



# UNCLE MARK

## 2012 GIFT GUIDE & ALMANAC

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## INTRODUCTION



# 2012

## UNCLE MARK

GIFT GUIDE & ALMANAC

This is the ninth annual edition of the Uncle Mark Gift Guide and Almanac, a compilation of the very best products available today in various categories – and a few rants and tips in the back.

As always, this guide tries to recommend just **one** product in each category – the best one, or at least a strong enough choice to avoid buyer’s remorse – so as to save you the time of combing through dozens of ratings and reviews of comparable products.

So instead of “the 32 hottest digital cameras this holiday season,” the guide lists just one camera: a nicely designed, fully featured product that is a reliably good choice. The goal of the guide is to quickly point you to a good purchase while saving you from laborious and time-consuming research.

Your humble author is the ultimate and final arbiter of what goes into the guide. There are no advertisers here. Put simply, I list what I like – and what I think you’ll like.

I will admit to some personal satisfaction at creating this guide year after year. I’ve worked as a customer advocate for about 15 years – creating a consulting company, a conference, a book, and other projects such as this guide – all dedicated to spotlighting companies, individuals, and products dedicated to creating a good experience. More than enough companies try to foist mediocre products and services on you for the sole purpose of making a buck. Let them get their own guide. The Uncle Mark guide

spotlights the good guys. By downloading, reading, and (I hope) sharing this guide with others, you are helping to reward the efforts of innovators and companies that genuinely try to create quality products.

In a perfect world, this guide would be unnecessary, because customers would only buy the good products. Alas, advertising and marketing have a way of bending that reality and persuading people to buy things that they won’t actually like. Uncle Mark hopes to turn the tide in favor of the good experience.

I don’t make any money from this guide, except when someone buys a product from some of the links in this file (which link to an associate account at Amazon or iTunes). That purchase is optional, of course. I also recommend one for-pay project of my own – [GoodTodo.com](http://GoodTodo.com) – because I believe it will help anyone who uses it. You’ll see why.

If you want to be notified when the next Uncle Mark guide comes out, then get my free Good Experience email newsletter – subscribe at [goodexperience.com/newsletter.php](http://goodexperience.com/newsletter.php). You can also email me directly at [mark@goodexperience.com](mailto:mark@goodexperience.com). I keep an empty inbox and am usually fairly quick to respond.

Enjoy,

(Uncle) Mark Hurst  
New York City  
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**PERSONAL COMPUTER:  
MACBOOK AIR/IPAD<sub>2</sub>/iMAC**

*Summary: Get the right Mac, or iPad, depending on your needs.*

The time of the old PC/Mac wars seems like a bygone era. For a brief period in 2011, Apple was the most valuable company in the world. Buying a Mac finally feels like a mainstream idea. (I remember the bad old days of the mid-90s, when I got many a strange look for using anything emblazoned with a multicolored apple.)

Of course, some people are forced to use a Windows PC by the IT policy at work or school, but beyond that narrow use case, people increasingly are choosing the higher-quality product from Apple.

The question is which device to choose. Most people will do fine with this simple choice:

- If it needs to be portable and you want to type a lot on it, get a MacBook Air, the super-slim laptop shown at right. Get the smaller model, the 11-inch, so it's more portable, but pay up for the 4GB of memory if you can afford it.
- If it needs to be portable and you'll mainly use it for "light interactivity" – email, movies, games, a little typing – get an iPad 2. Don't buy a cheaper tablet from a competitor; at the moment, for email and movies and such, the iPad is by far the best-designed and most usable tablet.
- If it doesn't need to be portable, meaning you're going to stick it on a desk, get an iMac. The screen is bigger by far – 21 inches – than that of the Air or iPad.

The landscape of computing devices is changing quickly and it's quite possible that my recommendation will change in a year. But what I wrote in last year's guide still holds true:

"I believe that the iPad – the lightweight device with a touch-screen interface – represents the future of mobile computing. For the time being, though, if you need the extra functionality offered by a laptop, the Air is a good place to look."



## E-READER: KINDLE OR IPAD

*Summary: Kindle for book-reading only, iPad for book-reading and lots more.*

This is the first year I have included “e-reader” as its own recommendation category, and for good reason: people are increasingly buying and reading books on digital devices. When I ride the subway here in New York City, it’s rare not to spot someone reading something on an e-reader. (Subway rides used to be more interesting when printed books naturally displayed what everyone was reading.)

