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Why Choose Between Great Photos and Crisp Text?

We test 16 ink jets and find models that do it all at the right price.

Dan Littman
From the January 2002 issue of PC World magazine
Posted Saturday, December 01, 2001

Is the one-hour film lab down the street too slow for you? With a digital camera and a low-cost ink jet printer, you can enjoy instant gratification: Snap pictures during a dinner party and print digital images as guests nibble on dessert. More than ever, an ink jet printer can turn your PC into a surprisingly effective digital photo mart.

Keeping an ink jet handy to print your own snapshots offers advantages over sending a roll of film off to a lab: You can use a graphics application to clean up images before printing them, and resize and combine them in layouts any way you want. And best of all, you don't have to pay for the images that you don't like.

Unless you're a professional photographer, however, photos won't be the only files you'll need to print. Some printers are marketed as being designed especially for photos, while others are supposed to be general-purpose units. Most photo-oriented ink jets do a respectable job of printing letters, spreadsheets, and so on; and many ordinary ink jets print photos pretty darn well. We tested 16 ink jet printers for this review, 13 of which were tagged as general-purpose printers. Of these 13 printers, our panel of image-quality judges gave 9 a photo-quality rating of Good or better. The remaining 3 units were designated as photo printers; these models rated higher for photos, but they cost more. Because they differ substantially from nonphoto models, we did not rank the

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photo-specific printers in our chart, but you can read reviews of the Canon S800, Epson Stylus Photo 785EPX, and HP Photosmart 1315 following the reviews of the nonphoto printers in this story.

The 13 all-purpose ink jets--all from Canon, Compaq, Epson, Hewlett-Packard, or Lexmark--range in price from $80 for Lexmark's Z33 Color Jetprinter to $399 for HP's Color Inkjet Cp1160. Why such different prices? It's partly output speed: In our tests, these models printed text anywhere from 3.8 pages per minute to 6.9 ppm, and showed an even greater spread in graphics--from 0.3 ppm to 1.5 ppm. But the biggest distinctions are in print quality. Epson's Stylus C80 printed beautiful photos but slipped on text, while HP's Cp1160 delivered great output in several categories. (Despite its print quality and attractive features, the latter's steep $399 price kept it off our chart.)

Photo Ink Jet Printers

What distinguishes an ordinary ink jet from a photo ink jet? To a degree, it's the brains under the hood--how precisely the printer and its drivers translate the camera's data into instructions for the printer's ink sprayers. In addition to the traditional cyan, magenta, yellow, and black inks, some photo printers include dilute (as well as regular) versions of cyan and magenta to place more ink dots on the paper, producing richer colors and more accurate highlights in the final output than can be obtained with four inks.

Another, not-so-obvious distinction between the two types of printers involves the inks they use. Photo printers typically employ pigment-based inks, rather than the dye-based inks in most ordinary ink jets. For the first time, pigmented inks have made their way into a non-photo-specific printer, Epson's Stylus C80, which captured first place on our chart. See "Secrets to Print Longevity," to learn more about advances in photo inks and ink jet photo papers.

The photo printers that we tested for this review also differ from each other. Canon's S800 Color Bubble Jet Printer, which costs $300, uses a six-ink engine to produce photos and has a CompactFlash reader. The $199 Epson Stylus Photo 785EPX sports a PC Card slot and an adapter for reading memory cards. You can attach an optional $99 miniature screen to view, modify, and group photos without a PC. Meanwhile, HP's $399 Photosmart 1315 Color Inkjet Printer comes with an infrared receiver for printing from infrared-equipped notebooks and cameras; a built-in LCD screen; and slots that read CompactFlash, SmartMedia, or Sony Memory Stick cards.

One surprise: Photo printers print regular text noticeably slower than ordinary ink jets: Our three photo units averaged 3.1 pages per minute, while the 13 all-purpose models averaged 5.3 ppm. (Both types averaged about 0.8 ppm for graphics.)

Print Tests

To rank the printers, we judged text, line-art, graphics, and photo output from each, using the manufacturer-recommended paper and inks. We used plain paper for all nonphoto tests and photo paper for photos. We timed how long each unit took to produce prints and factored in price, ease of use, features, support policies, and cost of ink.

