you should consider to be a tablet.

1. A tablet is all about the screen. Tablets may only have a screen 7 inches in size or a screen up

to 12 inches in size, but whatever the size it's designed all around this centerpiece of the device. While it may include a keyboard and other features, a tablet is meant to be touched, hands-on, and absolutely finger-friendly.

2. A tablet is portable, and meant to be wireless. At its core a tablet is meant to be about going wherever you go. This has to do with more than just having wireless access via WiFi or cellular connectivity. A tablet is meant to be rarely docked or stuck in a certain spot, and is also meant to be extremely light-weight and friendly for travel, meaning you should be able to use it wherever you may be.
3. A tablet has excellent battery life. With portability comes the need for essential battery performance. In the case of the tablet battery life should be no less than 8 hours and up to 24 hours or more in some cases.

With these three main points in mind, the rest is up to the manufacturer and what they see as the goals for their tablet.



1.2. What should you know?

A few more things worth noting about this guide is that it will involve some technical mumbo-jumbo to help explain how the gears work with tablets. A special category of tablets known as convertibles are also in this guide, which are actually tablets that run Windows 8 – making them seem a lot like miniature laptops than tablets. Still, these devices are tablets first and PCs second – similar products, like the MacBook Air, are not included in this guide because they are not tablets. Basic e-readers have also been excluded, as their primary purpose is reading books (though they may appear to have multiple functions).

This guide hopes to help explain as simply as possible a lot of complicated facts about tablets, but may not include certain technical specifications that don't affect the average consumer's ability to make a decision. Lastly, all of the tablets in this guide are considered worth buying – there are no losers listed – but bear in mind new models are coming out every few months.

Now, with all the formalities out of the way, let's break down specifically how a tablet ticks, and just who's involved in the creation of these amazing gadgets.

2. Who & What – Manufacturers & Developers

As awesome as tablets are for everyone from toddlers to moms and stockbrokers, it still remains that they are extremely complicated innovations of technology, and like any great tool or gadget it's important that you understand how it works to maximize the potential you can gain from it.

Figuring out how tablets tick is the first step to understanding not only how they work, but who builds them, and helping you understand which tablet is built with your needs in mind.



2.1 What's in a tablet?

At its core, a tablet starts like any other computing device and involves two main aspects: **the hardware and the software**. The hardware serves as the “guts” of the device and is all the physical parts that makes the tablet work. The software, meanwhile, is the programming the device has that turns all the many pieces of hardware into a functioning tablet with a working operating system.

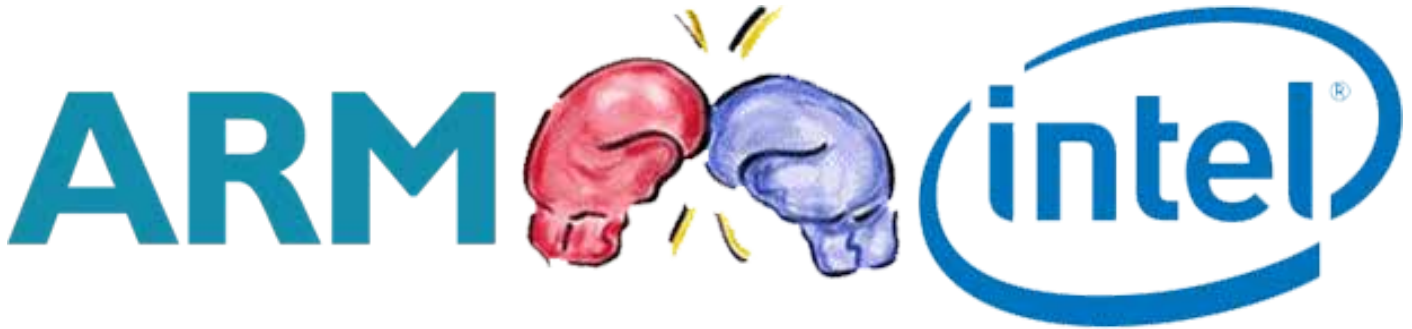
The hardware at the core of a tablet includes a number of important pieces of hardware. At the end of this chapter a list of all the typical pieces of hardware found in tablets will be listed, along with how they make a tablet work and what their importance is.

