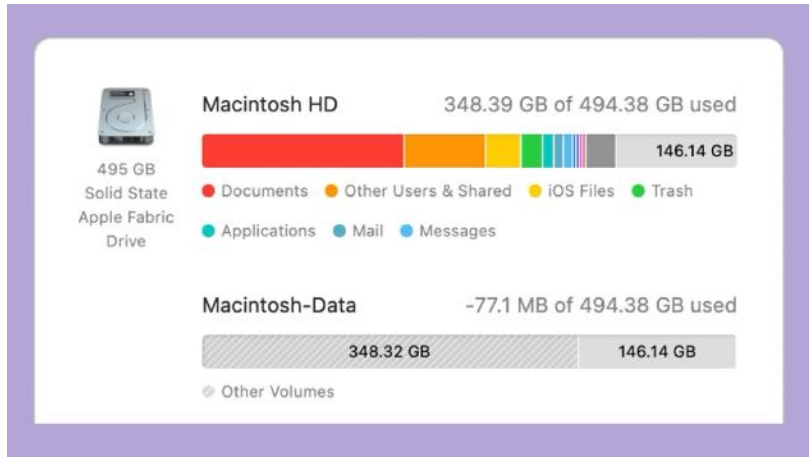


GEAR PATROL How Much Laptop Storage Do You Really Need?

Tucker Bowe February 11, 2025

More storage means more money. Here's how to strike the right balance between data and dollars.



Apple

\$400 (for 1TB), or \$800 (for 2TB) — that's a lot.

So, how much storage do you really need? There is no perfect answer, of course. But there are some handy rules of thumb and wrinkles to know.

Advertised Storage vs. Usable Storage



In the past year or more, Apple has started offering its MacBook Air and MacBook Pro in small and large models. Photo by Tucker Bowe for Gear Patrol

When buying a laptop, one of the most important decisions you have to make is figuring out how much internal storage you need. Depending on the amount, it can drive up the price of the laptop considerably.

For instance, [Apple's current 13-inch MacBook Air \(M3\)](#) starts with 256 GB of base storage but can be configured with 512GB, 1TB, or 2 TB. A higher-capacity model will cost you an extra \$200 (for 512GB),

One of the most important things to know is that there's a difference between the amount of usable storage space on a laptop and the amount advertised — it's actually much less. There are two reasons why.

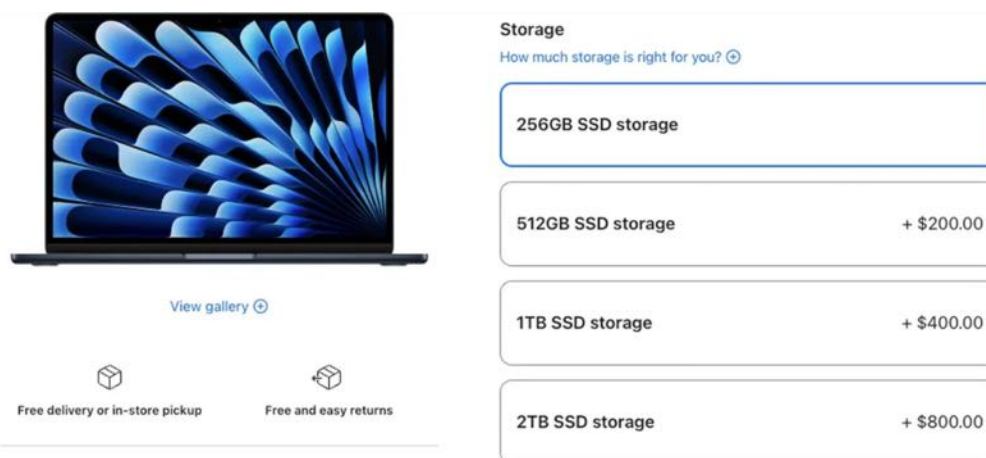
First, your laptop's operating system takes up a good chunk of space right out of the box; the latest version of macOS, (Sequoia) takes up a little more than 25GB, for example, while the storage version of the latest version of Windows, Windows 11, takes up about 20GB.

Second, most laptop manufacturers deal in specs that are base-10 numbers instead of the less intuitive base-2 numbers computers actually use, meaning hard drive capacities are always slightly lower than they are rated to be.

