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TRAVEL > BACKPACKS

The Best Backpacks for College and High School Students

By [Zoe Vanderweide](#)

Updated September 12, 2022



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September 2022

A backpack is a school-wardrobe staple—from classroom to gym, and from late-night library marathons to early-morning coffee runs, a good bag will carry all the supplies you need for a long day. So it's important to find one that's comfortable, stylish, and durable enough to hold up to daily use. Since our first round of testing in 2015, we've tried dozens of backpacks in a variety of styles. These five bags are the best we've found for any college or high school student.

Looking for something else?



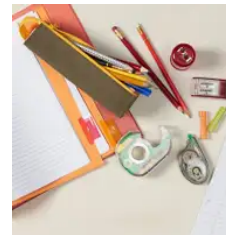
**35 Wirecutter Picks
for Heading Back to
School**



**The Best Kids
Backpacks for
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education at [Spear Physical Therapy](#), for expert advice on [how to choose a comfortable backpack and wear it ergonomically](#).

How we picked and tested

Students tote a lot of stuff, from textbooks and [laptops](#) to water bottles and [lunch boxes](#). Though a backpack needs to be spacious enough to accommodate a full day's worth of gear, Lloyd emphasized in our interview that it shouldn't be larger than your back and should never weigh more than about 15 pounds. A backpack that is too heavy or is [worn incorrectly](#) can cause neck, back, and spinal health problems—a particular concern for younger students, whose spines are still growing. With that in mind, we focused on comfort, adjustability, and ergonomics when selecting and testing backpacks. Features such as contoured, easy-to-adjust shoulder straps, breathable mesh padding on the straps and back panels, and adjustable-height sternum straps (a horizontal strap that goes across the wearer's chest) can all encourage correct ergonomic wear and enhance a bag's comfort.

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Staffers rocking a few of our picks (from left): the Herschel Classic Backpack XL, the Everlane ReNew Transit Backpack, and the Eastpak Padded Double. Photo: Afrik Armando

We also considered each bag’s organizational features, deciding that a bag should at a minimum have an easily accessible front pocket in addition to its main compartment, as well as a place to stash a water bottle. A secure laptop compartment or pocket is also essential, both for protecting a computer and for holding its weight close to your body. “If you have something that’s heavy far away from you,” Lloyd explained, “it’s going to create more strain on your back.”

A good school backpack should be durable enough to survive the wear and tear of at

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There is room for something that a student will carry every day.

Finally, we assessed each bag's aesthetics. The backpacks we considered vary in style from rectangular campus mainstays to sporty daypacks to bags polished enough for office internships. All of our picks are good-looking backpacks that our testers felt confident wearing.

Bags that measured up to our initial criteria underwent real-world testing. After loading them up with laptops, water bottles, running shoes, textbooks, groceries, gym clothes, toiletries, and just about anything else you might think to carry on your back, we wore the backpacks in a Seussian variety of situations (on a train! on a bike! in the rain! on a hike!), assessing each model for its comfort and ease of use. We also asked a panel of testers, representing a diverse range of heights and body sizes, to examine the finalists, and they looked more closely at each bag's fit, style, and organizational features, as well as its materials and construction.

A sporty pack for all-day comfort: Patagonia Refugio Daypack 26L

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Photo: Connie Park

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Our pick



Patagonia Refugio Daypack 26L

Ergonomic hero

Padded mesh straps and back panels make heavier loads feel effortless. This pack also has the easiest-to-use water-bottle pockets of any bag we've tested, as well as a removable laptop caddy. If you loved previous versions of the Refugio, keep in mind that this redesign is lighter on interior organizational features.

\$109* from REI

\$109 from Patagonia

*At the time of publishing, the price was \$99.