There are lots of options in this space – Amazon alone offers at least seven different products bearing the Kindle brand. Throw in the Nook (the e-reader from Barnes & Noble), and a host of other off-brand e-readers, and you’ve got a real menagerie.

All this complexity is great for the technology press, which loves to cover the horse-race of the competing brands and products in long 1,000-word articles complete with feature comparison charts.

Despite all this froth, the e-reader choice is quite simple, and it depends on one single question. Do you want the best product for JUST reading books, or do you want the best product for reading books AND doing other things (like viewing movies and checking email)?

- **If all you intend to do is read books**, get an Amazon Kindle for just \$79. This is the least expensive and, in my opinion, best of all the Kindle products: a simple, light, nicely designed book reader without all the bells and whistles tacked onto the more expensive Kindle products. It has a better screen resolution than the iPad – making it easier to read text – though the screen isn’t back-lit like the iPad’s.

- **If you want to read books AND do other things**, then what you want isn’t an e-reader but a tablet computer – a device designed to offer many different functions. And from the previous page you already know the best tablet: Apple’s iPad 2.

One disadvantage of the iPad is, of course, the price: \$500 is a much different price tag from the \$79 of a plain old Kindle. But it’s a different device entirely. If you want the ability to do many

things on one device, you’re essentially buying a computer, and – as with the old Mac/PC debate – it’s not worth saving a little bit of money in order to buy the not-quite-as-good option.

And this is my problem with Amazon’s most recent Kindle,



called the Fire, selling for \$200. Boasting the ability to hold “movies, shows, songs, games, apps, magazines and books,” it sounds much more like an iPad than the plain Kindle e-reader I recommended earlier. That’s certainly Amazon’s intent: they want to carve out some of Apple’s share of the tablet market.

I’m excited about the Kindle Fire because the competition will surely motivate Apple to continue innovating and improving the iPad. But I wouldn’t recommend actually buying a Fire. The single best review I’ve read of the Fire is what Matt Haughey wrote on Twitter:

TiVo : cable company DVR :: iPad : Amazon Kindle Fire

If you’ve ever used a TiVo and a cable company DVR, you know how strong a recommendation this is for the iPad.

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**SMARTPHONE:  
IPHONE 4S**

*Summary: The iPhone 4S is yet another quality product in the iPhone series.*

As I've said since it launched in 2007, the iPhone is the most significant new digital device since 1984, when Apple launched the Macintosh. The iPhone was the first smartphone to combine a touch screen, downloadable apps, visual voicemail, GPS, and much more. Since then the various entries in the iPhone series have continued to improve and solidify Apple's dominance of the market. The iPhone 4S is no exception. While it's not much advanced beyond its predecessor, the iPhone 4, the notable addition of "Siri" – a voice-activated software assistant – takes the 4S one more step beyond its competitors.



And competitors there are, chiefly in the form of smartphones running Google's Android operating system. There are many Android phones available, both from Google and other manufacturers, and they tend to be cheaper than the iPhone.

The problem is that Android phones are not as easy to use as iPhones. Yes, Android has many of the same apps as iPhone;

yes, you can do many of the same things on both systems; but the iPhone is significantly easier to use, and more elegant in its design, than Android. I say this as someone who has developed apps for both platforms: my Good Todo app is available on [iPhone](#), [iPad](#), and [Android](#). I own both, have used both, have developed for both systems. iPhone is better.

Now, for anyone who is tired of hearing praise lavished on Apple, or who relishes the joy of only using Windows computers, go forth and buy an Android. (Heck, some of my best friends use Android.) I appreciate that Google continues to invest in Android, as it creates competition for Apple, and competition creates better products for customers.

For completeness, I suppose I should acknowledge that some people inside large companies and government agencies walk around with a BlackBerry – the device that used to rule the smartphone market. In my experience this is rarely by choice but rather the policy of the IT department. The BlackBerry's user experience has fallen so far behind iPhone and Android that it is hardly relevant outside large organizations.\* Its most enduring contribution to the technology world just might be a cautionary tale of what happens when a company stops being obsessed with the user experience.

\*One notable exception: BlackBerry is very popular in some parts of southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, as a status symbol of the emerging middle class. For some reason, iPhone hasn't caught on nearly as much. BlackBerry and other past mobile leaders, such as Nokia, are likely to find much of their future growth in Asia.