Several models produced attractive prints, but the Epson Stylus C80 outshined the rest. It was the fastest printer we tested--at both text and graphics--by a healthy margin, and its photo output rivaled that of the photo-specific printers. Nevertheless, other printers, such as the Canon S600 and S300 Color Bubble Jet printers, produced better text.

A note on speed: We previously tested printers over parallel connections. For this story, we retested all units over USB connections, and they posted much better performance numbers, in some cases printing graphics three times as fast.

Dan Littman is a contributing editor, and Alexandra Krasne is an associate editor, for PC World.

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Photograph by: Kevin Candland; Photograph by: Kevin Candland; Photograph by: Kevin Candland

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Secrets to Print Longevity Revealed

If you've ever stuck a print of a digital photo on your refrigerator, you've likely seen it fade quickly. That's because sunlight, fluorescent light, air pollution, and humidity all take a toll on digital prints. So what's the secret to making those prints last?

Keeping photos framed under glass, instead of tacked onto the fridge, offers some protection. Photo longevity also depends on the ink you use. Most photo printers--and a few lower-priced general-purpose ink jets, such as Epson's C80-- use pigment-based inks, which contain small, waterproof color flecks that make the inks more fade-resistant than the water- soluble, dye-based inks that typically last only six months to a year without fading.

Picking Perfect Paper

Paper is another important factor in print longevity. Though there are many different kinds of paper, most fall into either of two groups: porous and nonporous. Nonporous (sometimes called swellable polymer) coatings are composed of ozone- resistant polymer materials, but ink takes longer to dry on them. Microporous coatings, on the other hand, suck up ink like a sponge. The paper dries almost instantly because inks are absorbed into the surface and are held there, but they never completely seal. Microporous paper is so absorbent that it's more susceptible to fading from harmful light and ozone.

Vendors optimize their printers for specific kinds of paper and ink--usually their own proprietary blend--so if you use paper other than what's recommended, your prints may fade quickly.

"Papers that are designed to be compatible with all brands of

printers suffer from serious design constraints," says Henry Wilhelm, founder and president of Wilhelm Imaging Research. "These papers can't be for optimized any particular printer. Unless there is specific information on the permanence [of prints] on the paper, you are really flying blind."

Longevity Tests

Wilhelm's lab derives the longevity of glass-filtered and unprotected papers and inks by conducting accelerated light exposure tests that simulate typical fluorescent-lit indoor display conditions. By putting prints in a controlled environment and increasing the amount of light a typical room would receive in a day, Wilhelm can induce fading, changes in color balance, and staining normally occurring over months or years of display.

In his tests, prints made with Epson's C80 printer, using Epson's DuraBrite pigmented inks and Archival Matte Paper, were extremely lightfast, lasting up to the equivalent of 70 years on display before any fading occurred.

Prints from HP's Deskjet 970, when used with that company's Colorfast Photo Paper and HP cartridge number 78 dye-based inks, can last 18 to 20 years when displayed under glass, says Wilhelm, and 10 to 13 years without glass (about the same longevity as prints from the silver halide film used in a traditional camera).

On the other end of the spectrum, consider Wilhelm's tests of the now-discontinued Lexmark Z51 Color Jetprinter with its 12A1990 Photo inks and Lexmark Photo Paper (one introduced in 1998 and another in 1999). The 1998 paper showed noticeable fading after the equivalent of two to three years, while its 1999 paper showed fading occurring in less than a year.

Lexmark has developed new inks for the Z23 and Z33 Color Jetprinters that it says last longer, but it hasn't made claims about archivability. Wilhelm is currently conducting longevity tests.

