

Review: New Surface Tablets Make Typing Easy

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NEW YORK (AP) — Is Microsoft's Surface a tablet or a laptop?

I'm not quite sure, but it is a lot easier to type on than an iPad.

The software company unveiled updates to its Surface tablet computers Monday at an event in New York, where I had a short amount of time to try them out.

It almost seems unfair to categorize the new Surface 2 and Surface Pro 2 as tablets. Although they have touch-screen keyboards like regular tablets, they work best when attached to an optional cover with a keyboard on the inside.

The better one I tried was the Type Cover 2. In addition to coming in four fun colors — pink, purple, blue and black — that cover has backlighting, silent keys and a typing feel similar to that of a laptop keyboard. At \$130, it is just \$10 more than a Touch Cover 2, which doesn't have movable keys like real keyboards.

The slick wireless mouse designed for the tablets is helpful, too, as is the docking station created to go with the Pro version of Surface.

The result is something that looks more like a laptop than an iPad or Android tablet. And that's what Microsoft wants, calling its tablets the most productive on the market. The Surface 2 model even comes with a version of Microsoft Office, including the Outlook email and calendar program for the first time.

The Surface 2 starts at \$449 and runs a lightweight version of Windows called RT, meaning it works only with apps designed specifically for it. The Surface Pro 2 starts at \$899 and runs a full version of Windows, so it works with programs designed for traditional desktops and laptops. Both come with 200 gigabytes of online storage through Microsoft's SkyDrive for two years.

With the Surface, Microsoft is trying to create a seamless transition between home, work and the field. Microsoft doesn't want this device to just replace your tablet and laptop, but your office PC as well. It's a great idea, and I'll be interested to see if it can actually work in practicality.

Like a laptop, both the Surface 2 and the Surface Pro 2 balanced well and didn't slide around on my lap when attached to keyboards. I felt very comfortable typing and had a clear view of the screen.

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A setup like this would be very helpful for all those events I've had to cover, including Monday's, where I wasn't able to sit at a table and had to balance my tablet or laptop on my lap while I typed. For the new versions, Microsoft improved the built-in kickstand used to hold the tablet up like a laptop screen. It is sturdier and works in two positions, one for sitting on your lap and another for placing on a table. The kickstand on older Surfaces had just one position, for the table.

My only complaint is that the keyboard was just a little bit too big for my lap and didn't have quite enough space to lay flat. But at 5 foot, 2 inches, I'm small. If you're taller, you shouldn't have a problem.

Although the tablets are focused on productivity, they also have some fun elements. Besides the usual games and apps available in Microsoft's app store, the Surface Pro 2 can be used to play PC and Xbox games such as the popular "World of Warcraft" and "Halo" series. Although you don't quite get the same visual experience as you do with a big screen, gamers will like portability. It's a big step up from playing "Angry Birds" or "Fruit Ninja." (Yes, those games are available in Microsoft's app store, too.)

Both Surface models felt a little bulky and heavy to me. That said, the Surface 2 weighs about the same as the latest version of the full-size iPad at about 1.5 pounds, while the Surface Pro 2 weighs in at 2 pounds.

At the same time, the Surface tablets feel a little more rugged than an iPad. Microsoft touts them as nearly indestructible, pointing to their heavy-duty glass and magnesium-alloy casing. It claims you could hit it with a sledge hammer or run it over with a car. I can't wait to hand one to my less-than-gentle 3-year-old daughter and see what damage she's able to inflict on it.

According to Microsoft, both tablets feature significant improvements in speed, cameras and battery life. I didn't have enough time with the devices to test those out, and I'm looking forward to spending more time with it. And it'll be interesting to see how well the Pro version works as a desktop when attached to a docking station, which will sell for about \$200 when it comes out early next year.

Based on an early look, though, Microsoft seems to have learned from its mistakes and refreshed the Surface lineup with devices that feel better on the lap.

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