The software at the core of every tablet is the **Operating System, or OS**. The OS is the basic software that turns the tablet on, boots to some sort of user interface, and allows you to interact. There are a number of OSes which we'll talk about later, but it's important to note that the operating system is just the basic starting point for a tablet. While it includes plenty of functionality as it is, an OS is useless without the many applications that run within it. **Applications, or apps**, are self-contained programs that run within an operating system and allow you to message friends on Facebook, play games, or handle important spreadsheets for work. All of these many apps differ in so many ways depending on which OS you use.

Together, the OS and apps within a tablet make up the user interface, which is basically what you use to interact with the device.

2.2 What's computer architecture and why does it matter?

A technical term important to mention with tablets is something called a computer architecture. Just as an architectural style defines the capabilities and limits in design for your home, a computer architecture defines the capabilities and limits in design of your tablet. In case you don't get the first analogy, it's just important to point out that there are two very distinct architectures that determine what kind of applications and developers you will have access to with your device. These two architectures are ARM and Intel, named for the companies that make them.



The important thing about computer architectures is that they will define how easy it is for certain developers to build apps between different OSes. While iOS apps can't run on Android as it is, it's not too difficult for someone who made an iOS app to bring it to Android, since they both use the same ARM computer architecture. However, Windows 8, which uses the Intel architecture, is not only incompatible with apps built for iOS or Android, but is very difficult to port applications to. Porting refers to when developers rebuild their applications of one OS for another OS. For example, Angry Birds was originally on iOS, but has been since ported to Android, and many other OSes.

Computer architecture will, for the most part, have no effect on your decision to buy a tablet. The most important part of it is to note that Windows 8 and Windows RT – though they look alike – have two different computer architectures. We'll talk more about this later. For now, let's break down the facts on who builds the hardware and software behind tablets.

2.3 What's the difference between developers and manufacturers?

When it comes to putting together a tablet, there are both the hardware and software aspects at work, notably the computing interface and user interface. The two main categories of companies that put together tablets are the developers and manufacturers. Differentiating these two categories and the companies that fall between them helps to explain how tablets are put together from the ground up, as well as who's responsible when there's a problem with your device.

Developers are notably the companies that build the operating system and general aspects of a tablet's user interface. Meanwhile, manufacturers are in charge of putting all the computer parts together and breathing life into the tablet with the help of the developer's OS. In the case of tablets, some companies are both developers and manufacturers, while others are exclusively manufacturers. At this time there are no companies developing OSes that they themselves do not use to manufacture tablets with.

Microsoft, Apple, and Google are both developers and manufacturers. These companies build not only their respective Operating Systems for tablets, but also manufacture tablets themselves. While companies like Apple develop their OS exclusively for their products, Microsoft and Google actively release their software for manufacturers to use in building their devices. In the case of Microsoft, a licensing fee is charged. For Google, the OS is free for manufacturers to use.

Meanwhile, companies like **HP, ASUS, Amazon, and Samsung** are manufacturers. These companies focus on delivering high-quality tablets to customers and let the developers build the OSes they then use to make tablets out of.

It's worth noting though that most manufacturers contribute software to their tablet to enhance the experience for their customers. While some contribute custom software more than others (such as Amazon,) the fact remains that they rely on other companies to develop the Operating Systems they then modify for their tablets. This is why they are considered developers despite the major contributions they make their tablet's OS.

2.4 What are the OSes tablets use?

Of the many tablets out there, only a handful are featured in this guide. Of those chosen, a total of four different OSes are used by these devices: Apple's iOS, Google's Android, Microsoft's Windows 8 and Microsoft's Windows RT. Aside from Windows 8, all of these OSes use the ARM computer architecture – Windows 8 uses Intel.

Knowing how your tablet works at the software level is especially important, hence why we're including not only the facts on how these OSes work, but a little history behind them too. These short profiles tell you all about the OS, how it works, and how good their app stores are. We also note how good the app stores are with tablets, as Apple and Google share their app store with not only tablets, but also smartphones, occasionally leading to compatibility issues.

Apple's iOS

Released: June 2007

Latest Version: iOS 6.1.4

History: If there's anyone who deserves credit for starting the smartphone (and then tablet) craze, it's Steve Jobs, who unveiled iOS to a packed crowd in January of 2007. While smartphones have been around for years before the iPhone, the iOS platform changed the game forever for smartphones and tablets alike. Featuring an all-in-one interface never seen before, a powerful app store, and a beautiful interface, it really was a game changer. Since the iPhone's unveiling, the iPad was also launched in 2010, springing the tablet world to life and changing the face of gadgets forever.



