

PRACTICE EXAM – TECHNICAL WRITING – COMPUTER SCIENCE

- Read the laptop descriptions and compare them by putting 5 items of information in the table.
- Write 2 paragraphs comparing the laptops and explain which one you think is better and why?

Acer Aspire 5253 £347



Design and build: like an ultra-portable laptop

Although made entirely from plastic, the Aspire 5253 has a sober and relatively elegant design. However, to the touch it's disappointing. All the plastic parts—both around and under the keyboard—sink in when you press on them. Acer really needs to think about improving the finish on its laptops so as not to put off demanding users. The good news is that only the screen surround (in addition to the screen itself) is glossy, so it's the only area of the laptop that's susceptible to picking up finger prints.

Otherwise, the **keyboard** is almost faultless. Typing is supple and quiet. The keys are all where you'd expect them to be and they're correctly proportioned. The only exception is the 'Enter' key, which you sometimes miss when you reach for it just after pressing on the 'Backspace' key. Otherwise, any typing errors are more likely to be down to you than the keyboard!

The multitouch **touchpad** is good quality and precise, even though we would have liked it to be a good deal bigger. That said, a smooth glide makes it pleasant to use.

The **webcam** image is one of the worst

Apple MacBook Air £847



Hardware, design and build: well finished but with limited connectivity

In general Macbooks are reputed for their impeccable finish. The MacBook Air 11.6-inch is no exception to the rule. Its brushed aluminium shell is not subject to scratches. After carrying it round in a rucksack for three days, a quick once over with a rag was all that was needed. A very nice object to have around!

The **keyboard** with separated keys (15 x 15 mm) is very nice to use. Supple and relatively quiet, it offers good ease of use for word processing. Some might have preferred a slightly different arrangement of the 'fn' key, placing it to the right of 'Ctrl' rather than to the left, but this is a small detail.

The **touchpad** (multi-touch) is made of the same material as the rest of the shell. It takes up a third of the length (10.3 cm x 6.3 cm). The glide is supple and precise. In contrast to the old version of the MacBook Air, the touchpad of the 11.6-inch is clickable. And therefore has no buttons. For those who've never used a Mac touchpad, you put one finger on the touchpad and click with another for the left click. For more information on usage, you can consult the [explanatory](#)

we've seen. Black areas are displayed as a block of colour and movements glitch and lack fluidity. Lighter colours are either dark or underexposed. Anyone buying this laptop should really consider opting for an external webcam too.

To keep the casing as slim as possible (3 cm), Dell has limited connectivity options to the bare essentials. At the front, there's just an SD card reader. On the left, there's a VGA out, an RJ45 (Ethernet) port, an HDMI out, a USB 2.0 port and the mic and headphones sockets. On the right, there's a DVD rewriter and two USB 2.0 ports.

Unless you stick your ear right beside the 5253, you'll have trouble hearing the fan. Temperature levels are well controlled all the same. Even when you work the computer hard, the temperature remains under the 34°C mark.

Processor power: a big netbook

There's no point expecting to be able to do everything you can do with a standard notebook with the Aspire 5253. Our tests show that the AMD E-Series E-350 processor (CPU index 29) offers slightly better performance than an Intel Atom N550 (CPU index: 24). The Aspire 5253 will therefore be limited to office documents and Internet use. Processing times for more demanding applications are simply too long.

High definition video playback (HD 1080p, Blu-ray equivalent) is no problem as long as you use playback software that supports graphics hardware assisted decoding (recent version of VLC, Media Player Classic HD with the right codecs or Power DVD as of version 9). On its own, the processor part can't take you beyond 720p, and so the graphics hardware is also required (AMD Radeon HD 6310).

Windows 7 Home Premium 64-bit takes 49 seconds to boot. You'll need to wait another 5 to 10 seconds for the various background applications to start running (antivirus off). It turns off in 18 seconds.

Gaming: limited ability

The Radeon HD 6310 that's integrated into the APU soon shows its limits. In practice, the Aspire 5253 does reasonably well with a selection of less demanding games, but more

[video](#) on the Apple site.

The **webcam** is obviously not the best ever seen on a laptop. The image is slightly blurry and very rapidly loses detail when in low lighting.

Connectivity isn't very extensive: 2 USB ports, a headphones socket and a mini Display Port out to link up a monitor. And what about the Ethernet RJ45? No longer there. You now have to use a Wi-fi network to connect up... or spend out on a USB/RJ45 adaptor. Apart from the fact that you're being asked to buy something that even the lowest end netbook has, the adaptor will of course also take up one of your two USB ports.

In terms of noise, the machine is inaudible if you don't glue your ear to the side of it. Better still, it remains so even when you push it to take on more demanding tasks.

Processing: mainly office docs and Internet

When you take a look at the spec of this ultra-portable, the processor looks to be the weak link. In practice, performance is very close to what you get on the Dell Inspiron 11z. The Macbook Air has an Intel Core 2 Duo 1.4 GHz and can therefore handle multitasking and is well-adapted to office-doc use. Photo retouching and video editing and encoding are also well within range but it takes its time to complete tasks.

The OS starts up in 19 seconds and it takes under 10 seconds to turn off.

High definition video playback, whether 1080p or 720p, poses no problem. Its Nvidia GT 320M is perfectly able to cope with this sort of task.

Note that there's an SSD, which reduces installation time for software, copying times from an external hard drive and overall responsiveness.

Gaming: very limited

The MacBook Air 11.6-inch hasn't been designed for gaming. However, as long as you're reasonable with your

recent titles only work with the graphics settings turned right down and, more often than not, at low resolutions. These performances aren't really any better than a netbook with an NVIDIA ION 2nd generation graphics chip.

Audio: where are the speakers?

A single, low-power speaker of average quality is a pretty poor show. Don't expect it to be able to fill your flat with noise, then! The headphones out makes up for things slightly, providing a clean audio signal.

Battery life: a nice surprise!

When it comes to battery life, you're in for a pleasant surprise. The Aspire 5253 lasted 4 hrs 30 sec without switching itself off. It's a match for the [MacBook Pro 15-inch](#), which gives 4 hrs 45 sec under the same conditions (Wi-Fi off, headphones plugged in and brightness at 100 cd/m²). Unfortunately, even though the casing is slim, the 15.6-inch screen means the 5253 won't slip into your bag easily. In any case, at 2.6 Kg, it's probably a little too heavy to carry around for more than an hour or two.

graphics settings, the NVIDIA GeForce 320M GPU does honorably well on a few undemanding titles. More recent games work with graphics settings at a minimum, and most often at low resolution.

Audio: headphones de rigueur

The new Air brings... stereo. What joy! Long live new technology! Nevertheless, you have to admit that the placement of the speakers under the keyboard with no dedicated opening does result in pretty good audio as long as you don't push the volume too high. Many other netbooks would do well to follow the example of this model. The headphones out is still as clean as ever.

Mobility, battery life: good enough

Apple claims 5 hours. Our test - video playback, headphones plugged in, screen at 100 cd/m² and Wi-Fi disactivated - gave 4h17. This is reasonable but nothing exceptional. If it's battery life you're after, you're better off going for the [MSI Wind U115](#) which gives over 7 hours. This Apple is however very slim. It slides into a bag and weighs just 1.06 Kg.

TABLE

	Acer Aspire 5253	Apple MacBook Air

