# 2012 Tablet Buying Guide

*Tablets are one of the most in-demand gadgets in consumer electronics. Their appeal is near universal, from kids to seniors, consumers to business users. They are quickly evolving from nice-to-have to must-have digital devices. Increasing popularity, however, means increasing choices. With dozens of tablets on the market, which should you choose? This guide will give you a basic overview of tablets, touch on a few key features and provide tips for narrowing the pack and choosing the right one for you.*

First, what is a tablet? Generally speaking, a tablet is a thin, flat, touchscreen-operated mobile computing device. A tablet is a direct decedent of a smartphone, sharing similar processors and operating systems. Most tablets measure between 7- to 10-inches diagonally and have no physical keyboard. Users navigate the menus and enter text using a touchscreen.

**What can you do with a tablet?**
Out of the box, most tablets come pre-loaded with software applications, or "apps," to let you do many or all of the following:

- **Check Email:** Access all of your email accounts
- **Browse the Internet:** Mobile web browsers are a key feature of tablets
- **View Photos and Video:** Even if the tablet doesn't have a built-in camera for taking pictures, most will let you view, edit and share your digital photos and home video
- **Enjoy Music, Movies and TV:** Tablets are designed for enjoying all kinds of media; most let you download (rent or purchase) content from an online store
- **View and Edit Documents:** Many tablets let you compose and edit documents, spreadsheets and presentations that work seamlessly with traditional desktop software (e.g., Microsoft Office)
- **Access Social Networking:** Tablets connect you to your favorite social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, et al. There are also plenty of third-party social networking "apps" available for most tablets.
- **Read eBooks:** Tablets make great eBook readers, and many have the ability to connect to your favorite eBook stores (e.g., Kindle, NOOK) just like a dedicated eBook reader
- **Play Games:** Tablets are great for gaming, and there is no shortage of games designed specifically for tablets
- **Purchase and/or Download Apps:** Virtually every tablet on the market connects to an app store for downloading free or paid apps. The availability of apps for a particular device varies widely.

**Which should I buy: a tablet or laptop?**
Can a tablet serve as a replacement for a laptop? For many users, the answer is no. Since most tablets use processors and operating systems that are more on par with a smartphone rather than a PC, they fall short of a full-blown laptop in several ways:

- Inability to run desktop computer software
- Lack of storage
- No mouse
- Limited connectivity and expandability
- Limited printing options

On the other hand, if you're considering a netbook or laptop to use primarily to surf the web, post updates to social networking sites, check email, etc., a tablet may suit your needs quite well. Tablet advantages include portability, speed and battery life. As cloud computing continues to grow and as tablet operating systems and software become more robust and "PC-like," tablets will become the go-to computing device for more and more users.

**Which tablet features are most important?**
Here are a few key features that you'll likely come across as you shop for a tablet:

- **Built-in camera(s)** Several tablets on the market have one or even two cameras. The camera on the back is for taking photos and videos, just like on a smartphone. A second, front-mounted camera is for video chatting, Skyping, social networking and so forth. If you think you may use the tablet now or in the future for video calling, then you'll definitely want to consider a device with a front-facing camera.

- **WiFi and/or 3G** Considering how essential Internet access is to the tablet experience, you'll want to give a lot of thought to how your tablet will connect. Virtually all tablets offer built-in WiFi for connecting to the wireless network at your home, work or favorite hangout. However, if you anticipate using your tablet a lot while away from home (and out of range of public hot spots), you will want to consider one with built-in 3G connectivity. Tablets with built-in 3G actually have a cell phone transceiver inside for sending and receiving data over the cell network. Just like data plans on cell phones, you must contract with a wireless carrier (typically on a one- or two-year plan) to be able to use the 3G functionality. If you activate the 3G service, plan on spending about $15 to $30 per month on a data plan. Keep in mind that you can buy a 3G-capable tablet and not activate the service; it will continue to work on WiFi networks only. This might be a good option if you're on the fence as to whether to spring for the 3G model.

