

1. The operating system

The main difference is, of course, the operating system. A Chromebook runs Google's Chrome OS, which is basically its Chrome browser dressed up a bit to look like the Windows desktop. A search button similar to the Windows Start button sits in a taskbar in the lower-left corner along with shortcuts to Gmail, Google Docs, and YouTube.

A status bar sits in the lower-right corner that provides quick access to Wi-Fi, Bluetooth, volume and settings. In a blissfully stripped-down settings panel, you can choose a wallpaper and theme, and you can tweak the settings for the touchpad, keyboard and display.

Because Chrome OS is little more than the Chrome browser, it's incredibly lightweight compared to Windows and MacOS. Even with low-end parts, Chromebooks feel snappy. Better yet, it updates itself automatically and the updates take a fraction of the time of Windows and Mac updates to install.

The reason I like my Chromebook so much is its easy maintenance. It just works without any effort needed on my part. It always springs to life instantly and never makes me sit through a frustratingly long update and restart routine.

2. The apps it runs and the way it runs apps

Google offers a few familiar touches so that Windows converts will feel comfortable with the operating system, but the similarities stop when you open an application. Most Chromebook apps launch as a new tab in Chrome. A handful -- Files, Get Help and Chrome Remote Desktop -- open in a separate window.

Unlike Mac OS Sierra and Windows 10, Chrome OS uses only web apps and won't let you download applications. This means no Photoshop, Skype, iTunes or any other non-Chrome apps you might use.

You can find alternatives in the Chrome Web Store, including online versions from Microsoft itself. You can use Word, Excel, Outlook, Powerpoint and others. And Chrome's native Google Docs and Sheets can handle Word and Excel files.

Despite relying on web apps, you don't need internet access to run a Chromebook. You can edit Google Docs offline and watch movies and shows on Google Play offline. You may not be able to download more than one movie at a time, but a Chromebook can get you through a flight on a Wi-Fi-less plane.

Google's Android and Chromebook divisions have also teamed up to **bring Android apps to Chromebooks**, in a process that began earlier this year. Not all Chromebooks have touchscreens, so you may need to get used to controlling Android action with a keyboard and touchpad rather than tapping and swiping on a screen.

3. How much it costs

You won't need to pay for a Windows software license or that Apple logo, which makes a Chromebook cheaper than any MacBook and most Windows laptops. Chromebooks start at less than \$200 (international prices start at about £160 or AU\$300) and don't get much above \$500 (about £410 or AU\$660) with a few exceptions. You can find a few entry-level Windows laptops in that price range, but they can't run Photoshop any better than a Chromebook can.

4. Its build quality and display

Chromebooks and budget Windows laptops are indistinguishable from one another from the outside. They typically feature plastic enclosures and low-resolution displays; sleek, aluminum Retina Display MacBooks they are not. Then again, even the cheapest **MacBook** is about four times the cost of a Chromebook.

I picked the **Toshiba Chromebook 2** because it's one of the few models with a full HD display. Most Chromebooks feature displays with a 1,366x768 resolution. In addition to its relatively high-res display, the Chromebook 2 avoids many budget laptop pitfalls. The plastic chassis isn't terrible, the keyboard isn't mushy and the touchpad isn't skittish.

5. How much storage it supplies

Chromebooks embrace the web and web storage. You'll get a speedy SSD but it won't offer a lot of room. A few Chromebook models feature 64GB SSDs but most have 16GB or 32GB SSDs. An entry-level Windows 10 laptop might have an SSD as small as 32GB, but others come with larger but slower 500GB hard drives.

To help offset the lack of local storage, Google throws in **100GB of free Google Drive space for two years** with any Chromebook purchase.

6. How it handles your printer

You can't just connect a Chromebook to a USB printer and start printing. Among the many things you can't download and install on a Chrome are printer drivers, so you must route your print jobs over the web using **Google Cloud Print**. You'll need a **cloud-ready printer** that can connect directly to the web, or you can use a classic printer connected to a Windows computer or Mac.

To sum up, a Chromebook has a budget Windows laptop look, it may not run all of your favorite apps, doesn't offer a much in the way of local storage and can be a bit tricky if you own an older printer.

But don't write off the Chromebook. It runs a lean OS, so it works well with low-end parts. My Toshiba Chromebook 2 feels snappy with its Intel Celeron processor and 4GB of RAM, and its battery lasts roughly 7 to 8 hours on a single charge under normal use.

But, really, I like it best because it doesn't spring updates on me at the least convenient of times. Without needing to power and constantly update a more complicated, wide-ranging OS, my Chromebook just works; it's always on and ready to go whenever I need it.