
The Consumer's Guide To e-Learning



Using This Guide

This consumer's guide is best used at the post-secondary and adult education level, college and university level, continuing education or work-related skills training. It will help you choose the right e-learning option by examining one product or service at a time.

What is e-Learning?

The word 'e-learning' is used to mean learning when using both a computer and the Internet.

e-Learning products or services take various forms.

They may be:

- single courses and/or entire programs
- course units, lessons or components
- aimed at individuals or entire groups in classes
- instruction with or without various support services
- offered as approved prior learning to an education institute and/or for general interest
- very expensive, free of charge or consistent with other education tuition fees
- aimed at specific groups and/or any group
- offered by public and/or commercial education and training providers
- really effective or of questionable quality

You will need specific information to make an informed choice. Good e-learning organisations will provide you with the required information and a 'demo' to help with your decision making.

Are YOU ready for e-Learning?

Before you sign up for an e-learning course or programme, ask yourself these questions:

- What is my purpose for taking this course? Do I know what I want or need to learn?
- Do I need an approved prior learning credit or a certificate when I finish the course or do I just want to know more?
- How much can I afford to spend?
- How much time can I invest?
- What computer hardware and software do I have, and is it enough?
- Where will I access the Internet, what will it cost and how convenient will it be?
- Are my computer and Internet skills good enough for the course I have in mind?
- Will I need technical help?

Level 1: Basic Quality Questions

Let's get started

These questions are designed on three levels to help you select the best e-learning option for you. The first level is the basics - the most important questions. You will progress to levels two and three if the products and services you are looking at meet these basic quality requirements.

Suppliers of all e-learning products and services should tell you in writing:

- Exactly what you are expected to learn - the "intended learning outcomes" - and entry level knowledge or skills necessary for your success
- What you get when you finish and who is it recognised or awarded by - e.g., a college credit as approved prior learning, completion certificate or professional designation
- How skilled you need to be at reading, taking exams, managing your own time - the learning skills you need for success
- The type of material you'll cover, why is it important and where has it come from
- How you will learn - the format for instruction and assessment - e.g., individualised or in a group
- Who will be teaching and assessing you - if actual people are involved (e.g., sometimes the instruction is imbedded in text and exams are computer-marked)

Ponder these questions. If your answer is NO to any category of question, consider moving on to another e-learning option.

- Is this what I want or need to learn? Do I have the entry requirements so that I stand a reasonable chance of success? Yes/No
- Can I do anything with this course? Will it be recognised by an education institution or an employer? Is it a good investment of my time and money? Yes/No
- Do I have the required preparation to do work at this level? Can I get help in this course or program if I need it? Yes/No
- Is the content current and relevant, either to real work or advanced education? Is it well organised, credible and complete? Yes/No
- Can I learn this way? Would I prefer to learn on my own or in a group? By reading or by listening? By myself or in a group? Yes/No
- Is the instructor/assessor qualified and credible? How important is it that I have a person to communicate with? Yes/No

Your Comments

Level 1: Basic Quality Questions Continued

			Your Comments
· How will you be assessed - the criteria for evaluation and success	· Is it clear how I will be tested and can I perform my best that way? Are there options? Do I know what is expected for success?	Yes/No	
· When you can expect to complete - mandatory and/or flexible timelines	· Does the timeframe and schedule work for me? Do I have the flexibility I need to do the work and to finish the course or program?	Yes/No	
· What you need in terms of minimum computer and operating system requirements - with options where they exist	· Do I have the equipment and software I need? Am I willing and able to buy more?	Yes/No	
· What you need to be able to do - your technical competence	· Do I have the skills to use the computer and the Internet? Is there an orientation to get me started?	Yes/No	
· What you will pay in total - registration, tuition, books and materials, equipment, other items	· Can I afford it? Exactly how much is this going to cost? Is everything included, like access to technical assistance?	Yes/No	
· How credible the product/service is - the qualifications of the content, design and delivery, personnel and objective evaluation reports	· Does this supplier have a good reputation? How do I know? What do other students think? Can I see an objective evaluation report?	Yes/No	
· How to get started and connect with the supplier - complete registration procedures and services	· Is it easy to get started? Do I need transcripts or pre-tests? Is the registration process clear?	Yes/No	
· How to get help - contacts for course expertise and technical support	· Is assistance available 24/7? How do I access course and technical assistance?	Yes/No	
· How to get out if you're not satisfied - policies for withdrawal and refunds	· Can I get my money back if this doesn't work out for me?	Yes/No	

LEVEL 1 IS FINISHED - Are you satisfied with the basic quality of your e-learning choice? Now go to Level 2 Questions.