--Alexandra Krasne

Photograph by: Kevin Candland

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Rank	Ink jet printers	Street price (10/26/01)	Overall rating	Vendor's rated speed for monochrome/ color (ppm)	Tested speed for plain text/full-page graphics (ppm)	Maximum resolution	Print quality for text	Print quality for graphics	Print quality for photos	Input/output capacity (sheets)	Cost per page for monochrome/ color (cents)	Comments
1	**Best Buy** Epson Stylus C80	$179	93	12/5	6.9/1.5	2880 by 720	Adequate	Good	Very good	150/30	3.8/12.5	The lightning-fast Stylus C80 uses pigment-based inks, so photos should last longer than those from other printers on the chart. ★★★★
2	**Best Buy** Lexmark Z53 Color Jetprinter	$130	92	16/8	5.9/0.6	2400 by 1200	Good	Very good	Adequate	100/50	5.1/18.9	The Z53 printed text considerably faster than the Z43, but is otherwise very similar. Colors appeared too bright in photo tests. ★★★★
3	Lexmark Z43 Color Jetprinter	$100	91	12/6	4.6/0.6	2400 by 1200	Good	Good	Adequate	100/50	5.1/18.9	The Z43 delivered clean text; crisp, narrow parallel lines; and detailed, realistic color graphics. Photos were washed out and somewhat fuzzy. ★★★½
4	Canon S600 Color Bubble Jet Printer	$149	90	15/10	6.2/0.7	2400 by 1200	Very good	Good	Good	100/50	2/10.7	The S600 produced clean text in our tests. Though dark in places, color graphics showed subtle shading and good detail. ★★★
5	Canon S300 Color Bubble Jet Printer	$99	87	11/7.5	5.1/0.8	2400 by 1200	Very good	Good	Good	100/50	2.3/12.1	The S300's text output quality was clean with fine details. Photo output looked good, though slightly washed out. ★★★½
6	Canon S500 Color Bubble Jet Printer	$149	85	12/8	5.8/0.7	2400 by 1200	Good	Very good	Very good	100/50	2/10.7	Canon bundles digital photo album and panoramic photo-stitching software. Graphics quality ranks among the best. Photos showed good detail. ★★★½
7	Epson Stylus C60	$99	84	12/8	5.6/1.4	2880 by 720	Adequate	Adequate	Good	100/30	5/15	The Stylus C60 printed subtle details quite well in test photos. Photos looked good, but showed a slightly red cast. ★★★★
8	HP Deskjet 940c Color Inkjet Printer	$149	80	12/10	4.7/0.7	2400 by 1200	Good	Good	Good	150/50	6/13.8	Gray-scale images looked wonderful in our tests; glossy photos displayed great detail and texture, but were too dark. ★★★★
9	HP Deskjet 845c Color Inkjet Printer	$99	79	8/5	3.8/0.5	600 by 1200	Adequate	Good	Very good	100/50	6/13.7	Unit delivers smooth, detailed gray-scale images and superb highlights and shadows on photos. A bit slow, but an excellent option for inexpensive photo printing. ★★★½

| 10 | Lexmark Z33 Color Jetprinter | $80 | 71 | 8/5 | 3.8/0.5 | 1200 by 1200 | Good | Very good | Adequate | 100/50 | 7/18.6 | Text looked clean and evenly weighted, though its grayish tone lacked the punch of some black inks. Photos were grainy and fuzzy. ★★★☆☆ |

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Epson Stylus C80

Zippy performance, reasonable purchase price and ink costs, and high-quality photo graphics make this model a good bet for anyone not concerned with top-quality text.

Dan Littman
Sunday, November 18, 2001

WHAT'S HOT: First, speed. The Stylus C80 tops the chart at 6.9 ppm for text and 1.5 ppm for graphics. We liked the good shading and lighting of its color graphics, and glossy photos looked luscious, with realistic detail and textures. Epson also cuts you some slack on ink costs, at only 3.8 cents per page for black and 12.5 cents per page for color. Because the Stylus C80 uses pigment-based inks instead of dye-based ones, photos are less susceptible to the effects of light, humidity, and air pollution--and therefore should last much longer.

WHAT'S NOT: The Stylus C80 produced pale, rough text. In our line pair tests, it made narrow parallel lines that overlapped into a pinstripe pattern.

WHAT ELSE: The Stylus C80's boxy, oddly attractive shape bears a passing resemblance to a toaster oven, but the unit feels sturdier than most low-cost printers.

UPSHOT: This $179 unit makes a fine choice for high-volume home-office printing, and it doubles as a great photo printer.

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Lexmark Z53 Color Jetprinter
"I'm a text machine!" says the Z53, but it's pretty good on graphics too.

Dan Littman
Sunday, November 18, 2001

WHAT'S HOT: At a zippy 5.9 ppm, the Z53 Color Jetprinter printed text considerably faster than its Z43 sibling in tests, but otherwise the two performed similarly. In fact, we could barely tell their black-and-white print samples apart, though the Z53's color prints were slightly better on detail and shading.

WHAT'S NOT: Lexmark's price for black ink is 5.1 cents per page of text, and color prints are a daunting 18.9 cents each.