## GOOD IPHONE & IPAD APPS

*Summary: There are several good apps worth trying out.*

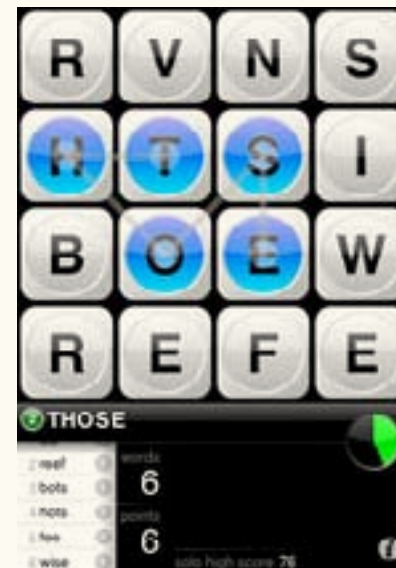
[Unchanged from last year's guide, as my favorite apps haven't changed in the past year. -u.m.]

For those readers who use an iPhone or an iPad, here are the Uncle Mark recommendations for the best apps. Among the thousands available in the App Store, there are many excellent apps for both devices, so this isn't an exhaustive list, but here are a few good choices:

- [Kindle app](#) (same app works on both iPhone & iPad, free download): Read ebooks bought from Amazon's Kindle store. If you already have a Kindle device, you can easily get ebooks you've bought onto your iPhone or iPad. See also Apple's free [iBooks app](#), which is nicely designed but doesn't have as much selection as the Kindle store... though iBooks does offer my book "Bit Literacy" as a [free download](#).
- [Pandora](#) (both iPhone & iPad, free download): free streaming music from a bazillion different channels, based on any given musical group or artist. Occasional advertisements.
- [Instapaper](#) (both iPhone & iPad, \$5): Read Web pages on the iPhone or iPad even when you're offline. It requires some setup, but it's super-useful: while using your computer, click a link to save the current Web page to read later on the device.
- [Netflix app](#) (both iPhone & iPad, free download but requires paid Netflix account): stream any movie in Netflix's Instant Play collection. A must-have for any Netflix user with an iPad.
- For New Yorkers or anyone visiting New York, [CityTransit](#) (\$3) shows the entire NYC subway map, and [Exit Strategy](#) (\$4) shows street maps near subway stops, as well as optimal places to stand on the train so as to be near the stairs when exiting.

**Games:** I maintain lists of the best games for each device. Highly recommended:

- [Good iPhone Games list](#) by Uncle Mark
- [Good iPad Games list](#) by Uncle Mark



Above: a screenshot from Quordy, an excellent word game included in the iPhone games list.

Finally, as this was not an exhaustive list of good apps, here are "favorite iPhone app" lists from two leading technology journalists, both at the New York Times:

- Bob Tedeschi's [10 favorite iPhone apps](#)
- David Pogue's [10 favorite iPhone apps](#)

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## TWO MORE GOOD DEVICES

*Summary: The Apple TV and Grace Digital Radio are nicely designed devices for streaming online movies and music.*

The [Apple TV](#) (\$99) needs an HDTV, a wireless connection, and (recommended) a [Netflix.com](#) account. With those in place, you can easily stream movies and TV shows from Netflix onto your HDTV. Emphasis on “easy”: at home there are several devices with a Netflix app (the TV has one, the DVD player, everything but the toaster has a Netflix app) – but the one in the Apple TV is the easiest to navigate.

The Apple TV does a good deal more than Netflix, though: you can watch videos from YouTube or Vimeo, listen to music via Pandora. Best of all, if you have a computer on the wireless network running iTunes with Home Sharing turned on, you

Repeating a pick from last year’s guide, I still recommend the [Grace Digital Wireless Internet Radio](#) (\$100) as a helpful addition to any kitchen or other room that wants basic Internet radio. This device uses a wireless Internet connection to tune into online radio stations from around the world. It also plays any channels you’ve set up on Pandora.com. I often tune into KCRW, a great public radio station in Los Angeles, though I’m based in New York. The controls on the radio could be better designed – still waiting for them to call me for UI design help! – but otherwise it’s a great little device. We use it daily.



can view your photos, movies, and listen to the music in your iTunes library – all delivered to the HDTV via the Apple TV. This is where TV is headed. Recommended.