Features: Apple's iOS centers itself on something called the Springboard, but the name is not important – you just have to know that the screen for every iPad through iOS is a simple row of folders and applications that you can easily open and move around. On the bottom of every screen is a set of permanent apps that stay with you as you swipe through the various pages of applications you have. The interface is responsive, quick, and easy to use. Recent updates have offered great features for the iOS platform, such as a notification bar, Siri voice assistant, and interactive Game Center. In short, iOS is clean, responsive, and beautiful.

Notes: The latest version of iOS (6.0) uses a new type of Maps application that many are saying is terrible. You can install Google Maps, if you want, or use alternative applications such as Waze for your navigation needs. The new version of iOS, version 7.0, is currently in beta testing as of this writing and includes dramatic changes to the iOS experience and functionality compared to previous versions including 6.1.4 – please note this guide does not address or consider such functionality.

Apps: For years, Apple's App Store has been the largest and most popular place to download applications from thousands of developers all over the world. While Android is in a close second place with about 675,000 apps, Apple still remains king, with a hefty 700,000 applications on their market and over 30 billion apps downloaded ever since the store opened in 2008. While there are more paid apps on Apple's App Store compared to Google's Play Store, it's safe to say Apple has the most diverse and impressive selection of applications available. In the last three years the number of iPad-friendly (or even exclusive) apps has grown dramatically, and the iPhone viewing mode also helps meet in the middle for those pesky apps that lack iPad compatibility

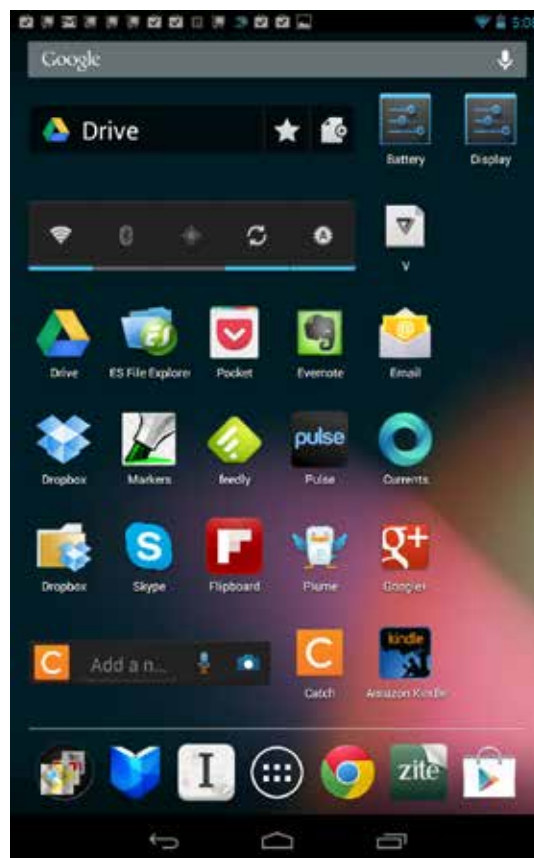
Tablet App Compatibility: Excellent

Google's Android

Released: September 2008

Latest Version: 4.2.2 (Known as Jelly Bean)

History: Google, along with a bunch of other big manufacturers, formed the Open Handset Alliance (OHA) in 2007, right around when the iPhone was storming the market. While Android, as a concept, has been on the table with Google since 2005, it wasn't until 2008 that Google unveiled their first Android version and device, the G1. Ever since then Google has been building momentum against Apple, mainly because they offer the software for free and the open source usage by their partners means the manufacturer has a lot of control over the operating system. Because of this, Google has been picking up speed in recent years, and looks to eclipse Apple soon. The first Android tablet came soon after the iPad in 2010. Since then dozens of Android tablets have made their way to the market, including Google's own Nexus 7 and Nexus 10 tablets.



Features: Android's Operating System centers on a "Home Screen" and "Application Drawer". When the smartphone is unlocked you are first presented the Home Screen, which can be customized completely to the user's desire, ranging from a variety of wallpapers to special applications known as "Widgets", that can show customized content and animations to the user. The Home Screen can be swiped from left to right, giving you plenty of space for widgets and other shortcuts. The Application Drawer displays applications alphabetically, and can be viewed from the Home Screen with the touch of a button. While you can slide to unlock or use a PIN on an iPhone, Android supports unlocking with a PIN, a picture pattern, or even facial recognition. Android's features are certainly much more robust, cus-

tomizable, and unique, but they also are much more complicated, and have a steeper learning curve than iOS by far. Despite this, the OS is certainly a more advanced option for those looking for complex options and solutions.