WHAT ELSE: The Z53 produced lackluster photos in tests. When we used photo paper with ordinary inks, however, we got some attractive photos.

UPSHOT: Home-office users looking for an inexpensive, speedy text printer will find value in this $130 model.

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Lexmark Z43 Color Jetprinter

The Z43 delivers the most printer for your money in Lexmark's lineup.

Dan Littman
Sunday, November 18, 2001

WHAT'S HOT: The Z43 Color Jetprinter bags third place thanks to its low $100 price tag and consistent output. In our tests, the printer delivered clean text; crisp, narrow parallel lines; and detailed, realistic color graphics.

WHAT'S NOT: There's no bypass feed for printing a single envelope or sheet of letterhead without emptying the paper tray. In addition, the output tray seems flimsy. Earning a score of Adequate in our photo tests, the Z43's photo prints looked a bit fuzzy and washed out. The Z43's ink costs are the same as those for the Z53: 18.9 cents per page of color and 5.1 cents for text. Lexmark sells a specialized photo ink cartridge for the Z43, but even using that cartridge's inks failed to yield great results on our photo test.

WHAT ELSE: The Z43's speed scores of 4.6 ppm for text and 0.6 ppm for graphics were a tad slow.

UPSHOT: This model is a good deal for anyone who wants high-quality text output. For photos, another printer on this chart would be a better choice.

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Canon S600 Color Bubble Jet Printer
Fast printing, sharp text, and a reasonable price mark the S600.

Dan Littman
Sunday, November 18, 2001

WHAT'S HOT: Canon's $149 S600 produced clean, attractive text and accurate narrow parallel lines in our tests. Color graphics showed subtle shading and good detail, though they were dark in places. In photos, we saw lifelike flesh tones with realistic highlights and shadows. The S600 printed text at a zippy 6.2 ppm and graphics at 0.7 ppm. Its ink costs tie with those of the S500 as the lowest on the chart, at 2 cents a page for black text and 10.7 cents per page for color. The separate ink tanks each have a low-ink sensor that alerts you when the well is almost dry.

WHAT'S NOT: The S600 had trouble with gray-scale graphics: Output was unappealingly gritty and dotty, with an occasional missing line that left a white stripe across the image.

WHAT ELSE: The driver packs special features, such as a duotone effect to simulate old-fashioned sepia, and a way to combine your document with any external image file--for example, stripes, photos, even a scan of a business form--to give the appearance of stationery. The software CD includes panoramic stitching and digital photo album software.

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UPSHOT: A reasonable price tag and modest ink costs make the Canon S600 a good choice for the frugal, but its fast text printing means that you can use this model in the home office, too.

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Canon S300 Color Bubble Jet Printer

WHAT'S HOT: Canon priced the S300 at only $99, yet gave it enough oomph to churn out text at a speedy 5.1 ppm and graphics at 0.8 ppm. And despite the low buy-in, ink costs only 2.3 cents per page of black and 12.1 cents per color page. We also liked the S300's text output quality, which was clean throughout and preserved serifs and other fine details.

WHAT'S NOT: Photo output looked good, although slightly washed out with some feathering on the edges. However, the S300 did not fare particularly well on our test file of narrow lines, and it rendered rough-looking, streaked gray-scale graphics with little detail. The unit also makes a racket, even when idle.

WHAT ELSE: Canon provides an excellent online manual with wizards. This printer offers only a USB connector--you won't find serial or parallel connectors. The software CD-ROM includes PhotoRecord digital photo album software.

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UPSHOT: The S300's low purchase price plus its reasonable ink costs equal a great value for this all-purpose printer.

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Canon S300 Color Bubble Jet Printer
★★★☆☆
Rated 11-ppm monochrome/7.5-ppm color, 2400-by-1200-dpi maximum resolution, 100 sheets input, 50 output.
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Canon S500 Color Bubble Jet Printer

WHAT'S HOT: The S500's graphics quality ranks among the best on our chart. We especially liked the great detail and realistic highlighting and textures of photos on glossy paper. Another advantage: cheap ink. With this printer, your cost is only 2 cents per text page and just 10.7 cents per page of color graphics--the S500 ties its cousin the S600 as the least-expensive model on our chart to operate. Over its USB connection, the S500 also performed quickly, delivering text at 5.8 ppm and graphics at 0.7 ppm.

