



# iPad or E-Reader: Which should you buy this holiday season?

*Are you the first one on the block with the latest techie toy? Decide what you really want and what it really costs*



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It was only January 2010 that Steve “Moses” Jobs descended from Mount Cupertino talking about tablets for the masses. Commanded by a superior power to call it the iPad, the device went on sale in April and, given its enormously successful debut, everyone is in a race to compete with it.

The most perplexing issue right now is that here we are, a few weeks before Christmas, and there is mass confusion on “what is what” in terms of these tablets. Simply put, people have no idea what they are looking for, what things will cost or where to get what they need.

On the one end there are basic black and white e-readers. On the other end are the iPad type machines, supposedly high-end devices (they are not) with a high price to match. (Take note: This article is *not* about tablet PCs. Those have been around for ages and tablet PCs are a different and more complex device, as compared to an iPad or an e-reader. So if you need a tablet PC, this article won't help you.)

### First – Some questions

Why do you want a tablet multi-media device (Hereinafter “tablet MMD”) or e-reader? Do you want a tablet MMD for viewing Internet content or do you desire an e-reader to curl up in bed and read a favorite digital book?

On today's tablet MMD you can check e-mails, upload and download files, view photographs, hang out on Facebook and Twitter, get social networking updates, etc. But it's a waste to pay for data/net access on the tablet MMD if you use it only infrequently to log onto the Net.

Personally, all of that functionality is redundant because I get e-mails on my cell phone, use my desktops

for the heavy work and there's nothing I need to do on a tablet that is so urgent that it can't wait.

Plus, as you will see below, such functionality may cost you big time. Assuming, for example, the tablet MMD costs you \$400 plus \$50 monthly for a data plan (after fees and taxes are included), that totals \$1600 over a two-year timeframe to operate what actually is an extremely limited computer.

### How to talk the talk

Let's start with a list of technical terms, features, functionality, and nomenclature using brief “Twitter





Tweet” style descriptions so you know what to look for in a tablet MMD or e-reader.

- **e-book format:** The format of e-books is something many people fail to consider when buying a tablet/e-reader. Most people assume their new device will download and display any book they purchase on the Internet. Alas, such is not the way it works.

As odd as it may sound in 2010, there are a variety of e-book formats used to digitally create *and* publish e-books. What you do have to be concerned about is that a tablet you really like may not be able to read your favorite e-books! Find out which e-book formats a particular device will read. Some read all but the most obscure formats, some only one or two (usually because of a licensing disagreement). The big downer, of course, is finding a tablet MMD or e-reader that you really want, only to find out it won't read the e-books you plan on buying.

- **Operating System (“OS”):** Android-based tablets and e-readers are just now coming to market (since June 2010). My prediction is that it will become the most common tablet OS. Why? It's fast, compact, can be put on small devices such as cell phones and tablets, and people are familiar with it since it's on many smartphones. Moreover, it's easy to use, ubiquitous, and cheap for manufacturers to include on their devices.

**Note:** Keep in mind that the sub-cheapo e-readers (meaning less than \$100) will have some unknown, unsupported, proprietary, turtle-slow, buggy operating system on it. Buy the bargain at your peril.

Other proprietary operating systems include software to run the iPad, Amazon's Kindle and Sony e-readers. Even Microsoft will soon have an e-reader OS (probably based on its new smartphone OS, Windows Phone 7 or “WP7.”)

If I was going to gamble on an OS that would be “current” longer than six months or so, I'd go with a tablet MMD or e-reader that has Android 2.1 or later on it.

- **Form factor:** This is a technical term in product design. It includes height, width, shape, physical features and thickness. What's important for you is how the device feels in *your* hands. If the device is awkward to hold or if it's too heavy, you are not going to enjoy sitting upright in bed reading a book, online magazine or newspaper.

Form factor is why it's critical for you to visit a local electronics store to see how you and a device you might “adopt” get along. If you can't stand the way a device feels in your hands, if you can't imagine feeling great after holding it for an hour straight, then put the darn thing down and consider something else. (To me, the iPad is too big and too heavy. It's an awkward device to hold. I can now understand why Apple is pushing people to buy a stand for it.)

- **Upgradeability:** With new versions of Android OS coming out every month, or so it seems, on any device where you are spending \$250 to \$500, you should look for the manufacturer's statement on the device's ability to upgrade. Truth be told, most devices made nowadays are capable of what's called “firmware” upgrades, so it's more a matter of if the manufacturer will give you one. If it does not provide upgrades it's because the manufacturer wants you to buy a replacement device next year.

Apple is famous for locking down its devices and coming out each year with new versions that require you to buy a new device if you want the upgraded features. In contrast, most all other manufacturers provide upgrades one to two years into a device's debut.

- **Net connection:** If you intend to use your tablet/e-reader to access the Net, before buying a device you need to decide how you will be doing that. Do you want 24/7 convenience of being anywhere to look something up on the Net or do you not mind your net access being limited to when you have a WiFi connection?