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## DIGITAL CAMERA: CANON POWERSHOT

*Summary: Sometimes the iPhone or Android won't cut it.*

Some people don't need a camera recommendation. They're happy with the camera embedded in their iPhone, Android phone, or other mobile device. And that makes sense: as someone else put it, "The best camera is the one you have with you." But sometimes it helps to have an actual camera, with a zoom and a powerful flash, to get the shot that a phone can't.

Once again I'm making my annual recommendation to buy a Canon PowerShot. For years this product line has turned out inexpensive, reliable, easy-to-use cameras that take decent to good photos. I've used several PowerShots over the past 10 years and have always been happy with them.



There are many PowerShot models available, including at least six choices in the mid-range level called Digital ELPH. To save you the time-consuming process of wading through dozens of camera reviews, I recommend the PowerShot ELPH 100 HS, \$125 at Amazon, which takes perfectly good photos and videos.

Those seeking a lower or higher price point, or an extra feature or two, should check the PowerShot comparison page. Two options to consider are the PowerShot A800, \$80 at Amazon (a decent entry-level camera, also shoots video), and at the high end, the PowerShot G12, \$380 at Amazon, offering lots of near-professional features and enjoying good reviews from experienced photographers. Personally I think the G12 is too expensive, and too much camera, for most people – hence my recommendation of the ELPH 100 HS.

Finally, one reader of last year's guide wrote in with a strong recommendation for Panasonic's Lumix series, which includes the DMC-ZS8 camera (\$150 at Amazon). I've never used a Lumix, but since I like Panasonic's products in general (see page 12) it may be worth exploring if you don't like the Canon.



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**WRISTWATCH:  
CASIO G-SHOCK**

*Summary: For old-timers who check their wrist, check the G-Shock.*

My favorite wristwatch is the Casio G-Shock. I've recommended it for years because of its simple interface, durable construction, and low cost (about \$40 at [Amazon](#)). For telling time, setting an alarm, and acting as timer or stopwatch, this is a near-perfect device.



With that said, two trends are chipping away at the popularity of digital watches – or wearing any wristwatch at all:

1. Many young people today – I believe the technical term is “whippersnappers” – no longer check their wrist for the time. Their iPhone is already out on the table, and they can check the time there.
2. Some people want more functions than the traditional five (time, date, alarm, timer, stopwatch). For example, shouldn't the timepiece also offer games, or other apps? How about a touch-screen interface?

One project is capitalizing on both of those trends. Noticing that the new iPod Nano is about the size of a watch face, designer

Scott Wilson and his team last year created the TikTok and LunaTik watch kits (originally funded by fans on [Kickstarter](#), another project worth your attention). These kits provide a holder and strap for an iPod Nano – not included – to turn it into an attractive wristwatch with a touch interface.

There are several clock faces to choose from, too – on this [features page](#) you can see the available designs. (The original version of this guide said that there were no digital watch faces on the iPod Nano; count this as the correction.)



It's not clear whether TikTok and LunaTik – or some competitor around the corner – will become a breakout success. I have to imagine that some “smart watch” product will eventually capture the attention of the market. In the meantime, the reliable and inexpensive Casio G-Shock still works great, though it's looking a little more old-fashioned every day.

## GIFT PICKS FOR KIDS

*Monopoly Deal card game, LEGOs, pocket kite, and foot bag.*

Several kid-gift picks this year: first, the Monopoly Deal card game. Now, mention Monopoly to some people and they groan, muttering about endless games and bitterness from the dog-eat-dog gameplay. (On that point, did you know that Monopoly was originally designed as an anti-capitalist exercise? True story.)



But this version of Monopoly is different: it retains the fun elements of strategy and chance, while solving the problem of duration. Each game is done in about 15 minutes. Playable by 2 to 5 players. Priced at all of \$8.

That's a deal.

Next up, the LEGO Ultimate Building Set – about \$50 via several sellers listed on Amazon. This holds some nostalgic



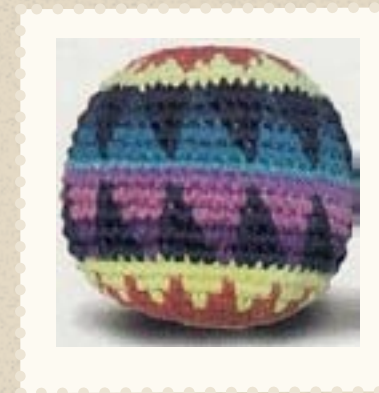
charm because it's just a big pile of the plain LEGO blocks I remember from my childhood, before most LEGO sets became

“themed” around a movie or some other corporate brand. Here there are no movie characters, no instructions for what you're supposed to build. Just the blocks.