Who it's for: If you have lots of stuff to haul around—heavy textbooks, a large water

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the spine.



ish back panels make this the most comfortable and ergonomic bag we tested. Photo: C

The Patagonia Refugio Daypack 26L has spacious pockets that can accommodate all of your gear for school, the gym, and beyond. Photo: Connie Park

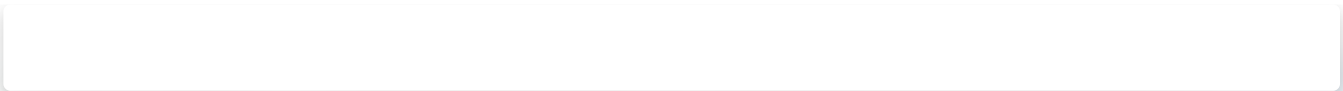


The Refugio is also equipped with a number of unusual organizational features. Its dual side pockets are made entirely from a stretchy mesh material that can easily

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The Refugio's sporty styling and contrasting colors look at home on campus or on the trail. Photo: Connie Park

The Refugio has a sleek, sporty look and is available in nine colorways that feel at home on any college or high school campus. The outer body, constructed from abrasion-resistant recycled polyester, repels water thanks to a PFC-free DWR (durable water repellent) finish. All of its components—from the buckles to the sliders to the zippers—are high quality and easy to use.

Flaws but not dealbreakers

Several reviewers and commenters on Patagonia's website have expressed

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As for organized bag, we think it offers versatile enough storage options to satisfy most people.

Dimensions: 19 by 12 by 6.5 inches

Weight: 1.75 pounds

Warranty: The Refugio is backed by Patagonia's ironclad guarantee, which promises repair, replacement, or refund at any time if you're not happy with an item. The company will fix damage due to normal wear and charge you depending on the extent of the repair.

A nostalgic school bag: Fjällräven Kånken Laptop

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Our pick



Fjällräven Kånken Laptop

Schoolyard style

This small, durable, and practical backpack is high on aesthetic appeal: It's the knapsack you might have carried to elementary school, all grown up. Though the lightly padded straps represent a significant upgrade from the straps on the original Kånken, this still isn't a backpack for carrying extra-heavy loads.

\$106* from Amazon

\$120 from Zappos

*At the time of publishing, the price was \$120.

Who it's for: This one's for cool kids who want a vintage-influenced backpack that will

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Forget what you're wearing to



The clamshell opening lets you pack (and unpack) the Fjällräven Kånken Laptop like a suitcase. Photo: Connie Park



The laptop compartment of the model we tested fits computers up to 15 inches and has a separate zipper, so you don't have to dig through the main compartment to grab your

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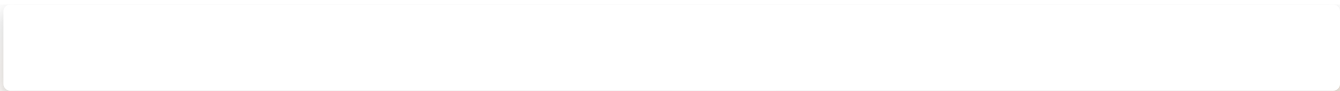


Schoolyard charm gets an upgrade with additional cushioning on the straps. Photo: Afrik Armando

The Kånken Laptop is constructed from Vinylon F, a hard-wearing synthetic material that's water resistant without the use of any chemical coating. One of our testers who found herself caught in a downpour happily reported that the contents of her backpack remained dry. The bag is available in an impressive array of 19 colors, from muted grays to splashier shades of coral, turquoise, and mustard.

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Over time, the Kånken Laptop develops a worn-in patina. This is an example of what we packed into the backpack during our 2016 testing. Photo: Michael Hession

One long-term tester reports that after five years of regularly using the Kånken Laptop to carry a laptop and notebooks, the bag is still sturdy, without any ripping at the seams. Although the Kånken Laptop's material can feel a bit stiff straight out of the box, it softens up and develops a patina over time. Another Wirecutter staffer, who has used the Kånken Laptop for about a year, says that she no longer notices any awkward stiffness to the material.

Flaws hit not dealbreakers

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Weight: 1 pound

Warranty: The Kånken Laptop is covered by a limited lifetime warranty that offers repair or replacement (at the discretion of Fjällräven's warranty team) for products purchased from authorized sellers. The warranty does not cover normal wear and tear.

