

What is distance learning?

Distance learning is a means by which a student can take courses or obtain instruction without having to be in the same room as the teacher or instructor. As the name implies, teachers and learners are separated by a distance, whether this distance is one or two blocks or a thousand kilometers in length.

Learning without walls: On-line and interactive!

Learning occurs when one acquires new knowledge or skills, and it takes place all of the time—most of it outside of a classroom. Whether one is reading a mystery novel, observing a child at play, listening to a radio program or to a friend describing a movie she had seen, it's all learning. However, learning also occurs as a result of a more intentional, didactic process of imparting information. It conjures images of students and teachers, classrooms and text books. This is formal learning. On-line learning, in this more formal sense, also involves students and teachers, lots of text and, in many cases, interactive discussion, either spoken or written. But the teacher is often "invisible," and the physical structure of the learning institute—the high school or university campus—is taken out of the picture. Little or no travel is involved, as the students' home or workplace office (or a simple tabletop), outfitted with a computer hooked up to the Internet, becomes the classroom. The kinds of courses that can be taken this way range from academic subjects like mathematics and business administration, to vocational subjects like watch repair and dental assistance, to hobbies and interests like gardening, cooking and model-making.

Advantages to on-line learning

What are the advantages to learning this way? What if a person is not that familiar with using computers? And what does learning "look like" in this setting? How different or similar is the delivery of the course content to the traditional classroom method?

Here are five advantages to on-line learning.

1. You can find learning sites available from around the world
2. You can learn simply for personal interest, or you can take courses for credit.
3. You can learn from any place at any time.
4. You can try different types of on-line learning to suit your own learning style.
5. You can connect with people who have similar interests or goals.

In addition, the advantage to learning on the Internet is that it supports the five media: text, graphics, animation, audio and video. The Internet also provides synchronous (at the same time) and asynchronous (not at the same time) access. This flexibility and capacity entices educators and learners alike because neither have to leave their work sites or homes to learn or to teach. On-the-job learning (or training) can be customized to the employee's and company's needs and resources, and highly effective, learner-centered programs can be offered.

What to expect

Many students curious about on-line learning first want to know what to expect. They wonder what an on-line course looks like, and whether what is being taught is presented to them in ways similar to traditional teaching methods. In fact, on-line courses can be taught or presented in many different ways. Some are much like seminar courses, whereby students do a lot of on-line interacting and group work, and the teacher acts more like a facilitator and resource person. Other courses are quite traditional in their delivery, where a student watches, reads and listens to a lecturer or a documentary-style presentation, takes quizzes, or submits essay papers. Since we all learn in different ways, students should shop around to find which method they prefer. Here are how some on-line courses are presented:

Boxmind

Boxmind produces video streaming presentations from some of the world's most eminent academic scholars that can be downloaded and viewed on your computer. The video lectures are paired with slide images that are timed to change as the presentation progresses. The presentation can be stopped and started again when convenient. Lecture notes and links to related readings are available from smaller windows on-screen. (The presentations are viewed through Windows Media Player, which can be downloaded from the Boxmind site.) If you go to this site, you can view a demo lecture free of charge.

Horizon Live

Horizon Live provides live instruction over the web by audio streaming and slides. Students can participate by using on-line chat, sharing an electronic whiteboard, or in some cases by two-way audio. This learning system also supports video streaming, so students can either view the presenter speaking live, or from a stored archive. (The presentations are viewed through Real Player, which can be downloaded from the Horizon Live site.)

For absolute beginners

Some learners are new to computers and communication technology. They'd like to take on-line courses, but are intimidated by the prospect of having to first learn how to use the tools. The world of paper copybooks and pens seems so much less complicated! However, once a learner becomes comfortable with the newer technologies—which happens much sooner than one might think—he or she will almost always find that the benefits of using them far outweigh the initial discomfort of learning how.

If you would like to “begin at the beginning,” there are many on-line tutorials that exist to help learners get comfortable with different software applications. Here are a few that may help:

[Chalksoft®](#)

Chalksoft provides free basic on-line tutorials in Microsoft Windows applications, including Microsoft's Word, Excel, and PowerPoint.

[PowerPoint in the Classroom](#)

A free tutorial package aimed at kids.

Finding your course

Once learners are comfortable with using computers and a few different applications, they're ready to start searching for available on-line courses. But how do they know where to find the course they're looking for? Many people start by using a **search engine** to find the course they're looking for. They might use search terms like “on-line courses” or “free on-line courses,” “distance education,” or the name of an academic or training institution.

Free (also called “public”) on-line learning sites offer very informal, loosely structured, continual intake courses as promotion for their e-learning services. Most are self-directed (no teacher), inviting the learner to interact with the interface and a very superficial level of content. It's usually left up to the learner to decide if he or she wants to complete the course.

The more formal education/learning programs are usually password protected, requiring you to register and pay. Most are highly interactive on all levels and facilitator-led. Successful completion requires achievement of the learning outcomes/objectives and all course requirements. These types of courses and programs are frequently offered through post-secondary institutions, corporations or government agencies, and designed for a specific target group.

In addition to using a search engine to find on-line courses, the sites listed below are very good starting points that will help you to find free, inexpensive or for-credit on-line courses, as well as offer links to other sites related to distance education.

[Geo Learning](#)

Offers over 2,500 free demo on-line courses.

[Learn 2](#)

Offers sample courses and free tutorials.

[TeleEducation New Brunswick On-line Course Directory](#)

Lists thousands of courses available in different subject areas (including hobbies and personal interest courses) from around the world. The courses are previewed to adhere to basic standards of quality.

[Lguide](#)

Provides lists and reviews of courses available over the Internet.

[Seneca](#)

Follow the links on the left-hand menu.

Wait... there's more!

The following information comes from the Education Index, which is "an annotated guide to the best education-related sites on the Web." It sorts these sites by both subject and lifestage. You'll find the information below, and much more, by going to the [Education Index](#)'s web site, and then clicking on "distance education."

[Adult Education & Distance Learner's Resource Center](#)

Lifelong Learning, consultants in education and training, have put together a terrific site for those thinking about or getting started in distance education. The site includes basic and historical information, financial aid facts, success stories, a fine directory of on-line colleges, and more. We recommend it highly!

[CASO's Internet University](#)

Offered as a service of Cape Software, CASO's Internet University offers Distance Learning articles, courses, and providers, plus on-line study resources. Included are descriptions, tuition, and contact information for more than 700 courses, plus profiles of more than 30 schools offering on-line instruction.

[DIAL: The New School's Cyberspace Campus](#)

This site does a good job of explaining just how you would go about completing course work from anywhere in the world as part of the Distance Instruction for Adult Learning program at The New School in New York. Also onsite: public events, sample classes, an art gallery, and more.

[McGraw-Hill On-line Learning](#)

McGraw-Hill's on-line computer sciences and corporate training classes are described here, and you can register and take opening lessons free. There's also a nifty little career planning section and a quiz to see how much you know about the Internet.