According to [Lifewire](#), for each gigabyte a hard drive purports to have, it has about 70.3 megabytes less of disk space. Using [a disk size calculator](#), and subtracting an extra 20GB for operating system to be on the safe side, you'll find that "256GB" is more like 218GB, and "512GB" is more like 456GB.

With that in mind, we generally recommend upgrading from the base storage to the next step up; so for the latest 13-inch MacBook Air, that means spending the extra \$200 to upgrade from 256GB to 512GB, which will give you a little breathing room.

The good news is that most manufacturers are increasing the amount of base storage they give laptops *without* increasing the starting price. Apple's 13-inch M3 MacBook Air and 14-inch M4 MacBook Pro start with a base SSD storage of 512GB and 1TB, respectively, twice as much as some previous generations.



More laptop storage can vastly increase the price of your laptop. Apple

Memory vs. Storage: What's the Difference?

When buying a laptop, you also have to decide how much memory — or RAM (random access memory) — to configure it with. Like storage, a laptop with more memory is going to cost more. For example, the current 14-inch MacBook Air (with an M3 chip) comes with 8GB of unified memory; if you upgrade it to have 16GB or 24GB, it will cost you an extra \$200 and \$400, respectively.

So what is memory and how is it different from storage? In simplest terms, memory (or RAM) is the amount of data your laptop is able to save *temporarily* while storage is the amount of data it's able to save *permanently*.

If you're somebody who has a lot of programs running at the same time — especially if you're rendering high-quality videos or playing video games — you need more memory (RAM) for your laptop to handle it all. If you're somebody who saves a lot of files to your laptop, especially photos and videos, you need more storage.

So, if you're just doing everyday web browsing, you probably don't need much RAM. As with storage, we recommend configuring your laptop with a little more than the base amount because it's nice to have. If you're running some serious programs, you likely already know that you'll need to upgrade to 16GB, 32GB or more of RAM.

How to Check Your Current Laptop's Storage



To get a better idea of your actual, personal needs, start by checking how much storage of your current laptop you are using.

- **On a Mac:** click on the Apple logo in the top left corner > select System Settings > select General (in sidebar) > select Storage.

If your storage readout looks like this, and you've had your laptop for years, 256GB is probably enough for you. Apple

- **On a PC:** click the Start

button > select Settings > select System > select Storage.

If you see that you have loads of unused space, 256GB of internal storage is probably enough for you. It generally is for most people who don't already have (or anticipate having) a ton of locally stored photos, video, video games, or music that can't either be easily offloaded into the cloud, or to a backup drive.

However, if your current laptop is close to maxed out, it's probably better to be safe than sorry and upgrade to the next step up. It's generally hard to add space into a laptop later, and while you can pick up an external drive to use as backup or even for day-to-day storage, it's going to add bulk to your machine and friction to your workflow.

How to Get More Storage for Your Current Laptop

Of course, you don't have to buy a new laptop to get more storage. There are a few ways to avoid having to go that far.

- **Free up wasted space:** The quickest and cheapest thing you can do is free up space on your current laptop by deleting files and uninstalling programs and apps that you aren't using. And then when you're done go into your Recycle Bin (on Windows) or Trash (on macOS) and empty it so that your deleted things are truly deleted. (You can read [our guide](#) to learn more.)



- **Buy an external hard drive:** If you don't want to delete anything, you can add more storage space by buying an external hard drive and connecting it to your computer via USB. You can get an excellent external hard drive from a trusted brand — like [Western Digital](#), [Seagate](#) or [LaCie](#) — and add anywhere from 2TB (usually costs around \$60) to 12TB of storage (usually costs around \$300).

The [Seagate Ultra Touch \(\\$80\)](#) is a fairly affordable external hard drive that connects via USB-C. Photo by Tucker Bowe for Gear Patrol

- **Use a cloud-based storage service:** Instead of buying an external hard drive, you're other option is to subscribe to a cloud-based storage service like [OneDrive](#) (for Windows users), [iCloud](#) (for Apple users) or [Google Drive](#) (for people who use Google's services). The advantage of a cloud-based solution is that use can quickly backup your computer (or free up space) and access your files over any device. Note: most cloud-based solutions cost a small monthly fee.