WHAT'S NOT: The ink bled somewhat on our text samples, and letters appeared slightly jagged in places. Though the paper trays look sturdy, they fall off if you bump them accidentally.

WHAT ELSE: The S500 sports a parallel port for legacy PCs. Its useful software bundle includes Canon's PhotoRecord digital photo album software and PhotoStitch for combining several side-by-side photos into one panoramic image.

UPSHOT: The $149 S500's combination of print quality and ink value makes it well suited for personal use, but its middling text quality may deter business users.

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S500
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Canon S500 Color Bubble Jet Printer
★★★★⯪☆
Rated 12-ppm monochrome/8-ppm color, 2400-by-1200-dpi maximum resolution, 100 sheets input, 50 output.
$149
800/652-2666
www.usa.canon.com

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Epson Stylus C60

WHAT'S HOT: The Stylus C60's blazing graphics speed (1.4 ppm) tops that of all other recent ink jets except its bigger sibling, the Stylus C80, and it prints text at the rapid clip of 5.6 ppm--an impressive rate for a $99 machine. We also liked its subtly detailed, glossy photos.

WHAT'S NOT: Most of the C60's print results didn't wow us: Text was marked with hatching along the edges and exhibited a slight waver or wiggle; narrow parallel lines printed with a patchwork pattern. Gray-scale images looked grainy and lacked shading; and even color graphics failed to capture detail and texture.

WHAT ELSE: Color ink costs run high at 15 cents per page.

UPSHOT: The C60 won't win converts for most forms of output, but it works well as a penny-pincher's photo printer.

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Epson Stylus C60
★★★★☆
Rated 12-ppm monochrome/8-ppm color. 2880-by-720 dpi maximum resolution, 100 sheets input, 30 output.
$99
800/463-7766
www.epson.com

Next Page: HP Deskjet 940c Color Inkjet Printer

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HP Deskjet 940c Color Inkjet Printer

WHAT'S HOT: The Deskjet 940c printed narrow lines well, and gray-scale images looked wonderful in our tests, even on ordinary paper. Graphics and glossy photographs retained fine detail and texture, but graphics had too much cyan and glossies were somewhat dark. A superb online manual includes informative animations. The driver's handy graphics mode makes graphics legible for copying or faxing.

WHAT'S NOT: HP provides a miserly 90-day limited warranty with only 30 days of telephone support and no toll-free number. We rated the printer's speed as average, at 4.7 ppm for text and 0.7 ppm for graphics in tests. Output text looked grayish, and large letters showed minor hatching around the edges.

WHAT ELSE: An $80 duplexer lets you print on both sides of a page. HP's black ink costs a steepish 6 cents per page; color prints are a reasonable 13.8 cents each.

UPSHOT: The $149 price is right, and performance and print quality are fine, but a chintzy warranty gives us pause.

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HP Deskjet 940c Color Inkjet Printer
★★★★☆
Rated 12-ppm monochrome/10-ppm color, 2400-by-1200-dpi maximum resolution, 150 sheets input, 50 output.
$149
888/999-4747
www.hp.com

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HP Deskjet 845c Color Inkjet Printer

WHAT'S HOT: Despite its $99 price, the Deskjet 845c delivers impressive-quality output: smooth, detailed gray-scale and color graphics, plus superb highlights and shadows on glossy photos. It even does well on narrow parallel lines. The Deskjet 845c's power supply, though enormous, has unusually long cords on both ends so you can stow this printer under a desk.

WHAT'S NOT: Text pages printed at a leisurely 3.8 ppm in our tests. Most other units we tested outperformed the 845c's speed of 0.5 ppm on graphics. Black ink is pricey at 6 cents per page; color ink runs 13.7 cents per page. HP covers the 845c with a very short 90-day warranty.

WHAT ELSE: HP includes a great online manual. The 845c supports USB only.

UPSHOT: Despite its slow printing speeds, HP's Deskjet 845c provides top-notch graphics quality for the money.

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HP Deskjet 845c Color Inkjet Printer
★★★☆☆
Rated 8-ppm monochrome/5-ppm color, 600-by-1200-dpi maximum resolution, 100 sheets input, 50 output.
$99
888/999-4747
www.hp.com

Next Page: Lexmark Z33 Color Jetprinter

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Lexmark Z33 Color Jetprinter

WHAT'S HOT: At $80, the Lexmark Z33 Color Jetprinter is one of the least expensive ink jets on the market. Text looked clean and evenly weighted in our tests, though its grayish tone lacked the solid punch of some black inks. Graphics looked better, with bright, realistic colors and subtle shading.

