

Review: Gift Guide to eReaders, Tablets, \$99-\$500

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NEW YORK (AP) — Flat, hard packages will be welcome this year. Tablet computers are extremely popular, and electronic reading devices such as the Kindle have matured and come down in price.

Which one to get? That's mostly a matter of your budget. The iPad and other full-blown tablets are more expensive, but they do virtually everything better. Consider pooling money from friends or family for a better device.

If you have more than \$300 to spend, go for one of these full-size tablets. They have color screens that are about 9 inches diagonally, and they have built-in cameras:

— Apple iPad 2 (\$499)

The device that made tablet computing mainstream still reigns, outselling all others combined. It's thinner than competing tablets and has access to an unparalleled array of applications: half a million, of which 140,000 are adapted for the iPad's 9.7-inch screen.

That means more good games, more useful reference apps and more entertainment options. The range of third-party book apps also means the iPad beats dedicated e-readers at their own game by giving users the ability to read books purchased from any store. The large screen displays documents comfortably.

The basic model has 16 gigabytes of memory. More expensive versions have more memory and can also be bought with built-in access to AT&T's or Verizon's cellular network. Cellular service comes with a separate monthly fee of \$15 and up, but there's no contract requirement, so your gift won't burden a loved-one with a big financial commitment.

— Sony Tablet S (\$500)

There are a slew of tablets from Samsung, Sony, LG and other manufacturers built around Google Inc.'s Android software. From a hardware standpoint, they're not much different from the iPad, though most of them are thicker, and they're available in a range of sizes.

The Tablet S stands out by including an infrared emitter, which makes it usable as a large universal remote control. It also plays some PlayStation games.

It has a 9.4-inch screen, slightly smaller than the iPad's. It runs the latest version of

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Android, which is specially designed for tablets and is slick. But the selection of third-party applications doesn't match the iPad's in quantity or quality.

— Asus Eee Pad Transformer (\$389)

The Transformer is a reasonably priced Android tablet that doubles as a "netbook," or small laptop, if you buy an accessory keyboard dock for \$109. You can get an accessory keyboard for any tablet, but the Transformer's attaches securely, and the combination folds up like a laptop. The keyboard has a touchpad, extra ports and an additional power pack, which prolongs battery life.

The keyboard makes this tablet a good choice for those who want to write a lot or just want the familiar feel of a keyboard and touchpad. Other tablets are typically better for reading and viewing content, not creating it.

A new version is due out Dec. 15. It will start at \$499 and will have a faster processor and a body that's as thin as the iPad's.

If you only want to spend \$200 to \$250, go for one of these e-reader/tablet hybrids. They add movies, games and other applications to the e-reader's capabilities, so they're not just for bookworms.

They have 7-inch screens, slightly less than half the size of the iPad's screen. (Don't be fooled by the 7-inch to 9.7-inch comparison, which makes it sound like the Kindle's screen is only slightly smaller than the iPad's. The difference in area is much larger than the difference in the diagonal measurement.)

— Amazon Kindle Fire (\$199)

The Fire is Amazon's first color Kindle. It runs a highly modified, user-friendly version of Android. The selection of apps is smaller than for other Android tablets, however. Notable inclusions are Netflix, Hulu and Comixology, a comic-book reader.

The Fire also streams a selection of movies for free to Amazon Prime subscribers, and you can buy movies for download.

Amazon had to jettison some standard tablet features, such as a camera and a microphone, to keep the price low. The Fire has only 8 gigabytes of memory, which can't be expanded. Magazines don't translate well to the smaller screen.

— Barnes & Noble Nook Tablet (\$249)

The bookstore's answer to the Kindle Fire is an updated version of last year's Nook Color, a solid and successful e-reader. The Tablet has more memory than the Color or the Kindle Fire, and you can add even more.

Barnes & Noble's app store has a smaller section than Amazon's, but it does have Netflix and Hulu. Barnes & Noble allows books from other bookstores to be read, while Amazon doesn't. However, there's no video store yet, so you can't download

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movies for offline viewing, as you can with the Fire or larger tablets such as the iPad.

The older Nook Color is still available for \$50 less. It has less memory and a slower processor, but otherwise does the same job as the Tablet.

If your budget is limited to \$150, you'll be tempted by some low-end color tablets. But giving one away is like giving away a lump of coal: The color touch screens that go into sub-\$200 devices look bad and have problems responding to fingers.

Instead, get one of these lightweight, quality e-readers with black-and-white "electronic ink" screens for the bookworm in your life:

— Amazon Kindle Touch 3G (\$149)

Amazon still has a variety of monochrome Kindles, including its first touch-screen model. The screen is more legible than color screens in bright daylight and uses very little power. But it's slow to respond, making navigation tedious. The lack of color takes the joy out of children's books, magazines and comics. The device's touch sensitivity does make navigation easier.

The 3G version comes with access to AT&T's cellular network, with no monthly fees. That makes it a good gift for someone who travels a lot or doesn't have Internet access at home.

For \$149, this model comes with screensavers that display ads for cars, beauty products, Amazon gift cards and so forth. Pay another \$40 to get rid of those. You can go the other way and save \$50 by getting a non-3G version.

— Barnes & Noble Nook Simple Touch (\$99)

This slim, light e-reader is very similar to the \$99 non-3G Kindle Touch. Barnes & Noble's version has two advantages: It doesn't display advertising, and it can load books from other bookstores, including Google Books. It can't load Kindle books, though.

A postscript: None of these devices come with a case, and they all need one for protection. Consider including one if you want to be extra thoughtful. If you can't afford it, you can always say that the choice of a case is a matter of taste best left to the new owner.

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