

MacBook Neo review: My biggest concern with Apple's near-perfect budget laptop

Apple's new \$599 MacBook Neo is a snappy 13-inch that feels a lot like its older siblings, but I can't help but wonder how it'll hold up after a few years.

Written by Kyle Kucharski, Editor
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Apple MacBook Neo

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very good

ZDNET's key takeaways

- Pros: It succeeds as an entry-level MacBook, has great battery life, and performs well within its intended use case.
- Cons: Modest hardware has real limitations, competitive PCs and Chromebooks still exist, and its longevity and durability are big question marks.

When Apple announced the [MacBook Neo](#) -- the new, affordable, 13-inch laptop running on an iPhone chip -- it prefaced the announcement by saying it was redefining what a MacBook could be. Once known for its performance and exclusivity, the MacBook Pro now has a far more affordable alternative, starting at \$599.

But Macs weren't always thought of this way. The iconic iMacs of the 2000s and Macintosh computers before that -- although not cheap -- lacked the same "luxury tech" connotations. The Neo speaks to a design ambition largely absent from the MacBook over the last several years: accessibility.

In a way, accessibility is harder to address than simply pushing hardware to its limits. But Apple's mature technology portfolio -- combined with decades of design insights into the MacBook form -- has resulted in a laptop that leverages both.

The Neo is nothing if not a successful balancing act between usability and exclusivity, and its addition to the market is a turning point for Apple, but more importantly -- its Windows and Chromebook competitors.



Apple MacBook Neo

The newest Mac model features a 13-inch Liquid Retina display, an A19 chipset, and the MacOS features we've come to expect.

The MacBook experience... almost

The MacBook Neo feels a lot like a MacBook Air from a couple of years ago. The A18 Pro chip in the Neo is a six-core CPU, five-core GPU system with 60GB/s memory bandwidth, and one less GPU core than the iPhone 16 Pro. Paired with the 8GB of unified memory, you've got enough horsepower for everyday tasks, but that's about it.

And that's okay; the Neo is not a pro device, it's an entry-level laptop for web browsing, working with documents in the cloud, and multitasking across Apple's apps -- things plenty of people do on laptops (many of whom have iPhones... more on that in a minute).

Physically, the 2.7-pound Neo looks just like its more expensive siblings, except for the new colorways (Citrus, Indigo, Blush, and Silver). It mimics the MacBook Air/Pro experience well enough, and the trade-offs to keep prices low are smart.



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For example, the Liquid Retina IPS display looks almost as good as a MacBook Air. It's not as bright, and the slightly thicker bezels point toward its modest price point, but it's still crisp and clear at 500 nits of brightness and a 2408 x 1506 resolution. It's certainly better than many of the similarly priced Windows competitors.

At the top of the display (and all but invisible) is the 1080p FaceTime HD camera, which isn't quite as crisp as the 12MP Center Stage cameras found on new MacBooks, but is again much better than most PCs at this price point. Paired with Continuity and iPhone mirroring, the webcam on the MacBook offers a far more seamless, functional experience than the grainy, medieval cameras found on most budget PCs.

Also: [How the MacBook Neo compares to its closest Windows and Chromebook rivals - by the specs](#)

Likewise, the keyboard is nothing fancy, but it's instantly recognizable as Apple's functional Magic Keyboard, with just enough key travel and response, if slightly mushy. They also don't have backlighting, which is a smart cost-cutting measure in my opinion, since I rarely turn it on anyway.

Following in that vein, the Neo's trackpad foregoes haptics in favor of a mechanical design without sacrificing much. Apple knows how to design a trackpad, and what you get here is, again (noticing a theme here?), far better than many PCs in the same price range. It's appropriately sized, centered, and offers enough room for your two hands to comfortably rest on either side without worrying about false inputs.

Regarding connectivity, the Neo has two USB-C ports (no Thunderbolt) and a 3.5mm audio jack. The port closest to the top is a USB-C 3 port, which supports charging and DisplayPort with transfer speeds up to 10 Gb/s. The port closer to the trackpad is a USB-2 port that also supports charging but has a transfer speed limited to 480 Mb/s.

The two openings near the front are the laptop's dual speakers with support for Spatial Audio and Dolby Atmos, and they sound just fine for a \$599 laptop.