Note: Because Android is open source software, each manufacturer utilizes Android with their own flavor and preferences, causing something known as fragmentation. Basically, manufacturers use different versions of the operating system on their various devices. While most of the largest manufacturers try to offer the latest possible version of the operating system, some choose not to update, meaning some new phones are not running the latest version of Android and the manufacturer does not have plans to update them. All the latest Android tablets, however, run Android 4.0 or later.

Apps: Google's Play Store has grown exponentially since its unveiling in 2008, and is just behind Apple's once tremendous lead on the application market at 675,000 apps, compared to Apple's 700,000. Google also features many more free and ad-based apps on the Play Store, as they were the first to offer developers the option for supported advertising through AdMob, meaning more free apps for you! It's fair to say that while Google's Play Store is a little behind Apple's App Store in both the number and quality of applications, it is certainly a worthy competitor.

Tablet App Compatibility: Good

Microsoft's Windows 8

Released: October 2012

Latest Version: Windows 8.1

History: Microsoft has been developing OSes for nearly forty years, but the company is merely a greenhorn when it comes to building mobile products like smartphones and tablets for the masses. Their latest attempt to win customers was the dual launch of both Windows 8 and Windows RT, two special editions of Windows meant for touchscreens and designed with a balance between the programs Windows is known for, and the new "Modern" interface akin to the stylish designs of iOS and Android. With only a few months under the belt, no one is yet sure of the fate of the latest Windows experiment by Microsoft.



Features: Windows 8 is a cross between the Windows of decades past (the desktop experience) with the new Modern UI Microsoft is trying to convince customers to try. While a nightmare with a mouse, Modern UI is vivid and easy to use on a touchscreen, and is just begging to be used by tablets. The crisp tile design is akin to widgets on Android and offers plenty of functionality along with the traditional Windows experience you probably know very well already. While

there are some weird design issues where these two experiences cross, the Windows 8 UI is still very versatile and easy to use with your tablet.

Apps: Thankfully, Windows 8 balances both the app store experience akin to Google and Apple, but also the Windows software compatibility you know and love. This leaves mixed results for touch and tablet compatibility for apps like Photoshop and non-Windows Store apps, but still the versatility and functionality you expect from Windows. Take your pick from both and mix functionality and style between the two. This also gives access to the decades-worth of Windows applications that exist, so long as your tablet can handle the hardware demands. If you want tablet-friendly apps, stick to the Windows Store. If you can't find it there, it's probably already a regular old Windows App too.

Tablet App Compatibility: Neither bad nor good

Microsoft's Windows RT

Released: October 2012

Latest Version: Windows RT 8.1



Features: Windows RT is actually an identical build of Windows 8, except built for the ARM computer architecture already known for OSes like iOS and Android. As a result, none of the apps you'd normally find available for Windows are actually compatible. But, most of the Windows Store apps are compatible. Windows RT also features the desktop environment (though limited) and thankfully a free copy of Microsoft Office, adding oodles of functionality at no extra cost. If you know Windows and the Modern UI, then you know Windows RT.

Apps: The Windows RT OS requires all applications (except those acquired through jailbreaking or other unapproved means) be made available on the new Windows Store, which bodes only about 90,000 or so apps – some of which are incompatible with Windows RT and only work with Windows 8. Nonetheless, this store has been around for months – not years – and still has the potential to grow out of its infancy. That being said, it leaves a lot to be imagined.

Tablet App Compatibility: All RT apps are tablet-compatible

2.5 Who are the top manufacturers of tablets?

With Operating Systems out of the way, along with their developers, it's time to break down the manufacturers who

help put all the pieces together to turn a bunch of hardware and software into a tablet. Each of these profiles includes a history of the manufacturer as well as what OSes their tablets run on. Please note that these manufacturers build devices not included in this guide, and that the OSes listed that these manufacturers build for is based on the market as a whole, and not just the devices in this guide.

Microsoft

History: Microsoft used to never manufacture its devices, preferring to license its software than to sell devices. This changed with the arrival of Windows 8, and Microsoft is now selling Surface tablets directly.

Builds tablets running Windows 8.1 and Windows RT 8.1



Google

History: While not a major manufacturer for smartphones, Google has been trying to lead the way with its tablets, offering one of the first 7-inch and 10-inch tablets to power Android and prove their OS works for both smartphones and tablets. As a result Google is pretty close to the bleeding edge for Android functionality in tablet design.

Builds tablets running Android.



