



THE BEST ROUTERS AND MODEMS FOR **EVERY BUDGET**

by Kannon Yamada



The Best Routers and Modems for Every Budget

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Looking for the best wireless router and modem? 2018 brings a surprising number of technological upgrades and product lines. The problem is that describing those innovations sounds like a foreign language.

This list of routers and modems decodes the jargon—to help you find the best router or modem for your needs and budget.

What Do You Need in a Router or Modem?

If you just want our recommendations, feel free to skip this section.

There are one or two kinds of networking devices that most people should buy: a router, a modem, or a router-modem combination. Unfortunately, most everyone rents their equipment from a cable or DSL-internet provider. For those skeptical, check your billing statement. You might see a \$5-per-month (or so) rental charge. Here's a little secret: you don't have to pay the provider a dime if you purchase your own networking gear.

But before you go off and buy a router and/or modem, ask yourself the following four questions:

1. Do you have a cable or DSL service provider?
2. Do you live in an apartment complex or densely-packed residential neighborhood?
3. Does your internet service provider let you use your own router or modem?
4. What are your ISP's max upload and download speeds?

1. Do You Have a Cable or DSL Service Provider?

Modems only work with either **cable or DSL internet**. If you need a satellite or dial-up modem, this article isn't for you. If you are uncertain which service you have, please check with your internet service provider (ISP) for more details.

Both cable and DSL providers rent out router-modem combination devices. While profitable for the provider, these devices lack the security of a separate router, cost a fortune in the long-run compared to buying your own device, and their performance sucks. If you want to get rid of rental fees, buy a router and a modem, or a router-modem combination device. I recommend buying the router separate from the modem.

Unfortunately, DSL (and related technologies) providers rarely allow third-party modems. Most of the time you'll need to buy a unit direct from the provider (at a substantial markup). Even so, it's almost always a better deal than renting.

2. Do You Live in an Apartment Complex or Densely-Packed Residential Neighborhood?

If you live in an apartment complex and own newer Wi-Fi-connected devices, you need a dual-band router. The more wireless signals packed into a densely populated area, the worse your wireless connection quality—especially for older devices.



I don't want to bore you, so here's a brief overview of why. Routers broadcast on two frequency bands: 2.4GHz and 5GHz. 2.4GHz has longer range and better wall penetration, while 5GHz has faster speeds and doesn't suffer too much from overcrowding (i.e. interference from other wireless devices). If you experience Wi-Fi problems, having both frequencies is a great help.

If you've already tried **changing the channel that your router broadcasts on**, you will want to upgrade the router to a dual-band model. You might also want to try **powerline adapters and Wi-Fi extenders**. On the other hand, **so-called "tri-band" routers** aren't truly three bands and do not substantially improve connectivity. The first real tri-band frequency is 60GHz, which is part of the soon-to-be-obsolete 802.11ad standard.

Don't worry about anything other than 802.11ac—it will remain the dominant standard for the next several years.

3. Does Your Internet Service Provider Let You Use Your Own Router or Modem?

Some ISPs force customers to use their own official modems and routers. AT&T, for example, **traps their U-Verse customers** into using AT&T Gateways (modems) while at the same time claiming that they allow customers to use their own devices. The truth is that your only option is to either rent or buy at bloated prices. Even so, buying is always a better option unless you plan on moving often.

If you subscribe to Xfinity (Comcast), look at their **approved list of modems** before buying. Despite generally horrible customer service practices, Xfinity actually does something right here by allowing users to substitute with their own routers and modems.

4. What Are Your ISP's Max Upload and Download Speeds?

This goes without saying: **a router or modem doesn't magically make your internet faster**. They only help you get the speed serviced by your ISP.

The **average AT&T DSL plan**, for example, allows for a maximum download speed of around 10Mbps and 4Mbps upload. That means even the slowest of wireless routers can transfer files well past your maximum download and upload speed. And a wired connection offers pretty much the maximum speeds that your ISP can provide.