WHAT'S NOT: The Z33's ink costs are steep at 7 cents per black text page and 18.6 cents per graphics page. Photos looked attractive on glossy paper. The unit ran slowly: Text came out at 3.8 ppm and graphics at 0.5 ppm. The Z33 has only a USB port--no parallel port.

WHAT ELSE: The printer's driver features an interesting innovation: On-screen flags stick out from each tab to display a summary of all the settings you've selected.

UPSHOT: The Z33's price is attractive, but ink costs may catch up with you later.

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Lexmark Z33 Color Jetprinter

★★★☆☆

Rated 8-ppm monochrome/5-ppm color, 1200-by-1200-dpi maximum resolution, 100 sheets input, 50 output.
$80
888/539-6275
www.lexmark.com

Next Page: Beyond the Top 10: Canon S630 Color Bubble Jet

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Canon S630 Color Bubble Jet

WHAT'S HOT: We retested the S630 using its USB interface; as a result, text speed increased from 3.9 pages per minute to 6.3 ppm, and graphics speed jumped from 0.3 ppm to 0.7 ppm. The Canon S630 Bubble Jet closely resembles its sibling, the less expensive S500, but ultimately comes out ahead in print quality. On text documents, the S630 produces clean letters and evenly spaced and textured serifs. Like the S500, the S630 prints slightly dark graphics with sharp details and even textures. Another shared advantage of both models is low ink costs: At 2.0 cents per page for text and 10.7 cents for graphics, the inks are a bargain. Canon provides a clear setup guide along with a more extensive and well-illustrated online user manual.

WHAT'S NOT: Although photo output looked good, the colors were a bit off: Skin tones appeared slightly ruddy. If you're planning to print photos, your $200 would be better spent on a model like the Epson Stylus 785EPX. Like the S500, the S630 has poorly attached paper-feed and output trays that fall off easily when you move or bump them.

WHAT ELSE: Generally, the S630 is almost identical to the S500--it has the same dimensions, the same purple shell and silver-speckled lid, and the same connectivity options (a USB port for new PCs and a parallel port for older PCs). Canon bundles the same useful software, too, including PhotoRecord, for designing documents using photographic images, and PhotoStitch, for joining several side-by-side photos into a single panoramic image.

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As on the S500, drivers bundled with the S630 include lots of features, but you may have to do some exploring to feel comfortable with them. For example, the S630 lets you create

watermarks or superimpose an external file on the printed document (such as adding a letterhead image to a document), and it even lets you convert an image into a duotone using black and any color on the color wheel.

UPSHOT: Though it's no home-office dynamo, the S630 provides better text quality than the S500 and does a nice job on low-resolution snapshots. The fast text speed and good text quality make it a good choice for a home office.

Buying Information

Canon S630 Color Bubble Jet
★★★☆☆
Rated 17 ppm monochrome/12 ppm color; 2400-by-1200-dpi maximum resolution, 100 sheets input, 50 output.
$199
800/652-2666
consumer.usa.canon.com/index.shtml

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Compaq IJ650

WHAT'S HOT: The Compaq IJ650's bright, sharp text output in our tests means it's an excellent ink jet for printing documents. The detail and contrast it showed in our test images mean it's also a fine printer for color graphics, too.

WHAT'S NOT: Lines in some of our test images were a bit crooked, while gray scales appeared misaligned and grainy with a brownish cast. Its reasonably clean text is marred by wavering in some spots, as if passes of the printhead weren't lining up correctly. Even though we tested this printer using its USB interface, it printed a full page of color graphics at a leisurely 0.3 pages per minute and text at 3.8 ppm. Most of the other printers we've tested using USB, with the exception of photo-specific models, hit at least 0.5 ppm for graphics. Inks aren't cheap at 7 cents per monochrome print and 18.6 cents for color.

Compaq doesn't include a USB cable; the company charges $25 extra for one. The unit we tested also lacked a printed manual, and the online documentation is poorly organized. The output tray seemed flimsy.