A contemporary, understated, and versatile backpack: Everlane The ReNew Transit Backpack

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Our pick

Everlane ReNew Transit Backpack

Modern and functional

Sleek form and utilitarian features (such as a luggage pass-through and magnetic top closure) make this elegant bag look more pricey than it is, but it isn't backed by a warranty like our other picks.

\$95* from Everlane

*At the time of publishing, the price was \$85.

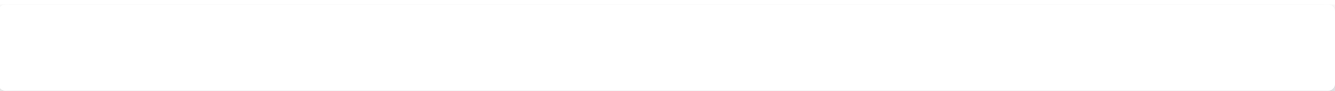
Who it's for: This backpack is ideal if you're looking for an understated bag that easily transitions from campus to office to airport and beyond.

Why it's great: **Everlane's The ReNew Transit Backpack** is a versatile, feature-packed bag that delivers on both looks and functionality. The bag's polished appearance belies its under-\$100 price tag, and though its materials aren't quite as hard-wearing as those of our picks from Patagonia and Fjällräven, we still think the Transit is well made and will hold up nicely over time: The bag's water-resistant exterior is made from a sturdy recycled polyester, and the all-metal hardware feels durable.

The Transit's clean aesthetic makes it appropriate for nearly any setting, from classrooms to coffee shops to office internships. Its water-resistant, recycled-polyester exterior is available in a pleasing array of muted hues, from classic black, gray, and army green to lighter shades of beige and blue. Featuring a lightweight build and

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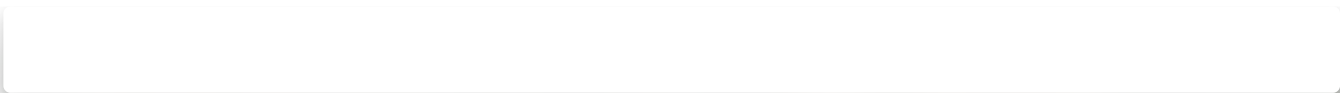
The Transit's organizational features help you pack smart: A dedicated laptop compartment keeps your computer protected, and an interior slip pocket holds heavier items close to your back. Photo: Connie Park



This Everlane bag has a spacious front zip pocket that affords quick access to on-the-go essentials, so you don't need to take the pack off every time you have to flash your ID, swipe a transit card, or stash your sunglasses. The main compartment is equipped with two slip pockets for notebooks or folders and an interior water-bottle pocket, while a second exterior water-bottle pocket on the opposite side offers added

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Versatile and stylish, this bag looks great wherever you carry it. Photo: Afrik Armando

The Transit is also our only pick equipped with a luggage pass-through strap, which allows you to attach the backpack to the handle of a rolling suitcase. A zipper along the side of the bag opens to a separate, lightly padded laptop pocket that can accommodate computers up to 15 inches.

Flaws but not dealbreakers

Accessing the 15-inch laptop compartment can be a little fiddly, even with a 13-inch computer. The bottom of the shoulder strap is attached just outside the compartment's

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Weight: 1.42 pounds

Warranty: none

A campus classic: Herschel Classic Backpack XL



Photo: Connie Park

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Our pick

Herschel Classic Backpack XL

The best traditional upgrade

Simplicity is what makes the Classic Backpack XL cool. It comes in a plethora of colors and patterns to stand out or blend in—but it offers no fancy laptop protection or organizational features.

\$60 from Amazon

\$65 from Herschel

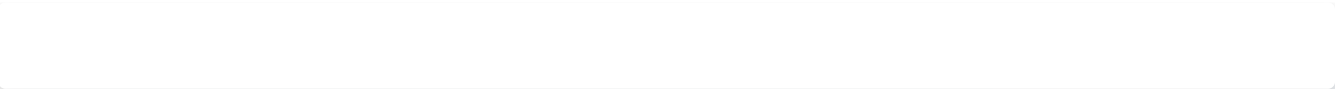
Who it's for: Label-conscious teens and young adults who appreciate a classic aesthetic and straightforward functionality will gravitate toward this bag.