It's not until you get to the faster cable or fiber-optic connections that a router or modem's data transfer speeds become relevant. For most users, you are better off with an inexpensive **dual-band router**, designed for 802.11ac or 802.11n devices. Two other high-end router use-cases are if you need to transfer files around on an internal network or if you want to stream 4K videos from a central in-network server.

One more thing: almost nobody needs 802.11ad (Wireless-AD) routers. The technology is already slated for obsolescence when 802.11ay (Wireless-AY) releases, which is a complementary standard to the widely-used Wireless-AC and the upcoming Wireless-AX standards. (By "complementary", I mean that they can both cohabit on the same device.)

Understanding Important Router/Modem Features

If you just want our recommendations, feel free to skip this section.

If you want to understand what makes a good router and modem, there are a few terms you should familiarize yourself with: the DOCSIS standard (if you've got cable internet), Gigabit Ethernet, the 802.11ac standard (also known as Wireless-AC), and dual-band Wi-Fi.

DOCSIS 2.0, 3.0, and 3.1 (Cable Modems Only)

Data Over Cable Service Interface Specification (or **DOCSIS**) is a standard for establishing an internet connection via cable modem. The most common version is DOCSIS 3.0. Be warned that, as [Ars Technica reveals](#), a DOCSIS 3.1 modem isn't just a baby-step ahead of 3.0—it's a fair amount faster.

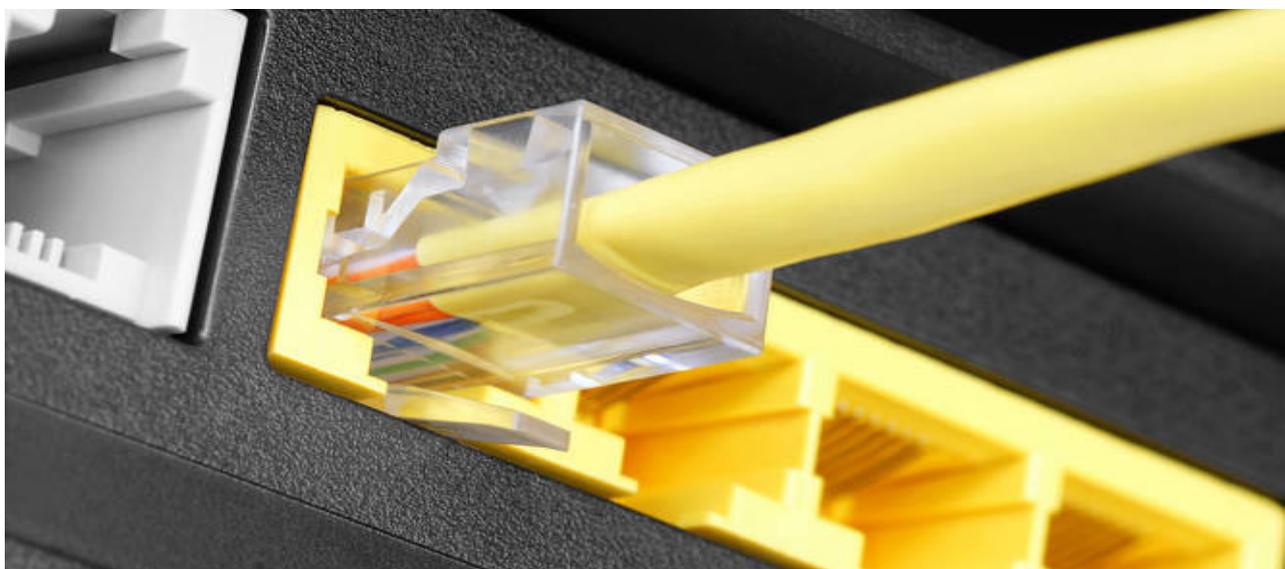
Whereas DOCSIS 2.0 routers were limited to a single channel for uploads and another for downloads, DOCSIS 3.0 introduces a method that unlocks the faster speeds offered by cable providers, which we refer to as Channel Bonding. Channel Bonding come in several speeds which include 8×4, 16×4, and 32×4. For the most part, 8×4 (340Mbps) adequately serves most users, but if you have a faster connection, 16×4 (680Mbps) covers all but the fastest of connections.