WHAT ELSE: Compaq added a useful feature to the driver: canned templates based on the various settings, such as N-up, booklet layouts, headers and watermarks, with tools to create and save your own template designs. Like most network-capable printers on the market today, you can print from any PC on your network and monitor cartridge status from the host machine.

UPSHOT: If you don't mind slow printing speeds, this model's text and graphics quality are agreeable, but other printers perform even better.

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Compaq IJ650

★★☆☆☆

Rated 9 ppm monochrome/5 ppm color; 2400-by-1200-dpi maximum resolution, 100 sheets input, 50 output.
$100
800/345-1518
compaq.com/athome/printers

Next Page: Beyond the Top 10: HP Color Inkjet Cp1160

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HP Color Inkjet Cp1160

WHAT'S HOT: We couldn't help but marvel at the crisp details and vivid colors in the Cp1160's photo samples, prompting us to award this printer a score of Outstanding--the best--on our photo output tests. Its color graphics quality was superb, with lively hues and great detail. Gray-scale images were breathtaking, with excellent gradients. While HP doesn't attach lofty speed ratings to the Cp1160, it outran many of the other printers in our tests by churning out 5.7 text pages per minute and 1.3 graphics pages per minute.

This is one of only a few printers we've tested capable of printing both fabulous photos and great text. In our tests, fonts as small as 2 points appeared sharp, while large, bold text remained bright and solid. Per-page costs are relatively inexpensive: just 6.7 cents for color and 3 cents for text. The printer includes well-written documentation with clear illustrations and explanations.

WHAT'S NOT: As you might expect, print quality like this doesn't come cheap; at $399, it costs substantially more than most of the printers we tested. The output tray is stacked over the input tray, so you'll have to remove prints in order to add paper. The small LCD screen perched atop the printer displays meaningless icons; for example, a triangle indicates that the printer is out of cyan ink, and a square means it's out of magenta ink. The LCD is recessed and slants away from you, making it hard to see. On our line-art tests, we saw some slight banding.

WHAT ELSE: For $79, HP sells a 250-page paper tray that increases the printer's total input capacity to 400 pages. This printer offers USB and parallel ports; you can also add an optional ethernet adapter for network printing. It also includes a duplexer--a $99 option for other HP printers.

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UPSHOT: If you can afford this printer's high purchase price, you won't be disappointed with its output.

Buying Information

HP Color Inkjet Cp1160

★★★★½

Rated 8 ppm monochrome/7 ppm color; 2400-by-1200-dpi maximum resolution, 150 sheets input, 50 output.
$399
800/752-0900
www.hp.com

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Canon S800

WHAT'S HOT: The S800 looks just like an ordinary ink jet, but this photo printer packs two extra ink tanks (dilute shades of cyan and magenta) to help it capture subtle lighting and transitions. We found it indeed produces photos with great detail and subtle, rich colors and textures. Despite the use of six inks instead of four, the S800 incurs reasonable ink costs; based on Canon's estimated yield for an ink tank, a page of text costs only 1.9 cents and a page of color graphics runs 12.8 cents. When we retested the S800 using a USB interface, it made a threefold jump in graphics performance to a reasonable 0.6 pages per minute.

WHAT'S NOT: With a text speed of 2.4 ppm, the S800 is pokier than most of the other ink jet printers we've tested. Except for color graphics, the S800's output quality in our tests was inferior to that of the less-expensive S600. Text looked grayish and rough in places, narrow parallel lines overlapped, and color graphics looked slightly hazy with marginal detail.

WHAT ELSE: Canon provides graphics-oriented software with the S800, including PhotoStitch, for combining photos into panoramic shots, and PhotoRecord, for archiving photos. The S800 includes a thorough online manual, but no printed manual. The S800's Background feature lets you simulate stationery or other preprinted paper by placing the contents of an external document behind the document you're printing. You can also lighten the background image without altering the original file.

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UPSHOT: Good photo quality and extra features make the S800 a suitable photo printer, but slow text-printing speeds and not-so-great text and graphics quality mean it falls short as an office printer.

Buying Information

Canon S800

★★★½☆

Rated 15-ppm monochrome/10-ppm color; 2400-by-1200 dpi maximum resolution, 100 sheets input, 50 output.
$299
800/652-2666
www.usa.canon.com

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Epson Stylus Photo 785EPX

WHAT'S HOT: If you don't need any of Epson's extra options, the Stylus Photo 785EPX's $200 price is an absolute bargain for a six-ink photo printer, especially for a model with a flash-media slot, a control panel, and a tray that can feed paper from a roll (so you can print banners), as well as regular cut sheets. Plus, it churns out graphics pages very quickly: We clocked it at 1.2 ppm.

