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MacBook Air shells and sleeves

by Dan Frakes, Macworld.com Aug 8, 2008 4:44 pm

A big appeal—perhaps the *biggest* appeal—of the MacBook Air is its size and weight: at just three pounds and thin as can be, it slides into places most other laptops can't fit, letting you bring a laptop without adding much to your load. At the same time, while the Air's size—and, let's face it, looks—may tempt you to carry it by itself, chances are you want to give it at least a modicum of protection.

Among the most-popular types of laptop protection—especially for the MacBook Air—are sleeves and shells: slip-on or snap-on covers designed to hold just the laptop, either for protection when carrying the computer by itself or for throwing it inside a larger bag or a suitcase. I've been testing several of these models for the MacBook Air; here's a quick rundown on each. One drawback to such cases worth mentioning up front is that they add a bit of weight and bulk to your laptop. That's to be expected, but when you're talking about a laptop as light and thin as the MacBook Air, such additions are disproportionately noticeable.

Hard shells

A while back I [covered several hard shells](#), polycarbonate covers that snap onto your laptop—a top piece for the laptop's screen and a bottom piece for the body of the laptop—and stay there, offering excellent all-the-time protection from scratches, as well as moderate protection against dents and dings. I got a chance to try two such cases for the MacBook Air, and both work well. As I mentioned last year, you need to thoroughly clean both your Air and the interior of the shell before putting on the shell—and periodically remove the shell and brush out any dust and dirt that's gotten inside—in order to prevent such debris from scratching your laptop. There's also another potential drawback: heat. Although both of these shells keep the Air's cooling vents unobstructed, I found that the Air still got noticeably warmer when inside.



Speck's \$50 SeeThru [SeeThru Slim Hard Shell Case For MacBook Air](#) (★★★★☆) is, as its name describes, transparent, although it's available in five see-through colors: clear, pink, smoke (gray), cranberry (red), and purple. An included microfiber cloth is

useful for cleaning your laptop and the SeeThru before installation. Openings in the case provide access

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to the Air's MagSafe connector on the left and the USB, video, and audio ports on the right. Vent holes on the bottom align with the Air's own vents. There are also four large feet on the bottom of the case, although they don't grip smooth surfaces as well as the Air's own feet. A nice touch is four silicone "nubs" inside each piece of the shell that keep it from resting directly on the laptop; this helps prevent the dirt-scratch issue I mentioned above, although because the shell flexes, it still comes in contact with your laptop's surfaces during use. The SeeThru adds about 0.25 inches to the Air's thickness and approximately 13 ounces to its weight. It fits securely but is easy to remove.



I've long been a fan of Agent 18's iPod cases, so I was looking forward to the company's \$50 [MacBook Air Shield](#) (★★★★☆). The Shield takes a slightly different design approach than the SeeThru: instead of being transparent, the Shield is opaque black or white on the bottom with a "framed" look on top: a matching opaque border with a clear window in the middle that shows off the Air's Apple logo. The Shield fits securely, offers access to all ports, and adds the same 0.25 inches of thickness as the SeeThru, but an additional ounce—14 in total—of weight.

There are two other things worth noting about the Shield. First, the bottom of the case, presumably in the interest of better cooling, leaves a large section of the MacBook Air's underside exposed. Between this opening and larger feet on the bottom of the Shield, my Air didn't get *quite* as warm inside the Shield as it did in the SeeThru, but if the idea of a shell is all-over protection, some people may object to this tradeoff. Second, the Shield's top piece was heavier than that of the SeeThru by about 1.5 ounces, and this was just enough difference that my Air's screen would occasionally flop backwards from the weight of the shell. It didn't happen all the time, but often enough for me to notice.

Soft sleeves

If you don't need always-on protection, a soft sleeve helps protect your laptop from scratches and keeps out dirt and dust while you're carrying it around—on its own or inside another bag. While my roundup of sleeves for the MacBook and MacBook Air was heavy on padded neoprene sleeves, the sleeves I've been testing for the Air skew leather, with one exception.



Incipio's \$40 [Orion Sleeve Case for Apple MacBook Air](#) (★★★★☆) is a slip-in case made of synthetic leather with a soft, microsuede lining. Available in black, gray, red, orange, green, pink, creme, or white, the Orion weighs less than 7 ounces and is approximately 0.25 inches thick in total. The Orion feels well-made and looks nice, although because it doesn't have a lid or flap, your MacBook Air isn't completely protected. In fact, as you can see in the image here, the sides of the sleeve bow outwards a bit when your Air is inside, and cut-outs in the sleeve

designed to make it easier to remove your laptop leave small portions of your Air unprotected. As such, the Orion seems most-appropriate for carrying your Air inside another protective bag or for "casual transport"—for example, toting it between meetings at the office.

Marware's \$90 [C.E.O. Envi for MacBook Air](#) (★★★★☆) plays on Apple's "fits in an envelope" theme for the Air, offering a fully-enclosed sleeve that looks like a black-leather envelope. Made of real leather, the sleeve is semi-rigid to offer a little—but not much—impact protection, and is lined with soft fabric. Light-gray stitching adds to the Envi's attractive appearance, and a magnetic closure secures the sleeve's top panel. The Envi fit my MacBook Air well and looked great, although it does add about 10.5 ounces and half an inch of thickness to your laptop load. As you might expect from smooth leather, the sleeve itself picks up scuffs and scratches easily.



Sena's \$200 [Executive Sleeve for the MacBook Air](#) (★★★★☆) is a step (or two) up the luxury ladder from Marware's offering. Made of full-grain, black or brown Italian Napa leather, the Executive Sleeve is more of a high-end portfolio for your MacBook Air than a traditional sleeve. The leather is indeed of high quality, the inside surfaces are lined with velvet to avoid scratching your laptop, and the stitching and workmanship—Sena calls the Sleeve "hand-crafted"—are impressive. The chrome-finish, magnetic closures are quite secure, and as with the Envi, the sides of the sleeve are semi-rigid for a bit of additional protection. Although the Executive



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Sleeve is expensive, those in the market for a high-end business accessory are likely to be unfazed. On the downside, this is the bulkiest of the sleeves I tested, adding 15 ounces of weight and 0.75 inches of thickness to your Air. The Sleeve also adds over an inch of width and depth because of its tapered edges.

Finally, if you're not into leather, at the opposite end of the materials spectrum lies Timbuk2's \$50 [Steve Sleeve](#) 🌱🌱🌱🌱. Essentially a fabric sleeve—designed to look exactly like a manilla envelope, down to the string closure on the back—for protecting your Air against scratches, the Steve Sleeve's appeal is its low environmental impact: The tough outer material and the two buttons for wrapping the closure string are made entirely from recycled plastic bottles (PET); the soft inner lining, made of [thermoplastic polyurethane \(TPU\)](#), is biodegradable; and the seams are welded using non-toxic glue. The front of the sleeve features a subtle Timbuk2 logo. My MacBook Air fit perfectly inside without being difficult to remove. The negatives? The edges of the "envelope flap" on the back tended to curl up rather than lay flat after some use; and given that the Steve Sleeve offers minimal protection against anything but scratches, you pay a pretty penny for its design and for helping the environment.



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