Tech Corner: Back to School Technology Shopping on the Cheap

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It’s August, and we all know what that means: back-to-school shopping. Many of us dread this time of year and the dent it puts in our wallets; tuition is already expensive enough, so having to spend money on a new computer, pair of headphones, or phone can be a downright disheartening way to start the new school year.

If there’s one thing I’ve learned over the years, it’s how to spend less on electronic goodies without sacrificing quality. And, in commemoration of this most-expensive time of year, I’d like to share some of my insights.

**Monoprice: The Bargain Brand**

To start off, one name *everybody* should know is Monoprice. Why? Because they are the cheapest supplier of power cables I have seen.

Something as simple as a USB phone cable can run upwards of $10 at BestBuy or WalMart, whereas Monoprice has them available for under a buck. They are, in general, of slightly lower quality—mine rarely last more than six months. But, thanks to children and pets, our cables often don’t last that long anyway. You can also find HDMI television cables, Cat5 networking cables, and auxiliary audio cables for dirt cheap.

Monoprice also has *the* best bargain-bin earbuds I’ve tried. For $7.50, you will find a pair of earphones that sound as good as a $50 pair from Target—ditto for over-the-ear headphones. Unlike my phone cable caveat above, however, these earbuds don’t break on their own. Whenever I’ve had to throw a Monoprice earbud in the trash, it was because it has the misfortune of being mistaken for a mouse, not because it broke from normal usage.

**Desktop Computers are Better Powerhouses**

Today’s laptops are ultra-portable: sleek, lightweight, and even easy to carry in a purse. Yet, the unfortunate consequence of this trend is that today’s laptops aren’t any more powerful than those from five years ago.

If you’re a gamer, forget it: there’s no super-portable laptop on the market that excels at gaming, and the even the bulkier laptops that do start out at a minimum of $1500.

Desktops, however, are another matter. At the cost of taking up space, a modern desktop will be about as fast as a laptop that is 2-3 times its price.

But, of-course, desktops aren’t portable. Which is why I would suggest getting both: instead of getting a $2000 laptop, get a $1000 laptop and a $1000 desktop. Connect the two via remote desktop software, such as TeamViewer, and you will easily be able to use your more powerful desktop machine from your more portable laptop, wherever there’s Wi-Fi.

Of course, this only applies if you need a powerhouse—something that is good at playing games, rendering videos, or performing advanced physics calculations. For everyone else, I would simply suggest knowing your needs and not spending for features you won’t use—perhaps that’s high resolution screens, touch controls, or backlit keyboards.

**Older Laptops May be Upgradeable**

The personal computer as we know it is a result of interchangeable hardware. It is easy to buy a monitor, processing chip, hard drive, memory card, and power supply from six different companies and assemble them to form a fully working computer.

However, the ultra-portable laptops of today generally don’t allow you to access their internals; you can’t replace hard drives or memory cards. Older laptops, on the other hand, still typically allow this, and it can ensure that your laptop will last years longer than it might have otherwise.

You will need to be sure that you buy the right type of RAM (they vary quite a bit) and the right size of hard drive (2.5” for almost all laptops), and the installation itself might be better left to experienced users—if you don’t know anyone, MicroCenter in St. Louis Park is a good resource.

Swapping in a solid state drive will yield enormous performance gains, and swapping in larger chunks of RAM will ensure that you can keep more programs open before your system starts slowing down. Do both, and a computer may comfortably last another few years.

**Mid-Range Smartphones are Pretty Good**

High-end smartphones, which include models such as the LG G4, Samsung’s Galaxy S line, and most of Apple’s iPhones, are very tempting to today’s smartphone buyers; they sport bigger screens, better cameras, and more storage than their midrange counterparts. But they also cost a *lot* more.

Certainly, in years past, a midrange smartphone would be unbearably slow for even common apps like Facebook, would take grainy photos, and would lack the radio antennas to connect to 3G and 4G networks. Today, however, they do almost as much as a flagship phone for half the price.

My personal recommendations include the $350 Nexus 5x, the $300 ZenFone 2, and the $200 Moto G.

**Oh, and Please Don’t Buy Microsoft Office**

Finally, if you’re a student at Metropolitan State, you already own a copy of Microsoft Office. Simply log in to your Metrostate Outlook.com email and go to <https://portal.office.com/Home>, where you will be able to easily install Office 365 on all of your computers.