Level 2: Design & Delivery Questions

If you still have more than one e-learning option to choose from, apply these criteria.

Good design and delivery of e-learning means:	Is there evidence of good e-design and e-delivery?	Your Comments
· The system works for the learner.	· Does the `demo` or the system work consistently?	Yes/No
· Navigation is logical and well organised.	· Can I navigate my way in to and out of the online system? Can I make my way through the materials and find what I need?	Yes/No
· Content is relevant, well organised and presented in an interesting manner.	· Does the organisation of the content make sense? Is there a logic that I can relate to?	Yes/No
· Materials are updateable and frequently updated.	· Is the content updated, or the same year after year?	Yes/No
· The learning package has options for individuals.	· Can I personalise the course for maximum benefit?	Yes/No
· A package includes all institutional services (registration, payment, advice, tutor support).	· Do I have access to the learning resources and advice that I need around organisational requirements? Does the system appear to be organised and efficient?	Yes/No
· Online instruction and communications are conducted in `real time` (synchronous) or more flexible (asynchronous) for a reason.	· Do I have to meet specific schedules or can I access the course as and when I am able to?	Yes/No
· Everything learners realistically need to succeed is easily and accessible online.	· Am I able to efficiently access the course and the assistance I need online or do I have to find other ways?	Yes/No
· Communication and interaction opportunities with tutors, content advisors, process experts and other students are provided.	· Are there ways for me to feel connected to the instructors and to other students? Are they convenient and effective?	Yes/No
· Assessment of learning takes a variety of forms and is against clear, achievable criteria.	· Will I be able to successfully demonstrate what I've learned?	Yes/No

LEVEL 2 IS FINISHED - Are you satisfied with the delivery and design of your e-learning option? Now go to Level 3 Questions.

Level 3: Detailed Questions

Still can't decide? Want the very best? Here are some especially detailed criteria.

Good design and delivery of e-learning means:	Is there evidence of good e-design and e-delivery?	Your Comments
· Treating students as important individuals.	· Am I made to feel like a valued customer?	Yes/No
· Flexible scheduling and learner-centered approaches.	· Can I register, learn and be assessed when and where I need to?	Yes/No
· Materials that are appealing and user-friendly, well-organised, current and affordable.	· Are the materials interesting and engaging?	Yes/No
· Approaches and materials that are free of cultural, racial, class, age and gender bias.	· Is there any obvious insensitivity to different cultures, sexual orientation, ability, race or gender?	Yes/No
· An understanding that you already know some things and should not have to relearn them.	· Is there a Prior Learning Assessment process?	Yes/No
· A statement of acquired skills and knowledge - what you have learned - that is as important as a completion certificate.	· Do I have the chance to demonstrate my current skills and knowledge so that I can get advance learning credit or a shortened training programme?	Yes/No
· Various approaches to meet different learning styles - learning best by reading, doing, listening, viewing, demonstrating.	· Will I be able to add a new body of skills and knowledge to my learning portfolio?	Yes/No
· Regular, systematic and objective evaluation of all components - instructors, curriculum, student success, processes and resources.	· Will I be able to learn in a way that works for me? Are there options for learning and testing?	Yes/No
· Demonstration of return on investment - a favourable comparison of the benefits to the costs for the student.	· Do I have access to evaluation reports and references? Is there an efficient approach to delivering a quality service?	Yes/No
· Demonstration of return on investment - a favourable comparison of the benefits to the costs for the student.	· Will the benefits of taking this course of study justify the expense? Is it a good investment?	Yes/No

LEVEL 3 IS FINISHED - Congratulations! You should now feel confident about your e-learning choice. We hope this guide has been helpful to you.

Background to this Guide

The background to this Guide is available at <http://www.futured.com>

The original version of this Guide was created by FuturEd Consulting Education Futurists Inc. for the Canadian Association for Community Education (CACE) and the Office of Learning Technologies, Human Resources Development Canada, with other project participants.



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