Why it's great: An unfussy, functional bag with retro-inflected styling, the **Herschel Classic Backpack XL** has a dedicated following among cool kids (and adults). Though simplicity is the better part of its charm, the Classic has enough signature details to keep it from feeling anonymous. Herschel's characteristic red and white striped lining, corded zipper pulls, and branding on the front pocket may not appeal to everyone, but they are instantly recognizable, while thoughtful additions like elastic loops for wrangling excess strap webbing add a little polish. The pack also comes in a range of 24 colors, patterns, and materials, from basic blacks and grays to poppy sunflowers and psychedelic swirls.

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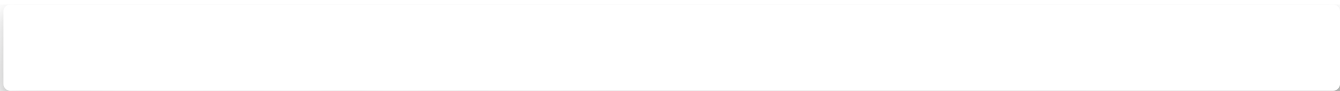
The Herschel Classic Backpack XL has a roomy main compartment with a 15-inch laptop sleeve. Photo: Connie Park



We found the Herschel pack's padded mesh straps comfortable, flexible, and easy to adjust. Plus, they have an interesting feature to help tame whatever webbing remains dangling after you adjust the straps: elastic loops for tucking in the excess length. We were also surprised by how compact the bag felt, considering its large, 30-liter capacity. The Classic's fabric is sturdy and substantial, and though we wouldn't want

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Little punchy details, such as signature Prusik zipper pulls, make this simple bag stand out. Photo: Afrik Armando

The Classic's front zip pocket is ideal for carrying smaller items like earbuds, pens, and a wallet, and it includes a clip for securing your keys. Inside the spacious main compartment, you'll find an elasticized laptop sleeve that can accommodate computers up to 15 inches; you could also use it to store notebooks or a textbook. Unlike smaller versions of the Herschel Classic, the XL also comes equipped with two side water-bottle pockets that are each large enough to comfortably fit a 24-ounce Takeya bottle.

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the natural curve of the body, and it has a sternum strap and a breathable back panel—a nice feature that we've found makes wearing a large backpack close to the body more comfortable—so wearers should beware of overloading.

Dimensions: 17.5 by 12.5 by 6 inches

Weight: 1.6 pounds

Warranty: The bag is backed by Herschel's limited lifetime warranty, which guarantees a product free of material and manufacturing defects when purchased from an authorized retailer. It does not cover loss, damage, or general wear and tear.

Street style, sized up for school: Eastpak Padded Double

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Eastpak Padded Double

A favorite, reimagined and improved

The Eastpak Padded Double is sturdily constructed with durable polyester and has several cool storage options beyond the two front pockets. If you carry a giant water bottle, this bag's single, smallish side pocket might not pass muster.

Buy from Surfdome

May be out of stock

\$65 from Eastpak

May be out of stock

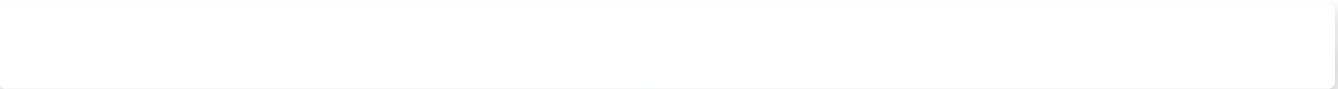
*At the time of publishing, the price was \$65.

Who it's for: If you're looking for a cool, casual backpack from a brand with recognizable street-style chops, the Padded Double is the way to go.

Why it's great: The **Eastpak Padded Double** is a functional yet still fab twist on the brand's best-known backpack, the **Padded Pak'r**, which has been bedecking the backs of cool kids for 45 years. The Padded Double serves up the Eastpak-label cred without the boxiness: It retains its predecessor's streetwear vibe but is higher in quality, more comfortable, and decidedly better looking.

