

AlphaSmart Neo: The Gadget to Improve Your Writing



any hardware products on the market promise to increase productivity. For the serious writer, such promises are often no more than that: promises. The exception is the new Neo from AlphaSmart (www.alphasmart.com). This cunning, little device may not make you a better writer, but it certainly will make your writing experience enjoyable.

I purchased my Neo, which is a sophisticated input device with its own hard drive and built-in display, in December 2004. Over the years, I have often considered purchasing this type of product, ever since the original devices came out, some ten years ago. I did not purchase one then because they were heavy, cumbersome, and the displays were limited to one line.

The AlphaSmart products have come a long way over the years. The new Neo is lightweight, portable, and versatile. The display is about twice as large as the original Dana display, large enough to show six lines of text. The device is easy to use—easy on, easy off—with one-second start up and automatic save. As it is Mac and PC compatible, it has all the Mac and Windows keys on a full-size, fabulous-touch keyboard.

To operate the Neo, you merely turn it on and start typing. It is that simple. The device will automatically open a new file for you or return you to the last-used file. When your document is finished, you can transfer the file from the Neo to your computer's hard drive, using the provided USB cable or IrDA technology. You have the option of inputting the document text directly into an open word-processing program or saving the document as a .txt file on your computer's hard drive using the AlphaSmart utility. In addition, the Neo can print directly to any compatible USB printer. Indeed, the device is so versatile and the feel of the keyboard so appealing that you can use it as an auxiliary keyboard.

Recently, an article in *macHome* magazine gave the Neo a favorable review (4♥). The AlphaSmart website supports the substance of this article, with the exception of the price. According to the magazine article, Neo ships at \$229. However, the AlphaSmart website indicates that this price is only for educational purchases for the non-rechargeable model. The professional price is about \$25 more. For under \$300, I purchased a Neo rechargeable (\$269) and a protective sleeve. (I purchased online at the AlphaSmart website. I became a little nervous when I did not receive an email confirmation of my purchase. I called the company, and the response to my concern was top-flight. The AlphaSmart representative tracked down my order, confirmed that it was correct, and even called me back to tell me that my Neo had shipped. I purchased online on Saturday and newest baby was in my home by Wednesday.)

The Neo comes with a three-year warranty, but the warranty does not cover breakage to the display. Hence, you should purchase a protective sleeve or traveling case. I selected the Neoprene sleeve for \$20 but an inexpensive cloth sleeve (\$10) is also available. Moreover, \$30 can be cut from the \$300 price tag by not purchasing the rechargeable model. The Neo can supposedly run for 700 hours on regular (3 AA alkaline) batteries. Since my Palm eats batteries as the old Pac-Man ate dots, I strongly suggest purchasing the rechargeable model.

Of course, the Neo is not perfect. First, it is plain text only. No margins, fonts, or special attributes such as bold or italics are available, as your computer's word-processing software does all formatting. There are no graphics, no music, and no multi-media features. Storage is limited to two megs, which AlphaSmart downplays. With even low-end computers shipping with 120-gig hard drives, two megs seem ludicrous, but two megs can hold about 150 pages of single-spaced text. Moreover, the size of the Neo's storage space is only limited by the size of your computer's hard drive. If the device's storage capacity is reached, merely transferring the data on the Neo to your computer opens up another two megs of space.

Second, the transfer speed when transferring data from the Neo to an open word-processing file is not the best. My Titanium laptop has a slow G4 processor, and the Neo simply cannot meet its speed. When the Neo fails to keep up, the text appears on-screen as garbled junk. However, the Neo has four transfer settings. You can correct this problem by lowering the settings, but it takes longer to transfer the data. At the lowest speed, three pages of single-spaced text took about three minutes. While that delay may not seem significant, the computer system is down during the transfer. The AlphaSmart software does not permit multi-tasking. Of course, using the AlphaSmart utility avoids this delay time. Simply, connect the Neo to the computer using the USB cable, open the AlphaSmart utility, and save the file to your computer's hard drive. This type of transfer takes seconds, and the resulting .txt file can be opened and formatted in a variety of applications, including Microsoft Word, AppleWorks, and Circus Ponies' NoteBook.

Third, the Neo has an irritating bug. The lines on the display suddenly truncate. Since the computer's word-processing programming performs all the formatting (including tabs and text indents), this truncation bug is irrelevant—especially since no data is lost. Nevertheless, the truncated text appears odd on the Neo display.

Fourth, for obvious reasons, no “standard” software works on the Neo. You must purchase special programs, called SmartApplets, and there are a limited number of them, mostly designed for the educational market. The Neo comes with three of these programs: a simple word-processor (including a spell-check and a thesaurus); a calculator feature; and a preference control panel.

Fifth, and this is minor, but the Neo comes in an ugly dark green! We Macintosh users love computers of beauty, and the dark green is rather repulsive. A silver casing to blend with most upscale laptops and desktops would be more appealing. Actually, I hope that AlphaSmart will develop an elite, upscale Neo for professional writers with more storage space, a larger flip-over display, and a stylish design.

As stated, the Neo is not perfect, but it is a good tool, halfway between a “real” computer and a tablet (without the awkward stylus). Since it is light-weight and does not take up much space in my WaterField cargo bag, I can take it everywhere. The portability is certainly a plus, but it would be a great writing tool even if it were *not* portable. I have used it at home, on my couch propped up with pillows, and on my lap in the bathroom, and at my desk in my office space.

Plus, with clear, easy-to-understand user's manuals in .pdf (printable) format, I know that I am using this device to its fullest potential, including using all of its bells and whistles. Since it is so easy to operate, there is no excuse for a writer not to write well and to write often. ■

***This article is the author's impartial opinion based on hours of use.
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