Samsung

History: Samsung is the largest company in South Korea, and has been building both smartphones and tablets as long as everyone else have. These days they compete with other manufacturers in both smartphones and tablets, but have especially competed with Apple in not only stores but in court over patents and copyrights alike.

Builds tablets running Android, Windows 8.1, and Windows RT.



ASUS

History: ASUS is a Taiwanese company that has been building computer parts, monitors for years, and also has been in the smartphone & tablet market for some time. While few tablets are directly sold under the ASUS name, the company has had a hand in the manufacturing of tablets with many companies like Google.

ASUS builds tablets running Android, Windows 8.1, and Windows RT.



HP

History: Based out of the USA, HP, short for Hewlett-Packard, has been building computers and servers for decades.

While, for a time, their iPAQ line of PDAs were world-renowned, HP has only recently returned to the tablet market. After a failure with the HP Touchpad running WebOS, HP has returned with Android and Windows tablets to try and win customers over once more.

Builds tablets running Android and Windows 8.1



Amazon

History: Amazon sort of sneaks by as a manufacturer mostly because it is an online retailer first, and manufacturer second. The centerpiece to Amazon's millions of eBooks and audiobooks is the Kindle, and while the popular device started as an e-reader, the latest Kindles have really transformed into tablets. These Amazon-built tablets show the company paving a way for it to continue competing against traditional retailers and to win over customers in more ways than ever.

Amazon builds tablets running Android



Apple

History: Last, but certainly not least, is Apple. Since 2007, Apple has been building their iPhone, changing little, but offering newer and faster hardware to provide a seamless, high-performance experience for their users. The iPad, based on the iOS design of the iPhone, was launched in 2010 and has since had four renditions, each more powerful than the last. The latest member of the iOS family is the iPad Mini, offering not only a smaller form factor but a lower price point than its big brother.

Builds tablets running iOS.



2.6 Important terminology

As promised, there are a bunch of general terms you should know when figuring out the stats among tablets. Here is a list of these components in no particular order, along with a description of why they're important.

Processors: Processors are the "engine" of a tablet, and determine how fast a tablet can compute, run applications, etc. With computers, the speed of a processor is extremely important, however the processing speed of tablets can vary greatly and still be fairly effective. Some of the latest tablets feature quad-core processors, while most still use only dual or single core processors. A quad core processor can run four simultaneous processes, and run extremely fast, but also consume an immense amount of battery life. Despite this, the type of processor depends on your needs as a tablet user, and we'll compare processor specifications later. Processors measure their speed in megahertz and gigahertz (MHZ and GHZ respectively), where a gigahertz is 1000 megahertz.

RAM: Random Access Memory, or RAM, is essentially a set amount of memory for usage by applications currently running. Most tablets have at least 1 gigabyte of RAM within them, though some have more.

ROM: Read only Memory, or ROM, is actually a shared term for both the storage memory that an operating system is

installed on, as well as the internal storage for the device. Read Only Memory is measured in gigabytes (GB) with tablets, and typically a ROM can range anywhere from 1 or 2 gigabytes of storage to 64 or even 128 gigabytes, depending on the device.

Graphics: Tablets also include an often overlooked feature: a Graphics Processing Unit (GPU). While a GPU is an essential part of a tablet, unlike a computer it is not a major feature that affects performance as greatly as RAM or processing power. As a result, the GPU is often not a major deciding factor in choosing a tablet. The exception are tablets that run Windows 8, where GPU performance is very important.

Screen Size: The most immediately obvious feature of a tablet is its screen size, as this affects how easy it is to handle a tablet. Screens range greatly in size from tablet to tablet, and are measured based on the diagonal length of the screen. Screens can also vary in the type of display used, such as an LCD, AMOLED, or Retina Display. An AMOLED display has greater contrast and resolution than an LCD display, while a Retina display has a greater resolution than both LCD and AMOLED displays. What matters most is not resolution or contrast, but rather how pleasing a viewing experience your tablet offers you, especially if you plan to use it all day.

WiFi: WiFi is perhaps one of the most common and well-known features of a tablet's connectivity, as using your data plan for everything quickly becomes expensive. It's why most tablets can also connect to your home Internet connection, using WiFi. These days, most tablets utilize one of two different WiFi standards: WiFi 802.11g and WiFi 802.11n. They differ only in speed, and you should only be considering the type of WiFi as important for your tablets if you plan to be using a WiFi N network. If you don't know what kind of WiFi network you have, don't worry, as you can use either WiFi G or WiFi N for your wireless needs, as almost every wireless network uses WiFi G, and those that use WiFi N are backwards compatible.



