The Ars Technica ultimate buying guide for your home office setup

Enlarge / We spent months researching and testing all sorts of gear to help you upgrade your suddenly essential home office. Corey Gaskin

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Working and schooling from home are part of the new normal. Putting together a home office setup that’s pleasant, comfortable, and productive can be tough and time consuming, but lucky for you, we’ve been working from home for years here at Ars.

We’re here to tell you remote work doesn’t have to feel so *remote*.

Naturally, as discerning tech connoisseurs, we have some well-curated picks for all the gadgets and furniture you need to make your home office setup cozy and productive. We also threw in a few nice-to-have upgrades for your workspace if you’ve already got the basics down.

A monitor (or two) goes a long way

Dell UltraSharp 49 U4919DW
Dell UltraSharp 34 U3419W

- Dell’s UltraSharp 49 ultrawide monitor.
  Corey Gaskin
- It’s like having a dual-monitor setup in one device.
  Corey Gaskin
- Dell’s UltraSharp 34 monitor.
  Corey Gaskin

The UltraSharp 49 is Dell’s big boy monitor and the UltraSharp 34 is its similarly expansive little brother. They measure in at a wide-but-not-overbearing 49 and 34 inches, respectively, measured diagonally. The 49 maxes out at a 5,120 x 1,440 resolution with a 60Hz refresh rate, while the 34 does 3440 x 1440 also at 60Hz.

As you may have noticed, the 49-inch has a 32:9 aspect ratio that makes it wide and narrow, essentially forming two 27-inch QHD (2560 x 1440) displays joined seamlessly into one. In fact, in addition to using this ultrawide as a single, seamless “dual” monitor for one computer, you can use Dell’s Picture-by-Picture feature to split the monitor in half and display two separate computers side-by-side. You can even swap your mouse and keyboard between them via Dell’s built-in KVM function and use hotkeys to trigger the swap on Windows machines.

The 34-inch has this same functionality in its 21:9 aspect ratio, but using two computers on one 49-inch screen is significantly less cramped than on a 34, though this function is quite usable on either display. Both monitors have two HDMI ports, one DisplayPort, at least four USB 3.0 downstream ports (the 49-inch has five), two USB 3.0 upstreams, and USB-C with power delivery to charge your device.

Dell UltraSharp 49 & Dell UltraSharp 34

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As far as picture quality goes, you won't be left wanting for your work needs. Colors look plenty accurate and details are crisp. You also have a ton of range to tweak this monitor's colors for different times of day (or night) or various applications. This flexibility and the simple, intuitive menu and shortcut options make the UltraSharp 49 and 34 easy to live in for long workdays.

They can do for gaming too, though 60Hz is the refresh rate cap in all resolutions, which might not cut it for hardcore players.

If you're a MacBook user, it seems you'll have to use a notebook with a non-Intel discrete GPU to properly configure the 49's resolution to its 5,120 x 1,440 max. Otherwise, you're stuck at 3,840 x 1,080 which fudges the sharpness a bit, though it's still entirely usable and easy to get used to. Neither the HP Spectre Elite x360 nor the Dell XPS 13 I tested had these issues, displaying perfectly crisp, full-resolution imagery without any fuss.

Furthermore, with Windows PCs, you can also use Dell's software to tweak certain things, like setting up hotkeys for the KVM and ensuring that all your open windows arrange just as you had them each time you plug and unplug your computer. While the former function is Windows exclusive, the monitor seemed to remember window arrangements just fine on my Mac without Dell's Display Manager software.

Still, even with the slightly diminished resolution displayed from my 13-inch MacBook Pro, the extremely usable size of

these monitors is a beautiful aid to productivity, while their controls and flexibility are so intuitive and quick that it’s hard for me to imagine going back to a smaller, dual-monitor setup.

Competitors like the Philips Brilliance 499P9H, while also expansive and nice to look at, don’t have the granular controls to adjust this display properly in different lighting scenarios that we so appreciated on the Dells. Furthermore, cable management on this model is poor and the menus are frustratingly unintuitive. It’s been months and I still never click the buttons I intend to, due in part to there being no visual representation on the screen, but the layout does you no favors either.

If you’re in the market for a 49- or 34-inch ultrawide, Dell’s versions won’t let you down.

