

Get ready for OS X El Capitan

With El Capitan on the way, now's a good time to get ready

by Clifford Colby

Apple works hard to make its software updates painless. But the download and installation process for a major OS update can take a few hours, so it's smart to prepare so that everything goes smoothly...and be ready in case something goes wrong. With El Capitan coming September 30 as a free download in the Mac App Store, now's a good time to get ready.

Check your hardware

First, make sure your Mac can run El Capitan (OS X 10.11). Here's Apple's list of supported machines:

- iMac (mid-2007 or newer)
- MacBook (late 2008 Aluminum, or early 2009 or newer)
- MacBook Air (late 2008 or newer)
- MacBook Pro (mid- to late 2007 or newer)
- Mac Mini (early 2009 or newer)
- Mac Pro (early 2008 or newer)

Choose About This Mac from the Apple menu to see info on your Mac.

Some specific features, such as AirDrop and AirPlay Mirroring, may require more recent models.

Check your memory and storage

Now let's check if you have enough disk and memory space. The El Capitan public beta download weighs in around 6GB, and Apple recommends that you have at least 8GB of disk space free to install an OS update. To give the update room to breathe, consider doubling that. See this as an opportunity to tidy up your hard drive.

What about memory? Apple recommends 2GB of memory minimum. Adding memory can be an affordable way to make your Mac more responsive, however, so if you are working with 2GB, now may be the time to add more.

You can find details about your hard drive and memory by choosing About This Mac from the Apple menu.

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Which OS you are running?

Are you running an OS that you can update to El Capitan? With Yosemite (OS X 10.10), Apple said you could upgrade from these OSes:

- OS X Snow Leopard (10.6.8)
- OS X Lion (10.7)
- OS X Mountain Lion (10.8)
- OS X Mavericks (10.9)

El Capitan will likely have similar OS requirements, so check that you are running the most recent version of one of the upgradable OSes.

Update third-party apps

While you're updating, make sure your third-party apps are current. Click the Updates tab in the Mac App Store to see which updates are available to you. And after you've updated to El Capitan, check again, as third-party developers are working hard to have their apps ready for the new OS.

Know your Apple ID

If you've read this far, you probably have an Apple ID. If you don't, get one before September 30, as you'll need it to download El Capitan from the Mac App Store. You may also be asked for it during the El Capitan and iCloud setup process, so keep it handy.

Back everything up

It's been years since installing a system upgrade resembled a high-wire act. But an update can still go wrong, so it's wise to have a current backup of the contents of your hard drive -- including photo libraries -- before you move to El Capitan.

About Clifford Colby: He's been an editor at Peachpit Press and a handful of now-dead computer magazines, including MacWeek, MacUser, and Corporate Computing.