4G: 4th Generation Cellular Data, or 4G, is perhaps one of the fastest growing and publicized features of smartphones, but has yet to become a standard for all tablets. Some devices include 4G connectivity, though it is more of a luxury or business feature than expectation of tablets to have so far.

NFC: Some newer devices feature something called Near Field Communication, or NFC. This allows your tablet to communicate with other electronic devices nearby, and gives you a bunch of new nifty ways to interact. Some NFC applications allow you to use your tablet as a credit card at a store, share contact information with other devices, download music from posters, and more. It's harder to use with such a bigger device, but a feature nonetheless.

Cameras: The last major feature essential to tablets these days is the camera. While a camera is a rather straightforward component of a tablet, it's important to also understand the key metric of a camera is its resolution, which is measured in megapixels. Most tablets offer both front and rear cameras, allowing you to take high resolution photos as well as video chat with your friends.

Now, with all of this technical stuff out of the way, are you ready to check out some devices?

3. Compare & Contrast: Devices

Now that we understand each of the major operating systems, the hardware, and the companies that put all these products together, it's finally time to break down all of the best tablets and why one of these may be right for you.

This comparison is not calling any of these tablets the best ones outright, but rather which ones are best based on your lifestyle, needs, and other factors. Pricing is also not included as it fluctuates on a number of factors, though it has been noted if certain tablets sell less than other devices on the market. Keep in mind the goal is to highlight features and point out the kind of people who would best benefit from each of these devices.

The iPad

Summary: Make no mistake, the tablet that started the tablet craze back in 2010 is far from out of style. Apple is hard at work making the iPad, now in its fourth edition, remain one of the leaders in tablet design and functionality. With the highly coveted high-resolution retina display, even 1080p high definition screens can't hold a candle to the retina display. Add in to the 9.7-inch retina display a powerful dual-core processor and quad-core graphics so that you can enjoy not only top-of-the-line gaming but also impressive video editing on your iPad too. All together, the iPad 4 has a lot to offer consumers from all walks of life, and is a very well rounded device.

Features: 9.7-inch LED-backlit retina display, A6X dual-core processor with quad-core graphics, 5MP rear camera, 1.2MP front camera, Siri voice recognition, up to 64GB of storage, 4G LTE option, Wireless N, Apple App Store

Bottom Line: Though one of the priciest tablets on the market, the iPad stands out thanks to its high-resolution screen, amazing build quality, impressive app store, and trend-setting standard among tablet makers.



The iPad Mini

Summary: If you're interested in a more book-friendly (or cost-effective) size for your next iOS tablet, then Apple's iPad Mini is the answer for you. Though the device does have a significantly smaller 7.9-inch display and weaker A5 processor dual-core processor, the iPad Mini is formidable given its impressive design and great functionality. In short, the iPad Mini is essentially a cheaper iPad with a smaller size, meant for reading books and greater portability. There's

still the same design, functionality, and access to an App Store with millions of apps, though.

Features: 7.9-inch 1024x768 IPS display, A5 Dual-Core processor, 5MP rear camera, 1.2MP front camera, Siri Voice Recognition, Up to 64GB of storage, Wireless N, Apple App Store.

Bottom Line: Meant for reading your books and for those who want to spend less while getting a more portable device, the iPad Mini offers up great potential while being the most budget-friendly iPad out there.



The Nexus 7

Summary: If there's a Ying to the iPad Mini's Yang, it would be the Google Nexus 7, a relatively inexpensive 7-inch tablet meant to offer a same high-quality design, but Android-focused experience as opposed to iOS. In the case of the Nexus 7, reading is still the focus, thanks to the 7-inch HD IPS display and small form factor that's extremely easy to read books on. The tablet costs less compared to most tablets on the market too, meaning it's a very affordable option even though it tries to tackle Apple with the very best in terms of hardware. Between the cost-effective pricing, feature-rich functionality, and small form factor, the Nexus 7 is a great tablet for those who want something easy to store, that runs Android and has the Android experience they want, and is not going to break the bank.

Features: Android 4.2.2 Jelly Bean, 7-inch 1280x800 HD IPS display, NVIDIA Tegra 3 quad-core processor, up to 32GB of storage, 1GB of RAM, 1.2MP front facing camera, Google Play Store

Bottom Line: As a cheaper, but still feature-rich and well-designed tablet, the Nexus 7 is attractive thanks to its small size and low price, making it good for those who are on the go, like Android, or don't like the cost of the iPad Mini or other larger tablets.



