Find the Best Web Browser for Your Devices: A Review of Chrome, Safari and Edge

Double your Web productivity with the right browser and a toolbox of tips

Life doesn't have to be a series of fights with your phone's Web browser. WSJ's Joanna Stern reveals the best hidden tricks for the iPhone's mobile Safari and Android's Chrome. Photo/video: Drew Evans/The Wall Street Journal.

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123 COMMENTS

Life is full of big decisions: getting married, buying a home, picking your default Web browser.

I'm serious. Think about where you spend the majority of your time on your computer or phone. It's inside those four WWW walls.

"Apps will kill the Web!" prognosticators proclaimed, as if Achilles and his Greek army were invading. Yet on our app-packed smartphones and tablets, the browser is still the first stop to look something up. Not that you can always do that quickly: From typing URLs to managing tabs, our browsing problems only get worse on the small screen. On our more spacious laptops and desktops, the browser has become the home of our apps—our email, calendar, word processor, photo library and more.

If browsers have never been more important, why are you using the wrong one? Nearly 40% of computer-based Web surfers still use Microsoft's Internet Explorer, according to NetMarketshare. You realize that browser is not only sluggish but about as secure as a camping tent, right?

I'm not saying there is a perfect browser—except for my dog, named Browser, that is. But the best one for any device should nail the four S's: simplicity, stamina, speed and security. A fifth S would be syncing—in a perfect world, all our gadgets would share browser settings, bookmarks and history.

After testing multiple browsers on many computers and smartphones, I've determined which ones you should be using—and found shortcuts to use with them.

Windows Computers: Chrome or Edge

If you're using Internet Explorer on a Windows 7 or Windows 8 computer, please stop reading and go download Google's Chrome. Once you see how much faster and cleaner it is, you'll want to celebrate with

cocktails. Don't worry about leaving bookmarks behind, they're coming too. (Just follow these transfer instructions.)

GOOGLE CHROME TIPS (MAC AND PC)

Pin tabs. Don't let your most frequently used tabs—email, calendar, Facebook—get caught in the shuffle. Right-click on a specific tab and select 'Pin Tab' to lock it in place.

ENLARGE
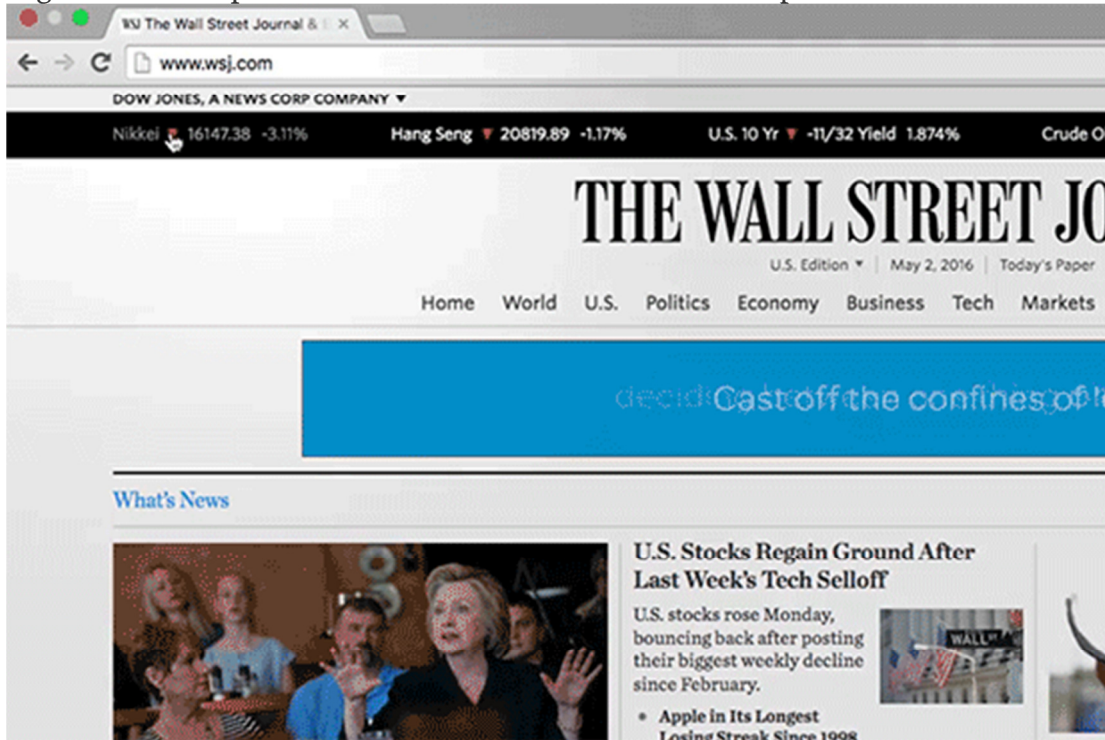
How to pin a tab in Chrome. *PHOTO: GOOGLE*

Going backward. Don't keep clicking the back button. Press and hold on it to see a list of your recent visits and jump to the site you want.
Install Tab Wrangler. This Chrome extension automatically closes and saves tabs after a preset period. It will speed up both you and your computer.

