

Is Online Learning for Me?

Many students find online, web-based classes to be liberating, highly focused, and challenging. They appreciate the expanded opportunities for research, learning and self-improvement that they can access in their own homes 24/7. Some like the chance to improve their knowledge, computer skills and capacity for self-reliance, while also increasing their prospects of getting a better job. Some want to improve their professional credentials while staying on the job or while taking care of their family. Some want to access first class educational facilities without having to move to another town. Some simply wish to broaden their intellectual horizons.

To see if online learning is right for you, we suggest that you answer the following questions as honestly as you can.

Ask yourself:

1. Do you really have enough time to set aside five to eight hours every week for each course taken?

One of the most popular features of web-based courses is the greater freedom of scheduling. If it suits them, students can choose to work in the evenings, on weekends, at 3 am, or whenever they find themselves in the mood. Furthermore, with online courses it is generally easier to work ahead, or to catch up, than it is in traditional courses. But, unless you have the time and self-discipline to work on a weekly basis, you will very likely find yourself falling further and further behind.

2. Do you believe that you have the self-discipline to complete a course that has a strong independent studies component?

Self-discipline is very important in online learning, especially if you are not studying on campus or with an immediate goal in mind. Web-based students sometimes end up neglecting courses because of

personal or professional circumstances, unless they have specific and compelling reasons for taking the course. Procrastination causes the downfall of many students. Some students prefer the independence of Web-based courses; others find it uncomfortable.

3. In your past educational experiences, how much did you rely on direct personal contact with instructors and other students to achieve a successful learning outcome?

Many people learn best by interacting with other students and instructors. Web-based courses facilitate this interaction in a number of effective ways: chat rooms, discussion boards and bulletin boards, video cams and e-mail, but to a significant degree, individual students must take responsibility for whatever contact they have with other people. Also, Web-based courses require you to work from written instructions without face-to-face contact. This doesn't mean you can't ask questions, but it does mean you have to pose your questions in a written format, which some people find a little intimidating. On the up side, you will be able to meet people from all over the US and sometimes from other countries and other cultures, which in itself can be a stimulating experience. The old fashioned "pen-pal" was never as much fun as this! Furthermore, you don't have to wait for weekly office hours to contact your instructor. Sometimes teachers are able to respond to emails within minutes, and usually within one to two days.

4. Do you have the necessary computer skills to make a go of online learning?

It goes without saying that web-based courses use technology for all teaching and communication. Some students, especially those of mature age, can find this somewhat confronting. If you know how to surf the web, to download information onto your computer, to send emails, to manage an online mailbox, and to use a word-processing program (like MS Word), then you already have all or most of the required skills to complete an online course at IAIA. But, if you are not "computer literate," then you will need to allow more study time at the beginning to learn your way around a computer. We don't require

you to take a computer course before you enroll because most students can learn the requisite skills within a few days or weeks. In any case, no matter what your current level may be, improving your computer skills is a good reason to take an online course.

More questions about necessary computer skills, contact Melanie at mcesspooch@iaia.edu.

5. Do you have the right computer equipment, hardware and software, to complete an online course at IAIA?

All that is required is regular access to any computer that is connected to the internet and has a word processing program. (We recommend MS Word to eliminate possible compatibility problems.) Of course, the newer and more powerful your computer, the easier you will find it. We particularly recommend broadband rather than dial up internet access because of the time it saves and because it allows downloading film and audio clips more effectively. There are a few optional learning activities that do require fairly high powered equipment, but alternative exercises or assignments are always available for students with limited equipment.

More questions about minimum system requirements, contact Toby at tmartinez@iaia.edu.