The Surface RT

Summary: Microsoft's experiment, Windows 8 and Windows RT, a lot of press in early 2013 thanks to Microsoft's own Surface line of products. The Surface RT, unlike the Surface Pro, does not run a full edition of Windows, but instead has Windows RT, along with Office, the Windows Store, and a number of other features that Android or iOS can't hold a candle to. With true multi-tasking functionality, a 10.6-inch ClearType HD display, front and rear microphone, and up to 64GB of storage, the Surface RT is still a powerful tablet even if its version of Windows is severely limited. Most of all, the Surface RT's Vapor magnesium design is one of the most scratch resistant cases out there, and the optional keyboard accessory adds all the more to the experience. Did we mention it's also really inexpensive compared to most 10-inch tablets?

Features: 10.6-inch ClearType HD Display, NVIDIA Tegra 3 processor, front and rear 720p camera, Wireless N, up to 64GB of storage, Vapor Magnesium Casing, long battery life.

Bottom Line: The Surface RT is a great student or business oriented tablet for those who want a lot of functionality similar to Windows, a great battery life, and a low price compared to most 10-inch tablets.



The Surface Pro

Summary: While it looks almost like Surface RT, the Surface Pro is far from the Surface RT in terms of price or functionality. As robust as Windows RT is as it is, The Surface Pro with the full Windows 8 experience offers so much more into a tiny, high-speed machine. With a Core i5 processor and Intel HD 4000 graphics, the tablet may not have great battery life, but can handle any application or situation you throw at it including Office, Photoshop, and even desktop gaming. With the highest price among tablets though, the Surface Pro is a very expensive tablet, but a very powerful and well-designed one nonetheless

Features: Intel Core i5 Processor, up to 128GB of storage, Windows Store Vapor Magnesium case, 720p front and rear camera, USB 3.0, 4GB of RAM, 10.6-inch 1080p display, Windows Store.

Bottom Line: The Surface Pro, per its name, is really the tablet meant for professionals. With a full i5 Intel Core processor, compact form factor, beautiful Vapor Magnesium case, Wacom digitizer, and a rather high price, this tablet is meant for the business pros who want all the bells and whistles – who can live without a superb battery life.



The Envy X2

Summary: Falling around the price of an iPad, the Envy X2 is unique in that it is a tablet that is average or slightly above-average price, capable of running the full Windows 8 experience, and still has a great battery life despite all of this. The tablet, featuring an included keyboard with built-in battery is capable of getting a better battery life than an iPad while still being able to run PhotoShop. Still, the Envy X2 only has a weaker Intel processor compared to the Surface Pro, meaning while it is much cheaper and has a better battery life, it will often choke with the majority of Windows Applications that require serious computing power. Regardless, the Envy X2 is an excellent student tablet thanks to its great battery life, included keyboard, and capability to run not only your favorite Windows applications, but also Windows Store apps.

Features: 11.6-inch HD display, Intel Atom dual-core processor, 2GB of RAM, included keyboard, 64 GB of storage, Widows Store, Windows Programs

Bottom Line: The Envy X2 is bigger than most tablets, cost about the same as an iPad, but runs Windows and perfect for students or professionals who don't want to spend nearly twice as much on a Surface Pro or higher-end laptop, but want many of the same powerful, robust features that Windows has to offer.



The Kindle Fire HD 8.9

Summary: If there's a tablet that serves as the proverbial "odd one out," then Amazon's Kindle Fire HD 8.9 takes the cake. In terms of specifications, the Kindle Fire HD 8.9, under the surface, looks like any other Android tablet with a 8.9-inch 1080p display, 1Gb of RAM, and dual-core processor. However, what's special about the Kindle Fire HD 8.9 is all the extra software Amazon dumps into it, offering the ability to do a number of things including access to millions of books, audiobooks, and even instant videos. The Kindle Fire HD 8.9 is the best friend to the student, mom, or dad who loves to read, but also loves games and movies just as much. In short, the Kindle Fire HD 8.9 connects you to the amazing technology and resources Amazon has to offer, not to mention also gives you a great tablet as it is with the ability to read books, watch movies, play games, and more with a size somewhere between a Nexus 7 and iPad. It's a win-win on every front.