- **Operating System** Just like on any computer, the operating system is how you interact with the device. The hardware you buy will dictate which Operating System (OS) the tablet uses. Apple's iPad runs on Apple's iOS software, RIM's Blackberry Playbook tablet runs on RIM's Tablet OS, and so forth. There are a lot of tablets from various manufacturers that run on some version or variation of Google's Android OS.

  The main thing to keep in mind when choosing a tablet is the OS it uses will dictate which apps will run on it. If you already have an iPhone, for example, you may want to look closely at Apple's tablet since most apps, books, movies, etc. that you may have already purchased will also work on the iPad. The same holds true in the Android and Amazon realms.

- **Screen/Display**
  Tablets offer eye-popping, high-definition touch screens. But be sure you know what type of touchscreen you're buying, especially when shopping for lower-priced tablets. Tablet touchscreens come in two forms:

    - Resistive: A resistive touchscreen is made of several layers, the outer one being slightly flexible. When you press on the screen a physical connection is made and the keystroke is entered. The best example of a resistive touchscreen is the point-of-sale or electronic signature pad at the supermarket. Generally lower-priced tablets use resistive touchscreens, some of which only respond to input via a stylus.

- Capacitive: A capacitive touchscreen has a solid layer (typically glass) with electrostatic sensors beneath. Human fingers, themselves excellent conductors of electricity, trigger a change in the screen that is then recorded as a keystroke or swipe. Unlike resistive screens, capacitive screens can register multiple touches simultaneously, making multi-touch gestures like swipes and pinches possible. Capacitive touchscreens are generally much better suited for tablets.

Also on the topics of screens, you'll need to consider size. Tablets generally range from a 5" diagonal screen (not much bigger than a smartphone) up to around a 10" screen (like that on the iPad). Most tablets come in either 7" or 10" screen sizes. Something to keep in mind as you shop: because they are measured diagonally, their total screen area increases exponentially as size increases. Therefore, a 10" screen actually has double the screen area as a 7" model.

**Which app store does the tablet access?**
This is an important question to ask. With Apple's iPad you don't have a choice; the tablet only connects to the iTunes store. Currently iTunes offers the widest selection of tablet-specific apps (approaching 100,000) plus many more for iPhone and iPod touch (which will work on iPad, though not optimized for its larger screen). In the Android market, things get trickier. There are several versions of Android OS (2.x through 4.x), plus several "marketplaces" selling Android apps. Not all tablets running an Android OS can access the main Android Marketplace. Some manufacturers limit you to their own app stores, which may or may not offer the selection of apps you want. Likewise, the RIM's Blackberry tablet and Amazon's Kindle Fire tablet can only run apps purchased or downloaded from each manufacturer's respective online store.

**Which accessories should I consider?**
Accessories complete the package. Here are just a few worth considering:

- **Bluetooth keyboard:** Most tablets offer productivity apps for creating and editing documents, spreadsheets, etc., but their on-screen keyboards just aren't up for the task for writing or editing. A Bluetooth keyboard makes an excellent accessory, and can also be used on desktop PCs, laptops and some smart phones.
- **Headphones:** Tablets are media consumption devices, ideal for enjoying movies, TV shows, music and podcasts, yet most tablets don't ship with headphones. Most any headphones--wired or Bluetooth--will work with most tablets. There are a wide range of choices, from ear-bud style to the over-the-ear noise-cancelling type.
- **Cases**: A stylish case is less of an accessory and more of a necessity. Cases offer not only protection and a personal touch of style, they also add serious functionality and ease. Road warriors will love cases with built-in stands for propping up their tablet on desks, countertops and airline tray tables. Parents will appreciate a seat-back video case that transforms a tablet into the ultimate rear-seat entertainment system. Business users will appreciate a case with a built-in keyboard for shooting off a quick email or editing a document on the go.

Now that you know what you can do with a tablet, which features and accessories to consider and what questions to ask about operating systems and app stores, you're ready to start shopping.