Finally, I still recommend last year's kid-gift picks. First, shown at right, the Deluxe Pocket Kite, five bucks at [unclesgames.com](http://unclesgames.com).

The case in the picture contains kite, string, and string winder. Portable fun on a windy day! (Thanks to Cool Tools – a

perennial source of gift ideas – for the pointer.)



And I still strongly recommend – as a gift for any age – the Guatemalan foot bag, shown at left, just \$3 at [Amazon](http://Amazon). Instant game, exercise, and conversation piece all in one. (There's a sport, too: see [footbag.org](http://footbag.org).)



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## ITEMS FOR EXPECTING AND NEW PARENTS

### *Summary: Books and strollers.*

I never understood baby gear until our son was born a few years ago. Initially I was overwhelmed by the huge number of products, many of them poorly designed, overpriced, or just plain unnecessary in daily life – but gradually I cobbled together the brief list below of some genuinely helpful items. Please pass it along to any expecting or new parent you know.

Before the little one arrives, I'd recommend two baby-naming guides. NameVoyager, aka “the baby name wizard,” is the place to start. It's an excellent and free online tool that graphically plots the popularity of any given name, decade over decade, over the past 120 years.

There are many books on baby names, and there may be a better one now, but the best I found a few years ago was “Beyond Jennifer and Jason, Madison & Montana: What to Name Your Baby Now” – now out of print but available for cheap at Amazon.

One book we found to be extremely helpful is “The Happiest Baby on the Block,” which details the all-important skill of swaddling. This is made easier by the Miracle Blanket – another essential item – which, true to its name, nearly always got our newborn to sleep.

For fathers, I'd avoid most “new dad” books. They seem to deliver not-so-deep wisdom along the lines of “turn off the football game in the delivery room, you knucklehead.” The books are also heavy on the emotional stuff (“It's the most wonderful thing – you won't understand until it happens”), which by definition the reader can't relate to, so why beat him over the head with it? But one book I found fairly helpful – also recommended by a reader – was “The Baby Owner's Manual.”

Another reader recommended the Munchkin Travel Diaper Changing Kit (\$23 from Amazon). Now that we're past the diaper stage at home, I'm blissfully amnesiac about what exactly we used for a diaper bag, but I agree that a dedicated bag for diaper supplies is very useful. Good gift idea, too.

**Strollers:** For the first three months or so, get the Graco Snugrider Infant Car Seat Stroller Frame, about fifty bucks at Amazon. Yes, the name is a mouthful. Other people just call it a “snap ‘n’ go,” a term I had never heard before my wife's pregnancy. It's just a frame with wheels onto which you place the Graco Snugride Infant Car Seat (about \$180 at Amazon), thus making a stroller out of the combination when the car seat isn't strapped into the minivan.

Unfortunately, that Graco combo only lasts for the first few months, until the baby weighs twenty pounds or so. Soon enough it becomes time to shop for a “real” stroller.

Here's the deal with strollers: You have to choose between a good **push** and a good **pack**. That is, some strollers are compact and easy to fold up (that's the good “pack”), but they require a two-handed push with small, clattering wheels. Other strollers have a great “push” – one-handed, taking bumps easily with nice wheels or tires – but they're heavy and difficult to fold up.

If you really want a good “push” and have a wad of extra cash, the Bugaboo Cameleon is the top of the line. It's the BMW of strollers: dual independent shock absorbers on the front wheels, rubber tires in the back, endlessly configurable. The “Bug” is a great vehicle, but it's large, very expensive (over 900 bucks), and doesn't fold easily.

For a good “pack,” I'd recommend the Maclaren Volo, the stroller we used. It's got a much better pack than the Bugaboo, a decent push, a **much** better price – about \$130 – and it's light enough to carry on one shoulder. (One reader recommended the Maclaren Techno, more expensive than the Volo but can recline the baby.)

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**OTHER “ESSENTIAL” ITEMS**

*Summary: Products to use and trust.*

Here are a few more Uncle Mark picks for useful items:

- **Digital camcorder:** The [Panasonic HDC-TM900K](#) is my recommendation, as I own and really like the nearly identical previous model (the TM700). Good image, good sound, easy interface. If the price (\$725) is too high, I'd recommend considering the [Canon Vixia HF M41](#), (\$390). I haven't used it but it gets consistently good reviews as a mid-range option.