The 785EPX prints detailed gray scales. It also prints lovely glossy photos with superb color and textures. Working from the printer's control panel, you can group images into various layouts with a choice of several borders, and even convert images to black and white or sepia. Epson provides a CompactFlash adapter with the printer, but if your camera uses SmartMedia or Memory Stick, you can exchange the adapter by sending it back to Epson.

WHAT'S NOT: Epson's printer requires you to use a PC Card slot instead of slots to read camera cards directly, so you'll need a PC Card adapter to download photos. If you own cameras with more than one flash memory format, you'll have to fork over from $50 to $80 for a SmartMedia or Memory Stick adapter (CompactFlash adapters cost only about $10). Ink costs are high at 6.1 cents for a page of black and 14.3 cents for a page of color.

The 785EPX's control panel confused us. The buttons for moving around the menus don't match the hierarchy of menu items displayed on the LCD; some commands that should be in the menus have their own buttons (such as selecting the images to print or setting the brightness); and other buttons (for turning the printer on, changing the ink, and resuming a print job) are strewn around the printer's face. Finally, it prints text at a leisurely 2.4 ppm, and even then its text quality doesn't impress us, with choppy edges on large headline fonts and a slightly fuzzy look on body copy.

WHAT ELSE: For an additional $99, Epson sells an LCD display that attaches to the 785EPX and shows you the images on your flash-media card. Without the card, you can still select the images you want to print by looking at them while the card is still in the camera. Obviously, it's much more convenient to use the display mounted on the printer.

UPSHOT: We consider the Stylus Photo 785EPX a great deal for printing photos but not a strong candidate as a general-purpose printer.

Buying Information

Epson Stylus Photo 785EPX
★★★★☆
Rated 8-ppm monochrome/5-ppm color, 2880-by-720-dpi maximum resolution, 100 sheets input, 30 output.
$199
800/463-7766
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HP Photosmart 1315

WHAT'S HOT: The Photosmart 1315's biggest strengths are its flexibility and its lovely photo glossies, which show great detail, shading, and textures. Unlike most of the photo printers we've tested to date, the Photosmart 1315 prints text adequately and handles narrow parallel lines reasonably well. (As with most printers, text and line art look even better on high-quality paper.) Gray-scale and color graphics display very nice detail and photo shading. The 1315 prints text almost twice as quickly as the other photo models in our review, at a tolerable 4.4 pages per minute (though the 1315's 0.6-ppm graphics speed is less than half that of the Epson Stylus Photo 785EPX at 1.3 ppm).

This printer has so many capabilities that we wouldn't be surprised to discover a built-in can opener somewhere. It has memory-card slots that can read CompactFlash, SmartMedia, Memory Stick, and Microdrive media, plus an infrared reader for printing from infrared-enabled notebooks and digital cameras without wires.

The paper assembly has a bypass for printing just a single sheet and a flap to support banner paper, as well as a little tray for 4-by-6-inch snapshot paper. You can add a duplexer for $99 to print documents on both sides of a page. The LCD control panel on the front of the printer is exceptionally easy to use, thanks to carefully organized menu items and the bright, crisp display, which swivels for easy viewing. The controls let you time- and date-stamp prints; alter images; add borders and some text; and rotate, crop, and group images. Ink costs are reasonable, at 3.6 cents per page of black and 11.4 cents per page of color.

WHAT'S NOT: Text looked a bit grayish and faded in our output tests, especially on bold text and small fonts. The 1315 costs twice as much as some other photo models, such as the Epson. But we think it's well worth the price if you need a high-quality photo printer; and by the time you equip the Epson

with an LCD viewer ($100) and a second card reader (about $80), the price differential disappears.

WHAT ELSE: The 1315 comes with ArcSoft's PhotoImpression 3.0 photo editor, which includes tools for editing and layout plus templates you can modify to add special effects for photos or to enter text.

UPSHOT: Expensive for a general-purpose printer, but extremely capable at printing text, graphics, and top-quality glossies; well worth the price if you need a high-quality photo printer.

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