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The Eastpak Padded Double has a roomy main compartment with a padded laptop pocket. Photo: Connie Park



The Padded Double’s polyester fabric feels substantial compared with the thin nylon exterior of Eastpak’s popular Pak’r and Zipp’r models—and is also less stiff than the Herschel pack’s material. Polyester is also inherently water resistant, offering some protection for your gear in inclement weather even without a water-repellent surface coating.

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proportioned silhouette.



The Padded Double has a slouchy silhouette but still feels sturdy and durable. Photo: Afrik Armando

We like this Eastpak bag’s balance of simplicity and organizational features. Its two large front zip pockets offer added versatility for wrangling smaller items that you need to access quickly. A discreet third pocket at the top of the bag unzips to reveal one of our favorite design elements, a phone (or sunglasses) pouch with a delightful, minky-soft lining. An elasticized slip pocket in the Padded Double’s large main

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pocket, located on the left side (it fits a 21-ounce Tumbler water bottle, but only just).

Physical therapist Sarah Lloyd told us that when you're carrying a water bottle on one side of your body, you should offset the load with weight on the other side—which can be a bit more difficult when your bag isn't equipped with dual side pockets. One (imperfect) fix is to pack heavier items on the opposite side of the bag's interior.

Dimensions: 18.5 by 11.2 by 8.3 inches

Weight: 1.18 pounds

Warranty: The Padded Double is backed by Eastpak's [30-year warranty](#), which covers damage to zip pulls, sliders, seams, and some fabrics. Discoloration and damage to the buckles, zipper tape, and inside coatings are covered during the first two years of the warranty period. The warranty does not extend to holes, cuts, tears, or self-repairs.

Other good backpacks

If you can spend a bit more on a backpack that'll last long past school: Get the [Timbuk2 Authority Laptop Backpack Deluxe](#), which was a pick in previous versions of this guide. We still think it's a great bag, but at around \$160, it's pricier than our other picks here. If that's within your budget, the Authority Deluxe will last you a long time, and it's backed by Timbuk2's [lifetime warranty](#). The bag has a clean, utilitarian vibe that, while not the most aesthetically inspiring, will easily transition to life beyond college. It's also seriously organized: Equipped with numerous pockets and a well-designed internal organizer, the Authority Deluxe is especially handy for wrangling school supplies, cords, chargers, and other tech. The dedicated 17-inch laptop compartment is well padded, and the bag's durable polyester exterior and waterproof reinforced bottom make it extra tough. It's comfortable, too—like the [Patagonia](#)

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backpack, this stylish and lightweight bag has a generously sized front zip pocket, a dedicated laptop compartment, and a handy luggage pass-through strap. The laptop compartment fits computers up to 16 inches, and its top zip opening makes it easier to use than the side-zip compartment on the Transit. Keep in mind, however, that this Lululemon pack's lightly padded straps aren't the most comfortable for carrying heavy loads.

If you'd like to fit all your gym gear: The San Francisco-based brand Aer makes excellent gym-ready backpacks that we recommend in our [guide to laptop backpacks](#). We especially like the 19-liter [Aer Fit Pack 3](#) and the 21-liter [Aer Duffel Pack 3](#) (other than their size, the bags are identical) for their combination of comfort, quality materials, and cool, vaguely futuristic design. At \$150 and \$180, respectively, these Aer packs are more expensive than other bags we recommend for college and high school students, but if you can swing it, these backpacks are built to last and backed by Aer's [lifetime warranty](#). Both bags feature an ultra-durable Cordura ballistic-nylon exterior, YKK zippers, Duraflex plastic hardware, and an interior liner treated with an antimicrobial coating to ward off icky bacterial growth from sweaty gear. Other features include a ventilated shoe compartment, a luggage pass-through, padded mesh shoulder straps and a padded back panel, and a sternum strap.

If you're on a tight budget: The [Amazon Basics Backpack for Laptops](#) is a functional, unfussy bag that can fit laptops up to 15 inches. It's also the best backpack we found for under \$30: Unlike models we tested from Target's Made by Design and Embark lines, the Amazon Basics bag felt sturdy and offered ample padding for a laptop. It also has nicely padded shoulder straps, mesh back panels, and two elasticized water-bottle pockets. At that price, however, you do make some sacrifices—the fabric is somewhat scratchy, the sternum strap is too short to be useful for people with broader frames, and the pack is available in only one color (gray).