- **A/V receiver:** To connect various devices to one set of speakers, I recently bought, and would enthusiastically recommend, the [Onkyo TX-NR609 A/V receiver](#) (\$390 at Amazon, where it's the top seller in its category).

- **HDTV:** The [UN55D6000 55-inch Samsung LED HDTV](#). See page 14 for details; there are many, many options for TVs.

- **DVR:** In our big upgrade to the new HDTV we had to stop using our nearly 10-year-old TiVo box, which I loved for its delightful, pretty much perfect user interface. We bought a TiVo Premiere (\$100 plus monthly fee from [tivo.com](#)) and have found the UI to be not as snappy or elegant as the older model – which is disappointing – but still better than the steaming pile of a DVR that most cable companies foist on their customers.

- **Printer:** I recommend the [Brother HL2270DW](#), a wireless black-and-white laser printer. Mac and Windows PCs can easily print over wifi – no printer cables needed. \$100 at Amazon. (This is the successor to the [Brother HL-2170W](#) from last year.)

- **Tech brands' reliability:** Speaking of Brother, I should add that I used to recommend HP printers, until I found their service and quality level to be in decline. Sure enough, a 2010 [PCWorld article](#) on tech brands' reliability found that HP was near the bottom of the list, alongside Dell... while Brother was near the top – alongside Apple and Canon, both longtime favorites of Uncle Mark. But you knew that.

- For **everyday tech appliances:** When in doubt, buy Panasonic. This company is an unsung hero of consumer technology, as

it quietly but consistently makes simple, reliable, easy-to-use devices. My home phone, fax machine, [DVD player](#) (\$80), camcorder (see above), and 20-year-old boom box – still going strong – all bear the Panasonic brand. I can't think of a single Panasonic product that has disappointed me in its design or reliability. Even the manuals are fairly easy to read.



- **Wallet pen:** Even in the age of digital devices, it's helpful to have a pen on hand at all times. A pen that clips right into the wallet is a good choice, since you always know where to find it. For \$5 and change I'd highly recommend the [Zebra Mini T3](#), available at [jetpens.com](#). A good alternative is the Derringer Wallet Pen from [derringerpen.com](#) (\$8 including shipping). For a special gift, you might consider the \$32 [Walletini](#) from Levenger, or the nicely designed, Oprah-recommended pen from [thewalletpen.com](#), made of sterling silver (\$75).

- **Kitchen appliance:** Get the VitaMix blender. It's expensive, \$400 at [Amazon](#) or \$450 from [VitaMix](#) for the newest version with a variable-speed dial, but well worth it for the strong and sturdy construction. I use mine most mornings to make a smoothie for breakfast (yogurt, protein powder, toasted wheat germ, almonds, three fruits, three vegetables, and nine ice cubes, if you were wondering). Notably, all units are made at the headquarters in Cleveland, Ohio, and the company is still family-owned and operated.

## TOOLS FOR LEARNING CHINESE

很好。

I started teaching myself Mandarin Chinese earlier this year and have found these to be helpful:

- **A book about learning Chinese:** Anyone who's at least mildly interested in the Chinese language should read "Dreaming in Chinese," a 2010 book by linguist Deb Fallows, about her experience living in Beijing and Shanghai recently. The book is both informative and entertaining – a delightful introduction to Chinese language and culture. (Her husband is the journalist James Fallows, who often writes about China for The Atlantic.)
- **Chinese-learning podcasts:** I subscribe to Chinesepod.com for friendly, upbeat lessons on Mandarin Chinese. The lessons are recorded in Shanghai and feature a native Chinese speaker and an American explaining dialogues of varying difficulty. Recommended for anyone really interested in learning the language.
- **Chinese-English dictionary app:** The KTdict C-E iPhone app is the very best Chinese dictionary I've found for the iPhone. There is a free version, but I recommend this \$4 premium version because it includes the best flashcard trainer I've found anywhere. The user interface is very well designed. If the app included animation of stroke order, it would be a near-perfect Chinese training tool. As it is, I find it extremely useful and refer to it daily. (And yes, that's one strange name for an app.)
- **Chinese stroke order app:** I use eStroke Animated Chinese Characters (\$7) to look up, and watch, animations of how to properly write any given character. (The strokes of Chinese characters have to be written in the right order, and in the right direction.) This is invaluable in learning how to write Chinese. The problem is the app's poorly designed user interface, which takes some getting used to. But the stroke order animations are nicely presented.