Features: Android 4.0 Ice Cream Sandwich, 8.9-inch 1920x1080 HD display, 1GB of RAM, dual-core TI processor, PowerVR GPU, Wireless N, Amazon App Store, Kindle Integration, Amazon Instant Video Compatibility

Bottom Line: Designed for those who want a little bit of everything in terms of media but absolutely need Amazon's e-book or video services, the Kindle Fire HD 8.9 offers a great screen size, high resolution, integration with all of Amazon's many digital resources, and plenty of great options for the whole family.



The Nexus 10

Summary: Much like the Nexus 7, the Nexus 10 is another Samsung-built (Google backed / designed) tablet that looks to try to outdo the iPad in more factors than just price. The Nexus 10 has a beautiful 10-inch display protected by Gorilla Glass with a resolution that even the retina display can't beat, and may be one of the highest resolution tablets out there, offering a very crisp image. Backing this display is a dual-core processor, quad-core GPU, and 2GB of RAM to maximize functionality. The Nexus 10 is also a moderately priced tablet too, meaning it's real good for those who want a lot of features without breaking the bank either. All in all, the Nexus 10 is another one of Google's flagship tablets that's great for those who think they want Android and are willing to buy the best Android has to offer in terms of hardware and screen size.

Features: Android 4.2.2 Jelly Bean, 10.055-inch 2560x1600 resolution display, Gorilla Glass, 5 megapixel rear camera, 1.9 megapixel front camera, up to 32GB of storage, 2GB of RAM, NFC technology, Google Play Store.

Bottom Line: The Nexus 10 is a well-rounded tablet that has a gorgeous display, powerful processor, excellent battery life, and modest price. This tablet is a jack-of-all-trades device good for anyone who wants a big display, plenty of functions, and a flagship Android tablet.



Vivotab RT

Summary: The ASUS Vivotab RT is an extremely versatile tablet because of its ability to offer up a compact size, superb battery life, Windows RT functionality including Office, and so much more. If you're a student, this is probably one of the best tablets out there in terms of value and functionality. The Vivotab RT has a 10.1-inch Super IPS display from which you can view the powerful NVIDIA Tegra 3 CPU and GPU technology within. Plus, with the added functionality of Office RT, a keyboard accessory and potential 24-hour battery life, this tablet is not only powerful but also can last all day no matter where you go. This makes the tablet very portable, very effective for getting work done, but still able to enjoy a game of pinball when the day is over. All together, these features allow the Vivotab RT to be very robust for whatever challenges it may face.

Features: 10.1-inch Super IPS HD display, NVIDIA Tegra 3 processor, 2GB of RAM, 32GB of internal storage, MicroSD card compatibility, 8MP rear camera, 2MP front camera, 24-hour battery life, physical keyboard accessory, Windows Store.

Bottom Line: With powerful NVIDIA Tegra technology powering Windows RT on this Vivotab, free Microsoft Office, a great price, and a full keyboard that pushes this tablet to have a 24-hour battery life, the Vivotab RT is perfect for those who are all over the place and need Microsoft Office to follow wherever they go, namely students.



That about does it for the tablets we suggest. Keep in mind the facts we told you before about how we choose these devices, and the fact that they all suit a variety of needs consumers have for their products.

4. The Bottom Line / Conclusion

At the end of the day, tablets are very complicated gadgets that vary in size, shape, and intended buyer. While an 11-inch tablet would be troublesome for reading on, a 7-inch Android tablet would do little good handle Windows applications. The point of this is that tablets come with different intentions and its best you look for the one that will best serve the needs you have, whether they be screen size, computing speed, business or pleasure.

As said earlier in this guide, the tablets all listed here are all awesome gadgets we'd highly recommend you buy. However, your needs vary from what we see as good tablets, so it's up to you to figure out which ones are the real winners for you. Please also note this guide will quickly grow outdated as advice on which tablets to buy as the market rapid grows, but it will still be a source of information fundamental to the way tablets tick, and how they are designed. As you see the next generation of devices arrive in the fall, keep this guide in mind to be a real sleuth with figuring out what's best for you, your co-workers, friends, and family – whoever relies on your new-found knowledge on tablets.

Keep in mind that tablets are still in their infancy. Three years may be a long time for the lifecycle of gadgets, but things are still just beginning, and as tablets get cheaper and more widespread the potential they can offer is going to continue rising. The bottom line really is that this market is continuing to change rapidly, and there's no telling what the three years will bode – but at the very least you can stay informed. Keep this guide with you for as long as you can, as it's sure to be a fundamental in helping you understand how tablets tick for the years to come. Hopefully this guide has offered some amount of help in allowing you to pick the tablet you wanted all along. Happy Hunting!

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