Not even Microsoft wants you to use outdated Internet Explorer anymore. It's why Windows 10 comes with Edge, a brand new browser with an intuitive, modern interface. Goodbye ugly buttons and cluttered toolbars! It's also why choosing a browser on Windows 10 is tough.

In industry benchmarks and my own speed tests, Edge and Chrome were neck and neck for first place. Firefox and Opera—two clunky yet long-surviving third-party browsers—trailed. Internet Explorer barely placed.

Yet unlike Chrome, Edge doesn't hog so much of a computer's power. On a Web-browsing battery test, the Dell XPS 13 lasted an hour longer with Edge than with Chrome. When streaming Netflix, it lasted two full hours longer. And security experts say Edge is as secure as Chrome.

So finally, Windows 10 PC buyers don't need to download a new browser? Not exactly. Edge is still too rough around the...edges. Since it's new, Web developers haven't really focused on it, so Web apps can be slow or

erratic. Plus, it doesn't support feature-adding extensions. In Chrome, I use a calendar, to-do list and tab manager. Microsoft is adding extensions in the next version.

I suggest you use Chrome on Windows 10. The exception: Edge will eke out better performance on underpowered Windows 10 laptops and tablets.

Mac Computers: Safari or Chrome

Google's Chrome has long been my default browser on Apple laptops, but my tests all proved this was a poor life decision. Apple's Safari consistently scored 10% to 15% higher on speed tests. On systems with the weakest processors, like the new MacBook, Chrome occasionally rendered the system unusably slow.

APPLE SAFARI TIPS (MAC)

Mute noisy tabs. Easily mute random noisy websites by clicking on the little speaker icon to the left of the address bar. (Mac OS X Yosemite and up required.)
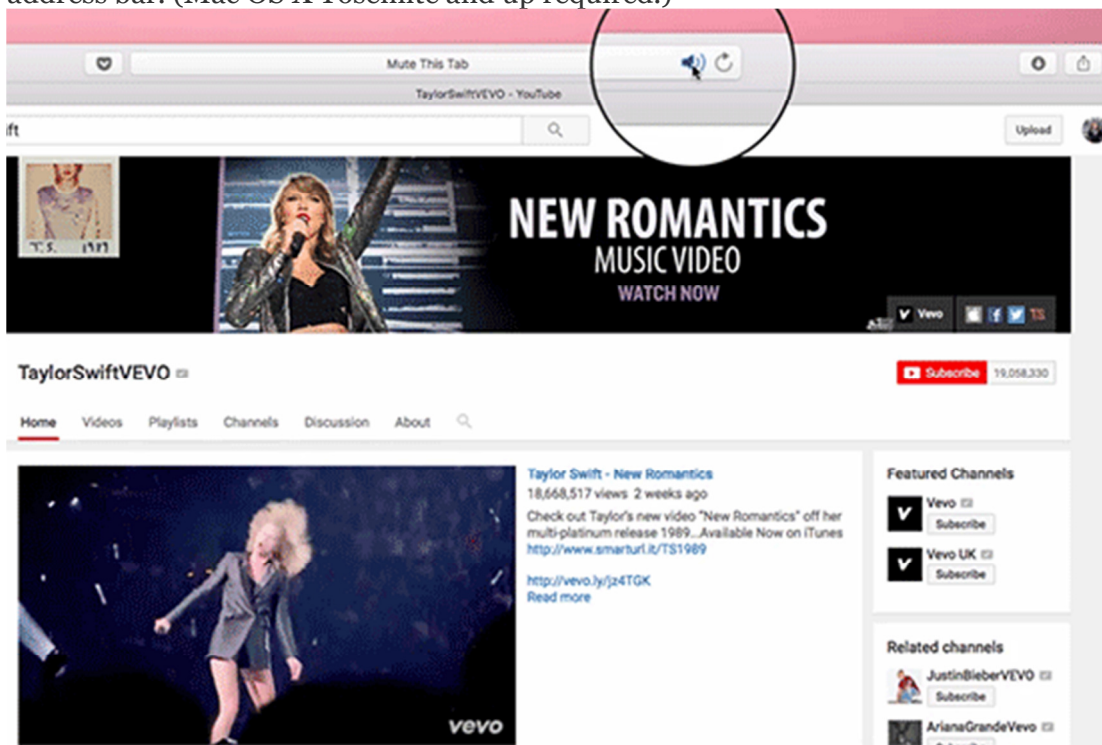
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How to mute a tab in Safari. *PHOTO: APPLE*