Here's what you need to know: Some high-end modems feature as high as 32 downstream and four upstream channels (so 32×4). But the vast majority of users won't need anything approaching that level of speed. DOCSIS 3.0 is good enough for most home users.

Gigabit Ethernet, 802.11n, 802.11ac, and 802.11ad

Gigabit Ethernet: Ethernet is wired internet. All modern routers can function as both wired and wireless access points (an access point is what you use to connect to a network). All modern routers also offer 10/100/1000 wired speeds (the numbers are essentially meaningless because it's found in all routers).

However, not all routers include the ultra-fast 10 Gigabyte Ethernet (10GbE). The 10GbE standard is the absolute fastest around—but it's for wired connections only. Keep in mind that unless you need to transfer files around on an internal network, you won't need 10GbE.



802.11ac: Like with wired network connections, wireless networks come with a few different standards. Of the many kinds out there, the two most popular are 802.11ac (Wireless-AC) and 802.11n (Wireless-N). But unlike a wired network, wireless devices have theoretical and real-world speeds. The theoretical speeds are what you see advertised by the manufacturer and these are never accurate. The real world speeds are what you get after you put a plaster wall and some distance between your smart device and the wireless access point. (Again, keep in mind that you are almost always limited by the speed of your plan with the internet service provider.)

802.11ad: A good example of this is the brand-spanking-new 802.11ad standard. Wireless-AD brings a theoretical maximum speed of 7Gbps, but there's a catch! The functional range is ridiculously short and it can't penetrate walls. You can't use it unless you're sitting right by your router. And then on top of that, almost no smart devices out there support the 60GHz spectrum. That means for most people, Wireless-AD routers are nothing more than Wireless-AC. And, on top of that, they'll soon be replaced by the superior Wireless-AY standard.

802.11n: The only reason to use an 802.11n router is if you can get one for free (and it's dual-band). Wireless-N routers come in single- and dual-band versions. The single-band versions are bad choices for most users.

Here's what you need to know: Get an 802.11ac (or Wireless-AC) router. There are newer standards coming out, like 802.11ax, but these are refinements of an already great technology. Other terms are largely jargon and unnecessary for the average home network.

Other Features: VPN, Dual-Band, MU-MIMO, DD-WRT

Certain routers and modems are pretty barebones, whereas others offer tons of features. Depending on your needs, you may require certain specific options.

VPN: Some routers allow for installation of a VPN or virtual private network. This prevents you from having to install a VPN on each machine on your network. But it means if you toggle your VPN on, the traffic for each device is routed through that VPN's servers. ([See our recommendations for the best VPN routers.](#))





Dual-band Wi-Fi: Dual-band Wi-Fi is a great feature. This refers to the aforementioned 2.4GHz and 5GHz frequencies. You'll want to check your devices and see what bands are needed, though the majority of modern smart devices and routers include dual-band Wi-Fi. Tri-band routers have two 5GHz networks and can automatically switch devices onto the 5GHz frequencies which deliver greater speed.

This feature works best when you've regularly got a LOT of connected devices. Most users won't notice the difference between tri-band and dual-band routers. Note that a tri-band router does not speed up your connection, but rather reduces the potential for bottlenecks. You'll only notice a difference if you regularly use lots of devices on your network.

MU-MIMO: MU-MIMO (or multiple-user, multiple-input, multiple-output) is a technology capable of evenly dividing bandwidth into separate streams to share connections regardless of application. It's a nifty network feature, although MU-MIMO only works on 802.11ac. On top of that, MU-MIMO only functions if devices are compatible with the signal, so you'll need gadgets with MU-MIMO Wi-Fi chips to take advantage of a MU-MIMO router. Nevertheless, MU-MIMO is excellent for an even distribution of Wi-Fi signals.

