(Approx. 970 words)

Windows 10, S-Mode – What’s that? Do I need it? Do I want it?
Apps and Applications – Mobile and Desktop

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Recently I needed a very inexpensive, low-end Windows 10 laptop. I intended to stream movies from one of my main computers, located across the house, to this new device and then show the movies on a big screen TV. From a performance point of view, I may have been able to use a Chromebook, a Tablet, or even an old phone but I wanted the device to be able to be part of a Windows network. So I decided I needed a low-cost Windows 10 computer. Keep in mind that nowadays, even low-cost laptops come with pretty decent performance, capabilities, and features. I’ve bought a few computers in the past and I’ve found that the important things to consider have always been, CPU, display, RAM, Hard drive (electronic drive in some), Networking (Wi-Fi), and Input/Output ports. (I won’t even need a mouse with this computer; the touchpad will do just fine.) Most laptops, these days, have pretty nice screens, though the price seems to go up as the screen gets bigger. I wasn’t going to use the screen for watching the movie so I decided to look for a small screen. The CPUs were all from Intel or AMD, not top of the line but more than capable enough. Most had 4 GB of RAM. Hard drive capability varied but because I wasn’t going to use the laptop to store much this wasn’t a big concern. I did establish that I wanted a minimum of 64 GB if the laptop used SSD (Solid State Drive) memory rather than a hard drive. (In the past I had one with only 32 GB and I had trouble updating the Operating System when it was necessary.) Wi-Fi was a necessity because of the location of the laptop with respect to the movie streaming computer. Also, I wanted at least two USB ports, one for extra memory, should the need arise, and one for a mouse, should the need arise. With that minimal description, I started my search.

There are plenty of name-brand laptops out there like HP, Dell, Microsoft, and Lenovo, but I wanted a very low-cost device, so I widened my search to other brands like LG, ASUS, Acer, and Toshiba. I even considered “refurbished” laptops but I never found one for the right price. My search ended when I found an 11-inch ASUS Vivobook laptop model L203M at what I thought was an incredible price, $294 at Walmart. (Recently, I have seen it for about $10 less.) As I became familiar with the laptop features, I realized it had Windows 10 S-Mode. I knew there were a few different versions of Windows 10 like Home and Pro for home use and Enterprise for businesses, but I wasn’t familiar with S-Mode.

You will probably only come across the S-Mode version of Windows 10 if you are looking at the low end of Windows laptops. (I found laptops from all of the name brands that had Windows 10 S-Mode installed, even Microsoft has one, but the ASUS was about the lowest when I was looking to make the purchase.) In a nutshell, Windows 10 S-Mode is a version of Windows 10 that is streamlined for security (I guess, hence the S) and performance, while providing a familiar Windows experience. To increase security, it allows you to get and use Apps only from the Microsoft Store and requires you to use Microsoft Edge for browsing. All other versions of Windows 10 have the option to install applications from third-party sites and stores like Google, Yahoo, and hundreds of others. Because many people prefer Chrome to Edge, this could become a pivotal issue, but if you can live with Edge as your browser this may be a good choice. Part of its improved security may be a side-effect of the inability to install Apps from other websites not approved by Microsoft since viruses tend to hide in dubious internet downloads. One interesting feature of S-Mode is that you can convert from S-Mode to the standard Windows 10 Home (or Pro) version, but it is a one-way conversion. It’s as easy as going to the Microsoft Store and Opting out of S-Mode. Once you convert you have to stay there, you cannot go back to S-Mode, though I’ve seen indications that this might change in the future. (Microsoft used to charge a fee for this conversion, but now it is free.)

Windows 10 S-mode has been around since 2017. It is a lightweight version of the Windows 10 Operating System. Published statistics indicate it has been installed over 825 million times, so there are a good number of users. It is more protected than other versions and streamlined so it can run fast even on budget CPU devices. Even with its limitations, Windows 10 S-Mode still includes File Explorer, as we all know, the keys to the kingdom. It is aimed at the Education sector of the computer business where a certain amount of control, and possibly limitation, is needed. This puts Windows 10 S-Mode in direct competition with Google’s Chromebooks which have enjoyed unprecedented success and popularity in this education sector. The literature indicates you can find Windows 10 S-Mode laptops starting at about $200, but the lowest price I found in my search was just under $300. (Microsoft probably subsidizes the cost of the OS to hardware manufacturers, so you are probably only paying for the hardware.

So when all is said and done, is Windows 10 S-Mode right for you? Could be if you have minimal needs, that could be met by even using a Chromebook.