—*Corey Gaskin*

The good:

- Ultrawide can do the job of two monitors in one display
- Sharp details with good color representation
- Easily configurable picture for different needs
- Dead-simple menu layout
- KVM functionality and USB-C charging

The bad:

- 60Hz max refresh rate
- 49-inch maxes out at 3840 x 1080 resolution on certain MacBooks

Dell UltraSharp 27 U2720QM
Dell 27 4K UHD Monitor S2721QS

- Dell’s 27-inch 4K monitor.
  Corey Gaskin

- We don’t expect anyone to actually do this, but hey, it’s an option.
  Corey Gaskin

With many of the same features we love from Dell’s 49- and 34-inch curved monitors, the U2720QM offers you all that goodness in a smaller 27-inch flatscreen package. It doesn’t have the “picture-by-picture” mode which allows two separate computer inputs, as the bigger ultrawides do, but at this size that wouldn’t be the greatest experience anyway.

Otherwise you still get similarly intuitive menus, crisp picture quality, and highly customizable color profile, as well as options to display through DisplayPort 1.4, HDMI 2.0, or USB-C with power delivery.

If USB-C capability and charging your device through the monitor aren’t important to you but a PBP mode is, then the latest Dell S2721QS is your next best choice at 27 inches and about $200 less. Thanks to their smaller size, they suit most any desktop area and can also rotate so the screen can be used horizontally on their included stands.

—CG

The good:

- Same solid performance and ease of use as 34- and 49-inch models (see above)

The bad:

- Have to choose between USB-C charging or PBP in different models

Dell UltraSharp 27 & Dell 27 4K UHD Monitor

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Cut the clutter and charge quickly with these USB-C fast chargers and cables

Nekteck 5-Port 111W USB-C Wall Charger
RAVPower RP-PC128
Anker PowerLine II and Nekteck USB-C Cable Series

- Nekteck’s 111W 5-Port desktop charger can charge most USB-C devices at or near maximum speeds.
- The RAVPower RP-PC128 offers two USB-C PD ports capable of 90W charging in a nice and compact design.
- Nekteck’s 72W 4-Port desktop charger and Aukey’s 65W PA-B3 wall charger.
- Anker’s PowerLine II USB-C to Lightning cable alongside a Nekteck Thunderbolt 3 cable.

USB-C is finally the norm among electronic manufacturers—even recent iPhones ship with a USB-C to Lightning cable. Rather than have a bunch of chargers for all your devices clogging up your workspace, it’s best to save that clutter and cable entanglement with an all-in-one desktop charging solution. Of course, in doing so, you don’t want to lose a drop of charging performance.

Nekteck 5-Port 111W USB-C Wall Charger & RAVPower RP-PC128

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Nekteck's 5-Port 111W USB-C Wall Charger is a robust addition here that offers both USB-C and USB-A charging. Its 87W USB-C PD port can charge power-hungry laptops like the latest MacBook Pro or Dell XPS 15 at, or at least close to, maximum speeds, while also topping up most smartphones and tablets at their fastest rates. There are four handy USB-A ports alongside that for charging multiple devices simultaneously, and Nekteck includes a fast-charging USB-C cable in the box. The device is USB-IF certified, too, so you can feel confident that it won't fry any of your devices. At more than six inches long and about three inches wide, it's not the smallest desktop charger around, but if you want heavy-duty power at your fingertips, this can supply it.

If you're all squared away for desktop chargers and would prefer a more mobile wall charger that you can move around the house, consider RAVPower's RP-PC128. This includes two USB-C PD charging ports that can individually supply up to 90W or split that power when two devices are connected simultaneously. You could charge two lower-power laptops at 45W each, for instance, or have a more powerful device charge at 60W while your phone maxes out at 18W. This charger is not USB-IF certified, but it's received high feedback around the Web and it comes with an 18-month warranty. It comes paired with a cable, and being a gallium nitride (GaN) charger, it's nicely compact at 2.5 x 2.5 x 1.2 inches. Best of all, it usually retails for less than $50, making it great value for the performance and versatility it provides.

These are blanket recommendations, but there are plenty other worthwhile fast chargers out there for those who want to spend less time waiting for their devices to refill:

- Nekteck’s 72W 4-Port USB-C Wall Charger is another excellent and USB-IF certified wall charger if you don’t need quite as much power—its USB-C PD port maxes at 60W, which is still enough to refill most mobile devices and many laptops at full speed—and would prefer something smaller and less expensive.
- Aukey’s PA-B3 is a quality dual-port 65W charger if you need a USB-A port. It’s another GaN charger, which makes it similarly pocket-sized.
- And if you need more USB-C cables to take advantage of all this power, we can vouch for the durability and safety of Anker’s PowerLine II USB-C to Lightning cables for iOS devices, and Nekteck’s USB-C and Thunderbolt 3 cables for laptops, the Nintendo Switch, and Android devices.

—Jeff Dunn

The good:

- Top charging speeds for iOS and Android devices, Nintendo Switch, and many laptops
- Fast-charging USB-C cable included with each

The bad:

- Nekteck 111W charger isn’t the smallest we’ve used

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