DD-WRT, OpenWRT, and Tomato: These are open-source software that may provide a much-needed update or refresh to your router. Not all router models allow users to install custom firmware.

Modem vs. Router vs. Modem-Router Combo

Routers and modems aren't the same things. A router is a box which lets several internet-capable devices join a network. There's typically an Ethernet input and several Ethernet outputs. Wireless routers also include an antenna for wireless internet access.

A modem, on the other hand, delivers internet access. As such, a modem sends an internet signal to the router, and the router distributes that network connection to individual devices. Depending on your needs, you might purchase a **modem, router, or both**.

Want to consolidate? Try a modem-router combo. Usually, it's best to get a separate modem and router rather than a combo device. There's more choice in device features, upgradability, and performance with a dedicated modem and router.

What's the Best Wireless Router for Average Users?

Consumers face two big problems:

1. Walls and distance both diminish wireless speed and reliability
2. Bandwidth congestion destroys wireless speeds

For 90 percent of users, your needs are served by a cheap 802.11ac router (also known as Wireless-AC) combined with whatever modem your provider allows you to buy. (Just remember to **set up proper Wi-Fi channels!**)

Even so, you might experience some setup hassles and you may need a Wi-Fi extender. A quick-and-dirty solution is the **TP-Link Archer C7**. It's cheap, performs well, and it's easy to set up:



Image Credit: [Amazon](#)

However, if you're looking for the absolute best router or modem and you want to make your own informed decisions, here are our picks and recommendations.

The Best Cable Modem-Router Combo Units

Best Cable Modem-Router for Gamers: **Netgear Nighthawk X4S**



Image Credit: [Amazon](#)



If you need DOCSIS 3.1 and a 2-in-1 modem-router, the **Netgear Nighthawk X4S** is the best option. However, it's among the most expensive routers available.

Along with a high price tag, the Nighthawk X4S provides dual-band Wi-Fi, 32×8 channel bonding, and as high as 6Gbps download speeds. On the back, you'll find four Gigabit Ethernet ports, and over Wi-Fi, the X4S boasts speeds as high as 3.2Gbps. There's also a USB 3.0 port for NAS use.

For those with the budget, the Netgear Nighthawk X4S is hands-down the best router-modem combo you can find.

Third-party firmware compatible: No, modem-routers aren't compatible with open source firmware

Upgradeable antenna: Yes, four SMA connectors

Pros:

- Modem-router combo
- DOCSIS 3.1
- 32×8 channel bonding
- Dual-band Wi-Fi (2.4GHz and 5GHz networks)
- Up to 3.2Gbps download speeds over Wi-Fi
- Up to 6Gbps download speeds over Ethernet
- Four Gigabit Ethernet ports

Cons:

- Pricy

Best Midrange Cable Modem Router: **Netgear Nighthawk C7000**



Image Credit: [Amazon](#)

Equipped with 24×8 channels, the **Netgear Nighthawk C7000** is a Wireless-AC, DOCSIS 3.0 modem which can hit 960Mbps download speeds. It's more designed for mid-tier cable-modem users who want the speed and range of the R7000 router but don't want to pay separately for a router and a modem.

Third-party firmware compatible: No, router-modem combos don't work with third-party firmware

Upgradeable antenna: No, internal antenna

Pros:

- 24×8 channel bonding
- DOCSIS 3.0
- Modem plus router
- Dual-band Wi-Fi (2.4GHz and 5GHz networks)
- Up to 960Mbps download

Cons:

- No DOCSIS 3.1

Most Compatible Cable Modem: **Motorola MG7540**



Image Credit: [Amazon](#)

The **Motorola MG7540 Gigabit router and modem** gets download speeds as high as 686Mbps. There are dual-band Wi-Fi and a wireless boost feature which ensures whole-home coverage. It's compatible with most ISPs and has four Gigabit Ethernet ports. At just shy of \$200, it's not cheap, but Motorola's MG7540 can handle all but the fastest of internet connections.

