Frequently Asked Question about Online Learning at American University

What is the format of an online course?

Most AU online courses are taught asynchronously using Blackboard as the foundation or platform. Because these courses are asynchronous, there are no specific meeting times or days. Rather, students must take part at some time over several days or during the week while a unit is being covered. Some professors may add synchronous sessions using Wimba or other technologies. If you cannot attend a particular synchronic class session, you may not be able to add to the material covered and discussed during the session. You will, however, be able to view the session in the class archives. It is important to note that asynchronous classes are not independent studies, and that you are expected to participate in class and submit assignments according to the class schedule.

How do students learn the subject, and how do they take part in class?

The professor will assign readings, post lecture notes or other supporting materials, and provide questions or other guidance for studying and learning. After studying these materials, you will take part in class discussions, usually through Blackboard's discussion board or through blogs or other virtual communications that can be ongoing for several days. During the discussions, you will take part in the class by posting responses to questions and commenting on others' responses, much as you would on a blog or in a face-to-face class. You will be able to contribute your analysis or other assignments to the discussion. In addition, you will be able to raise questions of your own. In addition, in some classes, you will have synchronous class meetings through Wimba or other technologies in order to engage in real-time class discussions.

What technologies do I need to know?

In addition to Blackboard, many faculty also use outside websites or audio/video presentations and other educational tools. Some also use Wimba, a synchronous online tool that supports live audio and video interaction. Some faculty also post lectures on the AU iTunes site. The AU Center for Teaching, Research and Learning has excellent resources and tutorials for learning these technologies, and your professor can also help you should you have any difficulties.

Is online learning right for me?

Although everyone can, not everyone should. First, you need basic technology skills, knowledge of Microsoft, email and reliable internet access. Second, you should honestly evaluate your own learning styles and needs. If you tend to procrastinate, frequently put off doing class readings and assignments, have planned major life events that might disrupt your participation in the class, or learn best within the structure of a regular class time, online learning may not be for you. To help you prepare for online learning success, AU offers tutorials and a self-paced Orientation which you should explore prior to the start of your classes.

Is an online course easier?

No. Online classes maintain the academic rigor and standards of traditional face-to-face classes. Managing your time to ensure you are prepared to participate in discussions and complete your

assignments is an important factor in your learning success. Discussions are quite intensive since expectations of participation often count more in online courses. Keep in mind that accelerated and summer courses include all the expectations and requirements of semester length classes, but are offered in a highly condensed time schedule. You will work harder over a shorter period of time. Most online students report that they find this kind of accelerated format learning to be rewarding in many ways.

Can I see what an online course looks like?

Yes, and you should. Faculty teaching online classes are happy to discuss their classes. Most will be able to show you their online Blackboard course from last year, and they may even be able to enroll you in that class so that you can get an idea of what it is like. Many faculty members who are still working on the development of their online summer courses do not mind if you peek in during construction. You can also ask for a face-to-face meeting, at a mutually convenient time, or contact the instructor via e-mail.

Are online courses more expensive?

No, tuition rates for online learning courses is the same as face-to-face courses. But, regardless of when you take the class or whether it is online or face to face, you will find the same high quality AU teaching and learning.

Will students have access to campus resources in an online course?

Yes. Online journals are available through the library website and the class Blackboard site. The Library offers a wide range of online services and e-texts. The Academic Support Center is available to provide support for students in writing and disabilities related issues.

How are examinations handled online?

All examinations are part of the online environment and there is no face-to-face proctoring of exams. Professors may assign students to take a quiz through the Blackboard web site. Alternatively, they may be required to submit a paper either through the faculty member's AU email account or through the AU Blackboard assignment manager.

How do contact class hours online compare with those in face-to-face classes?

The contact hours for online courses are exactly the same for online courses as compared to those meeting in-person. Contacts hours are different online. Faculty presentations may include watching videos, viewing Powerpoints with audio, or reading professor notes on readings. Course conversations may often use discussion boards or blogs that occur over a long period (an asynchronous setting), rather than one of compressed time.

Where can I get more information?

Explore the AU Online Learning Web Site.