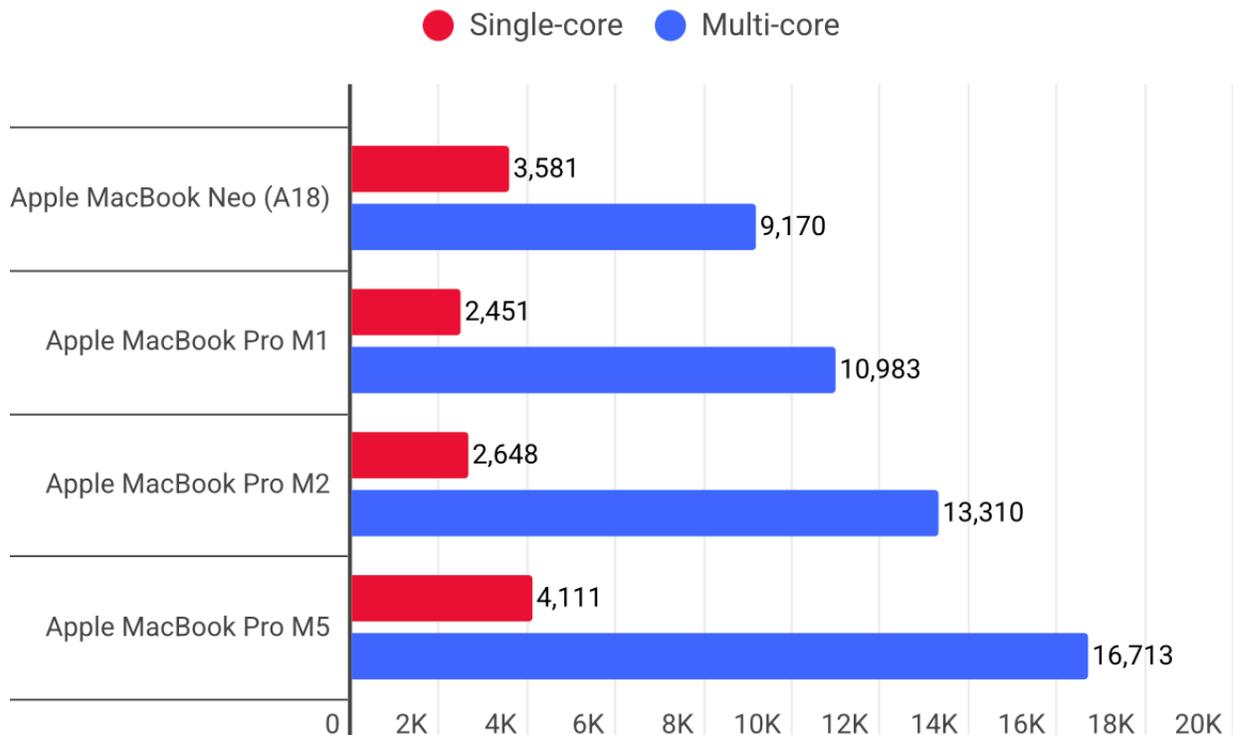


Lastly, its battery life is fantastic. This laptop easily lasts the entire day at the office and then some. Apple hardly has a monopoly on impressive battery performance these days, but it is without a doubt near the top at this price point.

The big picture

I haven't been using the Neo long -- only about four days now, but I dig it, because I feel like my expectations for its performance were realistic. As a work device, it's handled everything I've thrown at it, but for me, that means working out of the browser, navigating large files in Google Sheets, taking video calls, and light photo/video work. Sure, it only supports one external 4K display with the lid open, but that's hardly a deal-breaker.

Benchmarking results position the Neo around the MacBook Pro M1 in terms of performance. In fact, the A18 Pro beats the M1 in single-core benchmarking and is



only edged out by the M1's GPU. This makes it snappy and efficient for the tasks I just mentioned, but not as equipped for demanding ones.

When compared to other PCs and Chromebooks in the same price range, the Neo offers solid performance across typical workflows, but brings the MacBook experience to the table in a way previously reserved for mid- and upper-tier devices. Lenovo's Chromebook Plus 14 is one such premium Chromebook that is an easy comparison.

With a 14-inch, 2K OLED display, up to 16GB of RAM, and a MediaTek processor, that laptop offers a comparable user experience but with double the RAM for just \$50 more. You're getting better hardware and more memory on that machine (which also has an absolute marathon battery) but essentially paying for Apple's brand recognition.

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The Neo also has one thing the PCs and Chromebooks don't: iPhone integrations. It's a compelling entry-level product designed to resonate with the millions of potential

converts who already have iPhones but have never used a MacBook (or previously couldn't afford one).

It's a clever hook for Apple and one that will undeniably secure future MacBook Air and Pro sales down the line as iPhone users (especially young consumers) approach the Neo as an entry point into MacOS. I also wouldn't be the first to point to the naming reference to Keanu Reeve's character in "The Matrix", an anagram for "ONE".

A future with Neo



Kyle Kucharski/ZDNET

I have some concerns about the Neo's longevity. I have a near 10-year-old MacBook (yes, it still works), but one of the first things to go was the keys. At this point, they have almost no key travel and deliver multiple inputs on each keystroke. I can't help but wonder what kind of longevity we're looking at with an even cheaper machine.

Apple's argument would likely be that laptop build components are better now than they were 10 years ago, and the Neo is certainly better designed than Intel MacBooks from 2016. But in making a more accessible, mass-produced product, will we see resellers slinging stacks of half-working Neos in five or 10 years? Stacks of orange-colored laptops with missing keys going for \$99 a pop?

Also: Apple reportedly working on 'Ultra' lineup of devices in 2026 - including this foldable iPhone

While other manufacturers are making laptops that are more repairable and modular, Apple has just unleashed a horde of cheap laptops with neither of these qualities into the world, potentially adding millions of tons of e-waste to the ever-growing mass. The effects on the consumer market are yet to be seen.

The software side of things is just as much of a question. Once that 256GB of storage is used up, the prompts to upgrade your iCloud storage will start to hit, and it might not be an option for some.

ZDNET's buying advice

The [MacBook Neo](#) is now on preorder, with general availability starting on March 11th. It starts at [\\$599](#), but is available for students and educators for [\\$499](#), with a few caveats we've already looked into.

Just keep in mind that the \$599 configuration only offers 256GB of storage, which isn't enough to serve as a main driver for most folks. If you want the 512GB SSD, the price jumps to \$699, putting you right on the edge of MacBook Air territory, though you'll also get a Touch ID key with the upgrade.

Ultimately, the Neo is worth it only if you're committed to using it for what it's designed for: everyday tasks, internet browsing, media, and iPhone integrations. For those purposes, it's a snappy, battery-efficient laptop. If you want to push beyond that, know it won't exactly replicate the performance of a M-series chip in a MacBook Air or Pro -- but you already have plenty of options for that.



Apple's \$599 MacBook Neo hands-on: The budget laptop we've all been waiting for?

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