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The Best Gear for the School Year

A spiral-bound notebook and Ticonderoga No. 2 will only get today's student so far. Here are the latest high-tech tools for starting the semester out right



James Yang for The Wall Street Journal

For Tykes

LeapsterGS Explorer



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal
LeapsterGS Explorer

The LeapsterGS Explorer may look like a Nintendo DS for the Big Wheels set, but parents of Ivy League-bound 4-to-9-year-olds will appreciate the fact that its over 300 compatible games all have an educational slant. This latest model has an accelerometer for motion-controlled play and a built-in camera that lets kids create game characters using snapshots of friends' faces. Helicopter parents can sign up to receive email updates on their children's performance, with the percentage of questions answered correctly or highlights on skills that need improvement. Certain games let you tailor questions to your child's needs, for example by incorporating words from a school spelling list. \$70, leapfrog.com

FriXion Ball Erasable Gel Pen

Pilot's FriXion Ball Erasable Gel Pens write more smoothly and erase more cleanly than the scratchy, finicky erasable ballpoint pens of the past. And while early erasable ink would eventually set and turn indelible, FriXion Ball ink stays erasable indefinitely. The way the pen works is ingenious: Its heat-sensitive ink turns clear when it reaches a certain temperature; rubbing it with the eraser generates the necessary heat (rather than wearing away the page). The ink will disappear if the paper it's on gets too hot (left in the car on a sunny day, for example), but to make the ink reappear, just pop the page in the freezer—a quirk that makes these pens perfect for sending secret messages. \$32 for a dozen pens, pilotpen.us



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal
FriXion Ball Erasable Gel Pen

For Teens

CordCruncher



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal
CordCruncher

A teenager's backpack can be treacherous for headphones, filled with heavy textbooks to get crushed under, binder rings to get snagged on. The CordCruncher, which has a latex sleeve that protects the cord from tangling or splitting, is one of the most teen-proof earbuds you can buy. Using them takes practice: sliding off the snug-fitting sleeve requires effort, and unfurling the cord on a crowded train without throwing any elbows can be a challenge. But when the CordCruncher is retracted, you can plug one end into the other to create a snarl-resistant loop that fits neatly around your wrist. \$25, cordcruncher.com

TI-Nspire CX CAS

Graphing calculators have come a long way from the pixelated, monochrome bricks of yesteryear. The TI-Nspire CX CAS is just over half an inch thick, has a 3.2-inch full-color screen (nearly as big as an iPhone's) and will transform what were once boring equations into rotating 3-D graphs, complete with animated data points. Using the included software, students can transfer their work between the calculator and a PC. And the TI-Nspire Lab Cradle lets the calculator receive and analyze a range of lab-sensor data—from CO₂ levels and UV intensity to human heart and respiration rates. \$175, education.ti.com



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal
TI-Nspire CX CAS

For Undergrads

Braven 625s

Officially, this rugged, rubber-encased Bluetooth speaker is built for the great outdoors. Unofficially, it's made for parties. The speaker is small—around six inches long—and weighs less than 12 ounces, but it'll fill even the biggest dorm suite with sound. Its battery keeps the music pumping for up to 16 hours over Bluetooth and can recharge a smartphone or music player. Most important, the Braven 625s is shock-resistant enough to survive

years of unsupervised revelry. And when parents call to check in, it makes a perfectly respectable Bluetooth speakerphone. \$180, braven.com



F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal
Braven 625s

IRISNotes 2 Executive

The IRISNotes 2 Executive lets you convert the handwritten to the digital using, amazingly, pen and ink. Its battery-powered ink pen transmits text and doodles to a small receiver that clips to the top of the page you're writing on. The system can then save your notes as an image or convert them to digital text for editing with a word processor. Unlike the similar Livescribe system, IRISNotes 2 doesn't require special paper to work. The receiver, which communicates with the pen using infrared and ultrasound, can store up to 100 letter-size pages of notes. And with the Executive model, you can export to an iOS device with an included cable. \$149, irislink.com

—Erik Sofge

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F. Martin Ramin for The Wall Street Journal
IRISNotes 2 Executive