Third-party firmware compatible: No, router-modem combos don't often work with third-party firmware

Upgradeable antenna: No, internal antennas can't be upgraded

Pros:

- 16x4 Channel Bonding
- Up to 686Mbps download
- DOCSIS 3.0
- Dual-band Wi-Fi (2.4GHz and 5GHz networks)

Cons:

- No DOCSIS 3.1
- No Gigabit Ethernet

The Best Routers for Every Budget

Here are the best routers you can buy. The likes of TP-Link, Google, Netgear, and Linksys rank as the **top router manufacturers**.

Netgear Nighthawk X10 R9000



Image Credit: [Amazon](#)

Easily the best router you can find, the **Netgear Nighthawk X10 R9000** comes maxed out. It's an 802.11ad router with MU-MIMO and 160MHz as well. Not only that but the X10 houses a whopping six gigabit Ethernet ports and an SFP+ LAN port which produces fiber connectivity. Netgear packs in a smorgasbord of inputs and outputs such as two USB ports and a WPS button. It's capable as a Plex server, a nifty inclusion.

Performance remains phenomenal, with **PC Mag's tests** drawing 99.1Mbps on its close proximity 2.4GHz tests and a blistering 951Mbps in its 802.11ad test. However, it's pretty pricey and oddly considering its high-end array of hardware and software, lacks a featured known as Quality of Service (QoS). QoS balances internet traffic across multiple devices, which helps with lag—a big negative for gamers.

You may also consider the **TP-Link Talon AD7200**, which is another 802.11ad option. Although, it's not as feature-rich as the Netgear Nighthawk X10.

Third-party firmware compatible: **Yes, widely available firmware images**

Upgradeable antenna: No, non-upgradeable antenna

Pros:

- 802.11ad (most smart devices will only get 802.11ac)
- MU-MIMO
- 160MHz
- Lots of connectivity ports

- NAS capable
- Plex server functionality

Cons:

- Average MU-MIMO
- Not for gamers

MakeUseOf's Favorite Router: **Linksys WRT3200ACM**



Image Credit: [Amazon](#)

Decked out in classic blue and black garb like its routers of old, the **Linksys WRT3200ACM** is a high-performing router loaded with features. It's a **tri-band router**, which allows for more 5GHz-compatible devices to connect without bottlenecking. While you don't need tri-band frequencies, unless you have a lot of internet-connected devices, it's not a bad feature.

Among its abilities, you'll find the ability to install a VPN (on the router). You'll also find MU-MIMO, as well as **Tri-stream 160** which can maintain blazing fast speeds regardless of network traffic. Because Tri-Stream 160 allows for fatter channels (in a process similar to Channel Bonding), Tri-Stream 160, in theory, can manage networks speeds up to 2.6Gbps. However, real-world performance is always much slower than theoretical speeds.

Its USB 3.0 port makes it suitable for NAS use. It also includes an eSATA connector, for older external hard drives.

But its highlight feature is open-source software compatibility. The WRT3200ACM touts alternative firmware options such as OpenWRT and DD-WRT. Loading one of these software options allows features like TOR browsing. **TechRadar enjoyed** that the Linksys WRT3200ACM embraces open-source software, provides a ton of power-user worthy features, and delivers fast Wi-Fi speeds with decent range. However, in their review, coverage was a bit spotty.

This is my router of choice, and it offers fantastic file transfer speeds, keeping up with the demanding needs of a work-from-home writer and editor. You may also consider the **Linksys WRT32X**, which resembles the WRT3200ACM in its form factor and feature set while targeting gamers specifically.