Pin tabs. As with Chrome, make sure your most frequently used tabs don't get caught up with the riffraff. Right-click on a specific tab and select 'Pin Tab' to lock it in. (Mac OS X El Capitan required.)
See all open tabs. Without small tab icons, use the open tab view to jump around. On your trackpad, use two fingers to pinch in and see thumbnails of your tabs.

Yet again, the less-taxing browser led to noticeably better battery life. On a Web surfing test with the MacBook and a 13-inch MacBook Pro, Safari provided one more hour of battery life than Chrome. In a Netflix streaming test, the results were even more drastic: When streaming "Daredevil" on the MacBook Pro, Safari beat Chrome by two hours.

Chrome may be the top browser on the market, but its power hunger can make you want to avoid it entirely. Chrome product management director Rahul Roy-Chowdhury says Mac and Windows performance has become a big area of focus. Before every Chrome update, thousands of tests are run on many different Mac and Windows devices, he says.

On more powerful desktops or laptops, I'd still likely opt for Chrome. In the latest Mac OS X release, El Capitan, Safari has borrowed most of Chrome's best features—including pinned tabs—yet Chrome still has a larger variety of extensions. Chrome is also easier to use when you've got dozens of tabs fighting for your attention, thanks to those tiny website icons appearing on each tab.

Some may be wary of using Chrome because of Google's use of private data to improve its search experiences. But keep in mind that if you use Google's search or other services in any browser, you'll likely log in and be tracked anyway. Google provides full details on what Chrome does and doesn't collect here. Most browsers, including Chrome, do have no-tracking privacy modes.

iPhone and iPad: Safari

APPLE SAFARI TIPS (IPHONE AND IPAD)

Find on page. Want to find a word on a site? Tap the square-arrow share button and swipe to 'Find on Page' or just type the word or phrase in the URL bar, then select 'On this Page.'
Going backward. Hold down the back arrow to see sites you've recently visited. Accidentally close a tab? Hold down the + button in the tab menu to see recently closed ones.
Faster address input. Hold down the period key to add .com, .edu or whatever to the end of your Web address. Also works in the Mail app.

There are loads of things I love about third-party browsers for the iPhone or iPad. I love how Dolphin lets you swipe to see your open tabs. I love Opera Mini's data-saving features. I love the simple layout on Chrome and Firefox.

But Apple doesn't let you change your default browser, so none of that matters. Whenever you click a link in your email or text messages, Safari and only Safari will launch. Apple says it helps maintain an integrated experience. (Also, third-party iOS browsers including Chrome have to use Safari's browsing engine, so there aren't performance advantages to using them.)
So yes, Safari is the best browser to use on the iPhone and iPad. If you also use Safari on your Mac, you can easily sync your tabs, bookmarks and other settings across devices. Hit the tab button and scroll down to see them listed.

Android Smartphones, Tablets: Chrome

On Android, since Google supports changing your default browser, your choices are vast. In addition to Chrome and Opera, there's Firefox, Dolphin and Puffin—not zoo animals, actual browser options.

GOOGLE CHROME (ANDROID)

Quick search. See text that you want to look up? Highlight the words, then tap the box on the bottom of the screen to see search results.

Easily look up words in Chrome. *PHOTO: GOOGLE*

Tab management. To switch to another open tab, swipe right or left on the top toolbar. Swipe down from the top of the screen to view all open tabs.
Find in page. To find a specific word or phrase on a page, tap the three dots in the top left corner, then choose 'Find in page.'

In speed tests, Firefox, Puffin and Opera often beat Chrome, yet I didn't find those speed improvements to outweigh Chrome's superior interface and Android integration: For easy access, your tabs can even appear alongside open apps in the app switcher.

Additionally, if you're also using Chrome on your laptop or desktop, it seamlessly syncs your open sites, settings and passwords with your phone or tablet. (On Samsung phones, make sure you're using Chrome and not Samsung's own browser.)

Chrome has a data-saver feature, like the others, which compresses and optimizes parts of a site while you're on a cellular connection. Chrome, however, doesn't support ad or content blockers on mobile. If that's important to you, try Firefox, my second pick for Android users.

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