- **Chinese textbook:** I've been working my way through New Practical Chinese Reader: Textbook I, a nicely designed textbook for the absolute newbie. (There is a companion workbook but you'd also need to buy the associated CDs for it to make sense.) Another good overview of the basics is Beginner's Chinese by Yong Ho, though it is rather densely packed and I would recommend it as a supplement to whatever textbook you use.



叔 马 克

- **Pronunciation guide:** I recommend John Pasden's free online Chinese pronunciation guide, which explains some tricky pronunciation tips – especially for x, q, and j – in a way that no other site, app, or book managed to do. (John is one of the hosts on Chinesepod and I enjoy his posts at @sinosplice.)
- **Cool iPhone tip:** Every iPhone has a built-in Chinese character dictionary, of sorts. Go to Settings -> General -> Keyboard -> International Keyboards and turn on "Chinese - Simplified / Handwriting". Then go to the Notes application and tap the lower-left globe icon to enable that keyboard: now draw a character in the gray input area, and the iPhone will interpret your handwriting to suggest some possible Chinese characters that match your drawing. Combined with the KTdict C-E app listed above, you can now look up any Chinese character you see and can draw.

## THE ALMANAC

*A few final thoughts.*

A few final thoughts, ideas, and pointers.

- **You might like** “Best Worst Movie,” a 2009 documentary (available on [Netflix DVD](#)) about the making of a 1989 horror movie called “Troll 2.” Themes include art, creativity, and America. Hard to explain; just watch it. (I didn’t find “Troll 2” watchable, though.)

- **Also**, I just want to point out that last year I recommended the novel “[Super Sad True Love Story](#),” by Gary Shteyngart, and wrote that “the book imagines a debt-ridden America, and a New York City overrun by vapid technology and materialism, facing some uncomfortable changes.” It’s strange to see some of Shteyngart’s hyperbolic scenarios resembling real life: the Occupy Wall Street protests, for example, are very similar to a protest movement described in the book. Read it.

- As the economy is still limping along, I still recommend **an easy way to get free books**: go to the library. It’s one of the best deals running. Seriously, they should change the slogan to “like Amazon, but free.” Many libraries now allow you to reserve the book online, and then email you when it’s available. (And yes, many public libraries are facing budget cuts at the very moment they’re needed the most. I support the [New York Public Library](#).)

- **How to buy a TV**: Go to your local Best Buy or other electronics store. Look at the wall of TVs, focusing on the units that are the size you want. Find the one with the best image clarity, brightness, and colors. Write down – or email to your todo list – the make and model number. Back at home, check Amazon to see if the customer reviews are OK. If so, order it from whoever offers the lowest price. (I recently used this method to buy the [UN55D6000 55-inch Samsung LED HDTV](#). I like it so far.)

- **How to manage your email**: An overloaded inbox creates stress and anxiety; here’s how to solve the problem permanently. Delete anything you don’t need again (like old lunch invites or spam), store or archive anything you might need again but which doesn’t need an action, and put the remaining action

items on a todo list **outside** the inbox. One good option is my own tool, [GoodTodo.com](#). Now the inbox is empty, and you can focus just on the items on your todo list. This works. Try it. (More details in my book “[Bit Literacy](#),” free or a dollar e-book.)

- **Umbrella storage system**: Here’s how to ensure you always have an umbrella on hand when it’s raining. Buy two umbrellas, and keep one at home and the other at work or school. (Perhaps store another in the car.) Then grab an umbrella whenever it’s raining, and – this is the only hard part – remember to put the umbrella back in its place afterward.

- **How to prevent a sneeze**: Just think of watermelon – its taste and texture – and the sneeze almost always disappears. Maybe it’s just a placebo, but it works for me. (Strangely, seeing a bright light can cause a sneeze, via the [photic sneeze reflex](#).)

- **How I cured my back pain**: I read [this book](#) and pretty soon the pain went away. More details in next year’s guide.

**Keep in touch:**

Email me with comments, corrections, or suggestions for future guides. I’m at [mark@goodexperience.com](mailto:mark@goodexperience.com).

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Have a great 2012! -mark

P.S. Thanks to readers Dave W., John K., Andrew W., Ben G., Matthew Q., and others for writing in last year with pointers and suggestions that I found helpful for this guide.