

The U.S. government defines distance education as "a formal education process in which the students and instructor are not in the same place." It may seem like just about any college course satisfies this definition, but this specifically is referring to online courses that you take either in pursuit of a degree or to improve your knowledge and skills in some area. Distance learning is a really big thing these days: At any given time, more than 2.5 million students are taking these classes. And with the increasing demand for higher education, given globalization and the competitive job market, this number is bound to grow exponentially in years to come.

To get you started thinking about distance learning, and to help you figure out if it might be for you, here are 7 tips for prospective students thinking about online education:

1. Figure out your goal. Are you looking for a degree? If so, which one (associate's, bachelor's, master's, doctorate, certificate for a particular profession). Or are you just looking for a course or two to improve your welding skills or to learn Excel and PowerPoint? Having a firm idea of what you're trying to get is the first step in narrowing down the mind-boggling number of choices.

[Read [8 Mistakes](#) Online Students Make.]

2. Check out all the options. In addition to for-profit online universities (University of Phoenix, Kaplan, DeVry, and Walden are some examples), most community colleges, and more than half of four-year universities (e.g., Boston University, University of Florida, Arizona State, NYU) offer online learning. With wide differences of degrees available, courses taught, and quality of instruction, it's worth checking out all the alternatives before signing on.

3. Check out the price. There's surprising variation in the prices charged per course, anywhere from less than \$500 each to more than \$3,000. Be sure to find the price "out the door" before committing: consider tuition and any fees, book costs (including e-book costs) that may be rolled into the fee, transfer costs for applying your credits to other schools, and various other administrative fees. It's also smart to check out the refund policy (if any) in case you want to bail

after the first class.

4. Check out their credentials. You'll want a school that plans to be in business well past your completion date, so pick a school that you've heard of and that's accredited by a regional accreditation agency. There are six such agencies in total; two examples are the Middle States Association of College and Schools and the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools. Accreditation not only ensures that someone has had a look to determine the integrity of the school, but also that your credits stand a chance of being accepted should you decide to transfer to another school. Check out the Council for Higher Education Accreditation ([CHEA](#)) database for your school.

5. Evaluate if it's for you—and be honest. One of the main differences between traditional universities and online colleges is that in the case of distance learning, you're 100 percent in charge of your own learning. There's no flesh and blood professor to "encourage" you to do the reading or to politely wonder why you missed the lecture. Indeed, in some distance learning courses, there are no lectures but only reading and homework assignments (and perhaps some online discussion sessions). This kind of "do it yourself approach" works best for students who have clear goals, are self-motivated, and have the discipline to do the work on their own. Decide if you're one of these students.

[Read How to [Maximize an Online Program](#) .]

6. Figure out the method(s) of instruction. In distance learning, there's no "one size fits all." As mentioned above, some courses can involve formal lectures (just like the traditional universities), others may have online discussion sections and projects to be submitted online. If you're not getting lectures, be aware that you'll be responsible for most of your learning, in a more-or-less "self study" style. Also, some online courses (so-called "blended courses") can involve both web study and in-person activities—such as daylong workshops or even regular class meetings—at a local community college or distance learning center. If your class calls for in-person attendance, make sure the meetings fit your schedule.

7. Get the equipment. Depending on whether your course is video or audio, one-way or two-way—and what the subject is—you'll need hardware and software up to the task. Be sure to check the course Web page to be sure you have what you need, including any word processing, spreadsheet, PowerPoint, graphics, image-manipulation, or other software, before you start the

course. And if there's some special program—such as Blackboard, WebTV, Angel, or [Sakai](#)—being used to run the course, make sure you know how to use it in advance of the course. You won't want to miss lectures simply because your computer isn't fast enough to buffer the streamed data. And be sure you have your password well in advance of the first class: You can't get on without it.

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