Unexpected results from testing cheap HDMI cables.

An incompatible Ethernet cable can silently slow down your network speed, and HDMI cables operate on the same principle—each type of cable has bandwidth limitations, whether you realize it or not.

For years, many people argued that anyone spending more than $10 on an HDMI cable wasn't being reasonable. Digital signals either work or don't. Spending $30 on copper and plastic when there are cables for just $5 was a difficult decision. That was the view of many until they set up two Samsung M8 smart displays with a 75-inch TCL S5 4K Smart TV.

Something immediately feels off. Text on one screen looks sharp, while the other is blurry and indistinct—like looking through a dirty window. People blame the monitor, the graphics card, and even their eyesight, but never consider the cables. Incompatible Ethernet cables can silently slow down your network, and HDMI cables operate on the same principle—each cable has bandwidth limitations, whether you realize it or not.

Not all HDMI cables provide the same image quality.

HDMI versions are not just marketing hype.

Many people assume that "HDMI" simply means HDMI. A cable that functions like any other cable. That's not the case. HDMI 2.0 has a maximum speed of 18Gbps. This speed will handle 4K at 60Hz under ideal conditions,

but adding HDR makes things difficult. HDMI 2.1 operates at 48Gbps – a huge difference. You need that extra bandwidth for 4K at 120Hz, 8K content, or HDR without blurring. The version printed on the cable really does matter.

However, the packaging is misleading. Or at least it omits a lot of information. The "4K Support" label on the box is meaningless if the cable fails right when HDR is introduced. The image flickers. The colors look quite bad. Many people don't even realize how bad things are until they change the cable and rewatch the show they enjoyed earlier. The experience is completely different. Black is truly black, not gray. Color transitions are smooth. The ugly streaking in dark scenes that we were used to ignoring before is gone.

Resolution incompatibility was the root of it all.

Checking HDMI cables isn't in many people's plans. They have a whole drawer full of cables—probably five or six years old. They're for old devices they no longer own, random Amazon purchases they've forgotten about, and freebies from who knows where. When the resolution difference between the two screens starts driving them crazy, they rummage through that pile of cables and start swapping them one by one. What they find surprises them.

The Twisted Veins HDMI cable has been sitting in a drawer for years. It has a braided casing, gold-plated connectors, and the usual advertising features. It looks very professional. However, looks don't determine image quality. These cables are difficult to set up. Text on one screen is sharp. The other screen looks blurry, slightly hazy, as if the resolution has been reduced. It's hard to notice the difference in these photos, but the difference is much more apparent in person.

That's exactly what happened – Twisted Veins cables didn't have enough bandwidth for full 4K resolution on the second monitor. Many people spent time adjusting their display settings before even considering the cable issue. Standard 1080p content would probably look fine on these cables. But 4K HDR was a stretch.

These cables actually meet the requirements.

The Amazon Basics HDMI cable has surprised many. They've always considered Amazon's in-house brand to be rather mediocre – good for phone chargers, not something they'd trust for transmitting high-bandwidth video signals. However, the skepticism was misplaced. The Amazon Basics cable handles 4K content over shorter distances without a problem. No surprises, no issues. Just a cable that does its job. Pretty good!

What about the USB-C to HDMI cables that come with the Samsung M8 monitor? People didn't expect much from them. Included accessories are usually disposable. The kind of cable you throw in a drawer and replace immediately. But these cables are different. They outperform everything else we've tested. Colors look accurate, text remains sharp on both screens, and there's never been any signal loss during extended use. They use a USB-C video output, and the quality of your USB-C port can vary greatly between devices. Samsung doesn't skimp on included cables, and the image quality reflects that.

The prices have misled consumers.

Sometimes free things are better than paid things.

The cables that come bundled with monitors perform better than the ones you paid for. That's the strange reality of HDMI cables in 2026. The pretty braid and gold-plated connectors are meaningless if the cable can't handle the bandwidth. And the bundled accessories you're about to throw away might be better than what you bought yourself. Price and brand can be deceptive in both ways.

What's really important is finding an HDMI cable that's certified for your intended use, has a durable construction that won't degrade over time, and has positive reviews from users with similar resolutions and refresh rates. The ideal price for most people is around $10-20 for cables from specialized manufacturers. Spending less is risky. Spending more rarely yields a clear benefit unless you need extremely long distances or specific professional features.