**WiFi** – WiFi is a wireless connection to the Internet. You are basically tapping

into or “borrowing” a Net to connect your tablet MMD or e-reader to the Net. The most common WiFi connection is the one in your house, assuming you have a “wireless router” set up, running from your home broadband or DSL connection. Outside of the home, you can typically get free Net connections (free WiFi) at Starbucks, cafés, airports, trains, etc.

WiFi is *not* the same as getting a 3G data connection from a wireless carrier. For 24/7 anywhere-anytime convenience, you need a 3G signal from a wireless carrier (AT&T, Verizon, Sprint, T-Mobile, etc.). Don't be confused. WiFi has nothing to do with a wireless carrier. WiFi is simply a little chip and antenna inside your device. It's a radio transmitter and receiver. A WiFi connection is usually found inside your home or office, or at a Starbucks or other location offering “free internet.” If you will mostly use your tablet MMD or e-reader near WiFi signals, it makes no sense to pay \$1000 for a wireless carrier's data access.

**3G** – This is a mobile device (cell phones included) connection speed designation. Old phones connected at 2G (many still do). Newer phones connect at 3G, and the latest, hottest phones connect at 4G in a few areas of the country.

Since tablet MMDs and e-readers are considered mobile electronic devices, the devices have the same mobile speed designations as cell phones. (Note: I have not seen any 4G tablet MMDs or e-readers, yet.)

Carrier data plan pricing approximately ranges from \$15 to \$35. Assuming \$25 average, the advantage to paying \$25 monthly for a tablet MMD data plan is if you intend to use the device extensively on the road, away from a WiFi connection.

3G becomes relevant if you buy a discounted tablet MMD from a cell phone provider (such as Verizon, AT&T or T-Mobile). The carrier will offer you the device at a subsidized price (discount) in return for your agreeing to pay for a monthly data charge on the device.



What this means is that in return for paying \$25 monthly, for example, the carrier will allow you to use the tablet MMD to connect to the Internet, anytime or anywhere that you can get a carrier signal. Pencil this out over two years and you can see how this arguably “niche device” can get quite expensive. (E.g., \$1000 with T-Mobile; \$400 for a subsidized Samsung Tab tablet + \$25 x 24 month for data.)

**BlueTooth** – This is a short range, low power radio signal emitted by the transmitter/receiver inside the device. Wireless mice and keyboards use a form of Bluetooth. On any tablet you are considering, see if it has the better quality Bluetooth, “2.1” which allows, for example, wireless transmission of stereo signals to a stereo headset.

**USB port** – A manufacturer who wants to provide the most versatility for the lowest cost will provide common peripherals and accessories that connect to the tablet via the device’s USB port. For example, instead of forcing people to buy a costly external keyboard (for typing e-mails) some tablets can connect a generic keyboard via a tablet’s USB port.

**Network port** – A/K/A the Ethernet connection, this is simply the port that looks like an over-sized phone jack. It allows your device to use a wired network (like in most offices) rather than WiFi. Some tablet MMDs have one, most don’t. Why not have this “jack”? Mainly it’s because manufacturers and retailers want you to buy the more expensive tablet, the one with WiFi capabilities. One is going to be motivated to buy the more expensive tablet if he is getting WiFi with it.

• **Adobe Flash:** Some tablets have the ability to play flash files, some don’t. This capability is determined by the device’s software, operating system, browser type and licensing.

The cheaper tablets can’t play flash files. This is because the software running the device is outdated, proprietary, or, if Android, it’s an older version that is not able to play Adobe flash files.

“Flash capability” is important if you intend to use your device as an Internet multi-media viewer (e.g., going to newspaper sites, YouTube, TV broadcasting sites such as Hulu, or Google TV). Why flash files? It’s because online videos in flash format are extremely portable and compact. If playing online videos is something you look forward to, make sure the device supports playing flash files.

• **Display Type (Capacitive versus Resistive):** This is important. If you purchase an el cheapo tablet MMD or e-reader most likely it will have a less-costly-to-produce resistive screen. The \$300 to \$800 machines have capacitive displays.

What’s the difference? A frustrating experience, mostly. With a resistive display, when you swipe the screen to turn a book page, for example, it takes more finger pressure and concentration to do so. Also, pressing icons and entering commands on a capacitive screen takes little pressure. (Note, in the old days everything had resistive screens. To deal with the lack of touch sensitivity, devices came with a stylus that made it easy to apply pressure and execute commands.)

• **Resolution and display:** Important to most anyone buying an electronic device with a display is the size of the screen. Everyone wants a large, attractive, brightly lit display. What’s sacrificed with a large display on a tablet MMD or e-reader is portability. At some point a display becomes so large that you might as well just tote around a netbook.

So what is an ideal screen size for these devices? They come in 6” (Kindle), 7” (Samsung Tab) 9”+ (iPad), and even 10” (measured diagonally).