Third-party firmware compatible: Yes, fully open source and compatible with DD-WRT and other firmware

Upgradeable antenna: Yes, four replaceable SMA antennas

Pros:

- Tri-band (you probably don't need tri-band)
- Lots of features
- MU-MIMO
- Tri-stream 160MHz
- Open-source firmware compatibility
- Blazing fast 5GHz
- Fast file transfer speeds

Cons:

- Average 2.4GHz network performance

Best NAS Router: **Synology RT1900ac or **Synology RT2600ac****



Image Credit: [Amazon](#)



The **Synology RT1900ac** and the newer **Synology RT2600ac** offer two features in one device. You get a Wireless-AC router and a network attached storage (NAS) device. **PC Mag lauded** its 5GHz performance, features, and competitive pricing. You'll find a USB 3.0 port as well as an SD card slot. Plus, the AC1900 employs a Linux-based operating system (OS) dubbed Synology Router Manager (SRM).

It's similar to DiskStation Manager (DSM), the OS Synology uses for its NAS devices. Within SRM, there's the Package Center, essentially an app store.

The performance saw quick speeds on the 5GHz band, though a bit of a drop off in range around 100 feet. The 2.4GHz band yielded stable performance, but its range is merely average. Disappointingly, while the Synology RT1900ac makes a capable NAS, its network storage performance suffers. Using gigabit connections, CNET witnessed a copy speed of 40MBps, around 320Mbps for its write speeds, and 42MBps, roughly 336Mbps on read speeds. That's sufficient for basic home network use.

A solid mid-range router, the Synology RT1900ac offers NAS functionality, excellent 5GHz throughput, and a modest price tag.

Third-party firmware compatible: Yes

Modular antenna: Yes, four SMA antennas

Pros:

- 802.11ac
- Fast Wi-Fi
- Decent range
- NAS capabilities
- Linux-based SRM
- Apps

Cons:

- Average file transfer speeds
- Moderate 2.4GHz range

Best Value Router: **TP-Link Archer C7 AC1750**



Image Credit: [Amazon](#)

According to Tom's Guide, the **TP-Link Archer C7** is a solid yet inexpensive performer. Its 5GHz network maintains a fast, reliable connection, and you'll find two USB ports. Besides that, it's compatible with open-source software for adding your own firmware. At close proximity, the C7 drew in around 363Mbps download speeds with support for up to 1750Mbps and has a 110-foot range.

Oddly, the USB ports are 2.0, not 3.0. While its 5GHz network shines, the 2.4GHz performance is middling. Yet at under \$100, the TP-Link Archer C7 delivers hefty throughput, a smattering of customization options, and simple installation.

Third-party firmware compatible: Yes

Modular antenna: Yes, three upgradeable antennas

Pros:

- Fast Wi-Fi
- Lots of settings
- Gigabit Ethernet
- USB ports

Cons:

- Average 2.4GHz performance
- Only USB 2.0, not 3.0

Most Balanced Router for Home Users: Trendnet TEW-818DRU



Image Credit: [Amazon](#)

Consider the **Trendnet TEW-818DRU** for a beefy router that won't break the bank. It's quick and simple to set up. **CNET appreciated** its comprehensive feature set. Moreover, the TEW-818DRU ranked among the fastest routers. Coupled with incredible Wi-Fi signal strength and superb range, it's the best balance between price and performance. Top speeds hit around 1300Mbps on its 5GHz band, with around 600Mbps on the 2.4GHz band.

What's more, the TEW-818DRU is packed with options. Onboard, you'll find guest networks, **Quality of Service** (QoS), a firewall, and parental controls (which can filter out adult content). Unfortunately, despite the USB port, the Trendnet TEW-818LW doesn't function well with many portable drives. Ultimately, with lots of features, strong Wi-Fi performance, and good range, the Trendnet TEW-818DRU balances price and performance masterfully.

Third-party firmware compatible: Trendnet announced third-party firmware, but none are available yet

Upgradeable antenna: No, internal antenna only

Pros:

- 802.11ac
- Fast Wi-Fi
- Long range
- Quality of Service (QoS)
- Parental controls for blocking adult content

Cons:

- USB port doesn't function well

Cheapest Router: D-Link DIR-818LW



Image Credit: [Amazon](#)

The **D-Link DIR 818LW** is easily the most affordable 802.11ac router on the market. In its review, **CNET praises** the DIR-818LW for its small stature, intuitiveness, and Gigabit Ethernet. Additionally, the D-Link DIR-818LW includes cloud functionality. Performance is reliable which makes this the best cheap wireless router available.

