

Part Tablet, Part Laptop: Make Your Next Computer a Slate PC

By [Alexander John](#) December 3, 2018

They're light, they're powerful and they last all day. WSJ's David Pierce evaluates the latest batch of PCs that can be a laptop one minute and a tablet the next, and explains which might be best for you. Photo/Video: Emily Prapuolenis/The Wall Street Journal



By David Pierce

In the past two decades, laptops have become faster, smaller, longer-lasting and incredibly more usable. You now can record a hit song, design a skyscraper or program the human genome with a laptop.

Yet despite all this evolution, laptops still look like... laptops. A few enterprising companies have tried to reinvent the design: Lenovo tried to add a second screen, Acer moved the trackpad above the keyboard. Luckily for us all, both concepts failed.

More recently, designers have been cutting laptops in half, building devices that could be both tablets and laptops and calling them "hybrids," "detachables," "convertibles" and "2-in-1s." I like calling them "slate PCs," or just "slates."

If you buy a slate instead of a laptop, you're really getting two devices in one, a laptop and a tablet, as in the Samsung Galaxy Book 2.

The idea makes perfect sense: It would be great to have one device that could do everything, and you could add and remove peripherals, like clothing. With keyboard and trackpad attached, the device would still look and work like a laptop. But the touch-friendly screen would be light enough to hold in bed, and there would be a pen for when you need to sketch rather than type.

Good idea, yes, though the execution for years was terrible. But there's a new generation of these shape-shifting devices, with better technology and better software designed just for them.

They're getting really good. So good that next time you replace your laptop, you shouldn't buy a laptop. Even if you mostly use it like a laptop, you should still buy a slate.

Budget-friendly option

Acer | Switch 3 \$450 Battery Looks Power Versatility

OVERVIEW

It's a great budget-friendly option with a good kickstand and sturdy keyboard, though its looks and performance lag behind the Surface Pro. Note: Total cost includes device, keyboard and pen.

If you're looking for the most slate for the least money, I like Acer's Switch 3, which usually costs about \$450. (PC prices vary wildly, so shop around.) The Windows-powered tablet drops into a keyboard attachment and uses a simple kickstand to stay up at almost any angle. It isn't a very powerful PC, but in my testing it was plenty for simple web browsing and Office apps.

Where the Switch 3's price tag is apparent is in its generally plasticky, unimpressive feel. Still, it's a nicer machine than many laptops at the same price.

Go-anywhere option

Samsung | Galaxy Book 2 \$1,000 Battery Looks Power Versatility

OVERVIEW

With cellular data and super-long battery life, it's more like a phone than a laptop. Unfortunately, that's also true of its processing power.

Note: Total cost includes device, keyboard and pen.

What if you never again had to ask a coffee shop for a Wi-Fi password, or hunt for a wall socket in an airport? That's what a new kind of PC hopes to bring to the market. These Windows devices use superefficient [Qualcomm](#) chips similar to the ones you'll find in your phone, and offer always-on cellular connections to give you the simplicity and speed of a smartphone in the body of a laptop.

I like Samsung's Galaxy Book 2, which starts at \$1,000 and offers my preferred take on the kickstand-and-keyboard setup. Its processor can't measure up to traditional laptops, and its screen is a little too dim, but it's a terrific travel computer and can handle a day and night of web browsing or light work before needing a charge.

Super-powered option

| Surface Book 2 Microsoft \$1,598 Battery Looks Power Versatility

OVERVIEW

As powerful as a MacBook Pro or gaming PC, it proves detachables can be workhorses—just not particularly light ones.

Note: Total cost includes device, keyboard and pen.

If you're thinking, "OK, slates are cute and whatever, but I need a lot of processing power," then you need [Microsoft's](#) \$1,500 Surface Book 2. It's as powerful, and costly, as an entry-level gaming PC. It also does a magic trick: When you want to show somebody a video or draw on your desk, you can just pop the screen off and use it alone.

Your slate might work mostly as a PC, but when you need to get some drawing done, you'll want a handheld display and pen support, as with the Surface Book 2.

The Surface Book 2 is one of my favorite computers of any kind, with a rugged design and a great keyboard and trackpad. It isn't cheap, and it isn't something you'd want to lug in a messenger bag for very long. But with that detachable touch screen and excellent pen input, it's basically tablet, laptop and desktop all in one.

Chromebook option

Google | Pixel Slate \$897 Battery Looks Power Versatility

OVERVIEW

Google's tablet looks great and smartly combines mobile and desktop software, but Chrome OS isn't quite ready for detachables.

Note: Total cost includes device, keyboard and pen.

Slates work only when they have software that flows seamlessly between tablet and laptop modes. Windows 10, after a lot of growing pains, does this relatively well. Google's Chrome OS, combining a desktop-class Chrome browser with all the Android apps available on smartphones, does it even better—in theory. Google has even built its own slate, the \$600 Pixel Slate.

By matching Android apps with a desktop-class Chrome browser, Google's Pixel Slate should have ideal slate software. But it doesn't always work well.

I like the Pixel Slate's design but found the device too frustrating to use. The keyboard attachment didn't work reliably, the software was buggy and even the Bluetooth connections didn't hold. There's a bright future ahead for Chrome OS slates, but I can't recommend the Pixel Slate.

Apple option

Apple | iPad Pro 12.9 \$1,327 Battery Looks Power Versatility

OVERVIEW

Apple's tablet is still the best one on the market, but without more versatile software the iPad Pro still can't hack it as a full-fledged computer.

Note: Total cost includes device, keyboard and pen.

No matter what Apple wants you to think, and no matter how fast its processor, Apple's latest iPad Pro can't fully replace a laptop. There are just too many things it can't do—or can't do well—such as juggling multiple open windows and handling a wide variety of file types. The combination of Mac and iPad could be incredible—a computer that looked like the MacBook Air, but had a detachable touchscreen and could run iOS apps, is precisely the device I've been waiting for. I'm not holding my breath, though.

Best option

| Surface Pro 6 Microsoft \$1,128 Battery Looks Power Versatility

OVERVIEW

Fast, versatile and long-lasting, the Surface Pro 6 is a solid all-around slate. But it doesn't come cheap.

Note: Total cost includes device, keyboard and pen.

No computer is perfect for everyone, but in my testing the best overall option, the jack of all slate trades, is Microsoft's new Surface Pro 6. Hardly anyone has been making slates longer than Microsoft, and this is proof the company's dedication to the form wasn't crazy. The Pro 6 is powerful but portable, equally at home on my lap or my desk, and handy whether I'm using the Type Cover keyboard or the Surface Pen stylus.

In my testing, I used the Surface Pro 6 everywhere I'd take a laptop—and a few places I never would. It's been in crowded subway cars and on airplane tray tables, on the couch and in my bed. I use it for work all day and for Netflix after dark. It felt at home in every spot. Its only real problem is its odd selection of ports: Rather than versatile, future-looking USB-C, the Pro 6 offers only standard USB and Mini DisplayPort.

The Pro is also an expensive machine. You won't want to buy it without also buying a Type Cover and a Surface Pen, which means you're on the hook for at least \$1,129. You can get a regular laptop with similar specs for a lot less. Still, think of the Pro as not only replacing your workhorse laptop but also the tablet you'd use to watch "Sherlock" before bed. When it comes to computers, fewer is definitely better.

For years, tech companies have been looking for ways to separate the two parts of a laptop. Just... not like this.

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Appeared in the December 3, 2018, print edition as 'Slate PCs Take Shape.'