For those with less-than-perfect vision, a display’s native resolution, brightness and clarity are also important. Try reading an e-book on the devices you are considering. Look at an online newspaper. Can you read the material easily, or are you going to tire after 30 minutes of reading. To be sure, if you can’t read an e-book longer than a half hour without needing a break, you should pass on a device with a small display.

• **Light sensor:** This is a power-saving feature since a device’s backlight or LED lighting is the biggest drain on a battery. A light sensor is a great way to get max life out of the device’s battery.

If you are on the redeye flight where all the lights are dimmed or off, the device’s light sensor will automatically dim the display. If sitting at a café during the day, the display will automatically brighten.

• **Accelerometer:** This is a long word that many people have difficulty saying much less understanding what it is. All you need to know is that a “3-axis accelerometer” senses your device’s orientation. If you turn/rotate the device “sideways” 90 degrees (landscape mode) the device senses this and automatically rotates the graphics to match your device’s orientation. Cheaper devices will either not have this automatic rotating feature or it will not be as quick and responsive when rotating, that is, in comparison to the \$500 to \$800 tablets.

• **Accessories and peripherals:** Manufacturers are fully aware that big profits lie in providing users with accessories such as external keyboards, dock, external speakers, stands, cases, power adapters, extended batteries, screen protectors, etc.

An example of a peripheral that can affect a buying decision is the external keyboard. Someone like Apple may require that you buy a proprietary external keyboard while a competitor will include a USB port on the device to which any external keyboard can be connected. So using a keyboard on an iPad might cost you \$50 to \$100 while the competing product can use any keyboard you have collecting dust.

• **SD card:** Expandable memory. Apple does not include SD card slots on many of its products, including the iPad. Arguably, this is so one is motivated to buy the more expensive version of the iPad, 16GB, 32GB or 64GB. In contrast, many competing tablet MMD and e-readers have SD slots so that you can enjoy unlimited storage of media, books and data.



- **Cameras:** Newer tablet MMDs are now coming with two cameras, one on the back and one on the front of the device. The one on the back is for taking pictures and either storing them on the device and/or even instantly e-mailing the pics.

The one on the front is called a “front facing camera” and is used for making video phone calls. “Video chat” is something just now becoming a common feature on smartphones and tablet MMDs.

- **Partnerships:** Tablet manufacturers make the hardware but the devices are useless without software. The big piece of software is obviously the device operating system, but manufacturers or device retailers also enter into partnerships or license agreements for content, such as video, TV shows (Hulu), books, newspapers, TV broadcasters, etc.

A lot of this content costs extra, in the form of subscriptions; the tablet manufacturer simply provides the software preinstalled on the device. When considering a tablet, you will want to look to see what kind of software it comes with and the partnerships the manufacturer or retailer entered into.

- **Battery:** Most tablet MMDs and e-readers I have seen to date do NOT have a user-replaceable battery. So battery life of the device is important. Warning: Use power saving features; 99.9 percent of device manufacturers grossly exaggerate battery life claims.

- **Audio:** Most jacks, where you put your headphone in, are the common 3.5 mm, but if you get a budget brand device, look to see if the manufacturer cut corners by installing an old, outdated 2.5 mm port. You’ll need a 2.5 to 3.5 adapter if that’s the case (\$2 on eBay or even at Radio Shack).

### Shopping tips

My advice to you depends on your answer to this question, do you want a tablet MMD or e-reader *now*, or can you wait until early next year?

Unfortunately, tablets for retailers, tablet MMD and e-readers became popular too late into this year for most manufacturers to get their offerings to market for this holiday shopping season. So you won’t be seeing any bargains on quality devices, similar to what you will see on LCD flat panel televisions.

If you want to simply get your feet wet, so to speak, on using an e-reader (after all, you might buy one and rarely use it) then consider a bargain basement e-reader. For example, the base Kindle is selling now for \$140. The Barnes and Noble Nook, \$130.

I think the iPad or Samsung Galaxy Tab (that just debuted) are way too expensive for what they are (extremely limited multi-media viewing devices). For example, the subsidized price for the Tab at T-Mobile is a whopping \$400, with a two-year data agreement.

Another good reason to wait: While Android-based tablets have gotten a lot of press in recent months, only a handful of cheap, underpowered, off-brand units have actually made it to market.

All said and done, you’re going to have to wait until early next year to see the best, low-priced (\$250) competing products show up. All the big brand names have tablets coming to market in early 2011.

If you must buy something now, I’d stick to name brands of manufacturers who have a great reputation with electronics. I also would avoid unknown brands that are most likely cheap Chinese imports where the product won’t have support and will have a high failure rate. I would *not* get a first generation tablet, from a company that is just appearing on the Net or in stores with its products.

Lastly, before pulling out your credit card, do some research on the Net. A good source is Amazon.com because it’s simple for anyone to post a review on that site and, since Amazon is such a huge marketplace, you will get unvarnished opinions on just about anything.

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