Unfortunately, Wi-Fi data is considerably slower than on high-end and even mid-range routers. Further, the DIR-818LW features a fairly short range. While it's a dual-band router, the 5GHz band only supports a single 802.11ac stream that tops out at 433Mbps. The 2.4GHz frequency band is capable of dual-stream at a maximum speed of 300Mbps.

Therefore, while it's a true 802.11ac router, the DIR-818LW delivers real-world performance on par with most 802.11n routers. With its distinctive cylindrical design, multiple color options, and an 802.11ac network, the D-Lik DIR-818LW is the top budget router on the market.

Third-party firmware compatible: No, incompatible with third-party firmware

Upgradeable antenna: No, internal antenna only

Pros:

- True 802.11ac
- Dual-and
- Cylindrical shape
- Small footprint
- Four color options
- Reliable performance
- Cloud features
- Gigabit Ethernet

Cons:

- Short wireless range
- Slow Wi-Fi

The Best Modems for Every Budget

Netgear Nighthawk CM1000



Image Credit: [Amazon](#)

If you're into 4K video and gaming, the **Netgear Nighthawk CM1000** DOCSIS 3.1 modem achieves a whopping 1Gbps download speed.

It's a splurge at over twice the cost of the Surfboard SB6183. However, no modems come close to the performance of the Netgear CM1000. With 32x8 channels, it's the best modem you can buy. Notably, the Arris Surfboard SB8200 is a DOCSIS 3.1 modem worthy of consideration, and the Motorola MB8600 also touts DOCSIS 3.1.

Pros:

- DOCSIS 3.1
- 1Gbps
- 32x8 (this is the fastest possible in 2018)

Cons:

- Pricey

Arris Surfboard SB6183



Image Credit: [Amazon](#)

For a comprehensive modem, check out the **Arris Surfboard SB6183**. Tom's Guide noted that the SB6183 pulled in 686Mbps down, and 131Mbps upload speeds. That's an improvement over the DCM-301. It's a DOCSIS 3.0 modem, with 16 downstream and 4 upstream channels.

Arris is one of the most commonly-used modem manufacturers, and the Surfboard SB6183 is one of the best modems in this price range. Alternatively, the Zoom 5370 is a similarly specced out modem but lacks Cable One and Optimum support. Thus, the Arris Surfboard SB6183, with its increased ISP compatibility, is the better buy.

Pros:

- 16x4 channel bonding
- Up to 686Mbps download
- Up to 131Mbps
- DOCSIS 3.0

Cons:

- Not DOCSIS 3.1

Linksys CM3008



Image Credit: [Amazon](#)

As **Tom's Guide aptly states**, the **Linksys CM3008** is an inexpensive alternative to renting a modem from your ISP. It's a no-frills DOCSIS 3.0 modem and reportedly delivers speeds on par with the Arris Surfboard SB6141. Moreover, the CM3008 comes in a small form factor that's easy to fit virtually anywhere. Unfortunately, it's not a DOCSIS 3.1 router, but for the price, it's tough to complain.

Pros:

- Good speeds
- 8×4 channel bonding
- DOCSIS 3.0
- Small footprint

Cons:

- Not DOCSIS 3.1



The Best Routers and Modems for Every Budget

MakeUseOf's official recommendation is to make due with what you already have. But if you don't own your own router and modem (or a router modem combo), you need to buy it. It'll save you a lot of money in the long run.

Personally, I recommend avoiding combo devices and, for routers, get something with the 802.11ac standard, if you can afford it. A dual-band router is good enough for most people. The only reason to get an 802.11n router is if you're on a limited budget.

Ultimately, out of the numerous networking gear on the market, this list covers the best out there. However, before you run off and buy a new device, consider attempting to **improve the performance of your network**—with a few simple tweaks.

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