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We tested two best-selling styles from JanSport, the [JanSport Main Campus](#) and the [JanSport SuperBreak Plus](#). Though we have fond memories of carrying bags from the classic backpack brand, we found that the quality of both of these JanSports paled in comparison with our picks from [Eastpak](#) and [Herschel](#). The Main Campus's padded straps were stiff and lined with a scratchy mesh fabric that felt unpleasant against our skin. The bag also has an unappealing boxy shape, and we struggled to find a color that didn't offend. We liked the SuperBreak Plus even less: Its straps, like those on the Eastpak Padded Zippl'r, were stiff, and the body material felt especially insubstantial.

We used to recommend the small, stylish [Rains Backpack Mini](#) for college and high school students. Although we still appreciate its good looks and fully waterproof exterior, we've concluded that it's better suited as a fashion backpack or a purse alternative. The bag's unpadded straps are difficult to adjust, and its small capacity and subpar ergonomics are hard to overlook—especially in comparison with our new picks, such as the equally stylish but much more functional Everlane ReNew Transit Backpack—and these days we aren't fans of the Rains pack's lack of organizational pockets and its carabiner closure. In addition, the Rains pack doesn't have enough room to accommodate the amount of stuff that the average college or high school student totes around—and even if it did, this wouldn't be the bag to tote all of that in. When full, the Rains Backpack Mini tilts away from the body, increasing strain to the neck and upper back, and its thin straps dig into the shoulders.

Though the [Topo Rover Pack](#) is currently a pick in our guide to the best [laptop backpacks](#), we actually prefer its campground aesthetic and colorblocked design for the college and high school crowd. If you're into the look, it's a well-made and comfortable bag. However, its tall and narrow shape restricts the amount of stuff you

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in
hold a lot, but a fully loaded backpack can feel quite heavy—and with its sternum strap on this pack, we don't think it's a good idea to carry that much gear. The bag's size also means that it won't fit comfortably on smaller-framed people. And at \$275, it's expensive, exceeding our \$150 price cap even at its occasional 40%-off sale price.

We considered a few bags under \$40, hoping to find a solid budget backpack. The inexpensive [Made by Design Basic Backpack](#) from Target initially looked promising, as it had a clean design and impressively padded breathable mesh straps and back panels. Once we had it in hand, however, the backpack's poor quality quickly became apparent—we noticed lots of loose threads, frayed edges, and uneven stitching. It's also restrictively narrow, with a capacity of only 15 liters.

At just \$20, Target's [Embark 16.9" Backpack](#) was another intriguing prospect. Alas, we just can't recommend it. The lightweight polyester material is laughably thin, and the bag is unreinforced at the bottom, so we would never trust it to protect a laptop from bumps and drops. Although we didn't notice as many loose threads on the Embark as we did on the Made by Design, the stitching still looked sloppy and uneven.

Even though we found the [Amazon Basics Laptop Backpack](#) alarmingly unattractive, we still wanted to test the best-selling bag. (At this writing, the \$35 backpack has an impressive 4.6-star rating, out of five, across nearly 17,000 Amazon customer reviews.) Unfortunately, the style was out of stock, so we weren't able to get our hands on one with enough time to do our due diligence for testing. We plan to test it for our next update if it's in stock.

This article was edited by Catherine Kast, Jennifer Hunter, and Jason Chen.

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Meet your guide



Zoe Vanderweide



Zoe Vanderweide is a staff writer reporting on style and accessories at Wirecutter. She has been wearing things for over three decades, and she has spent years covering streetwear, luxury, art, and design. Off the clock, you can find her painting the town rainbow with her (devastatingly stylish) daughter.

Further reading



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7 months ago

My Carhartt 35L is the best backpack I've ever owned -- it's incredibly tough, lots of pockets and compartments, has a dedicated laptop compartment. I've used it for carrying books to class, clothes on trips, you name it, and it hasn't shown any wear.

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