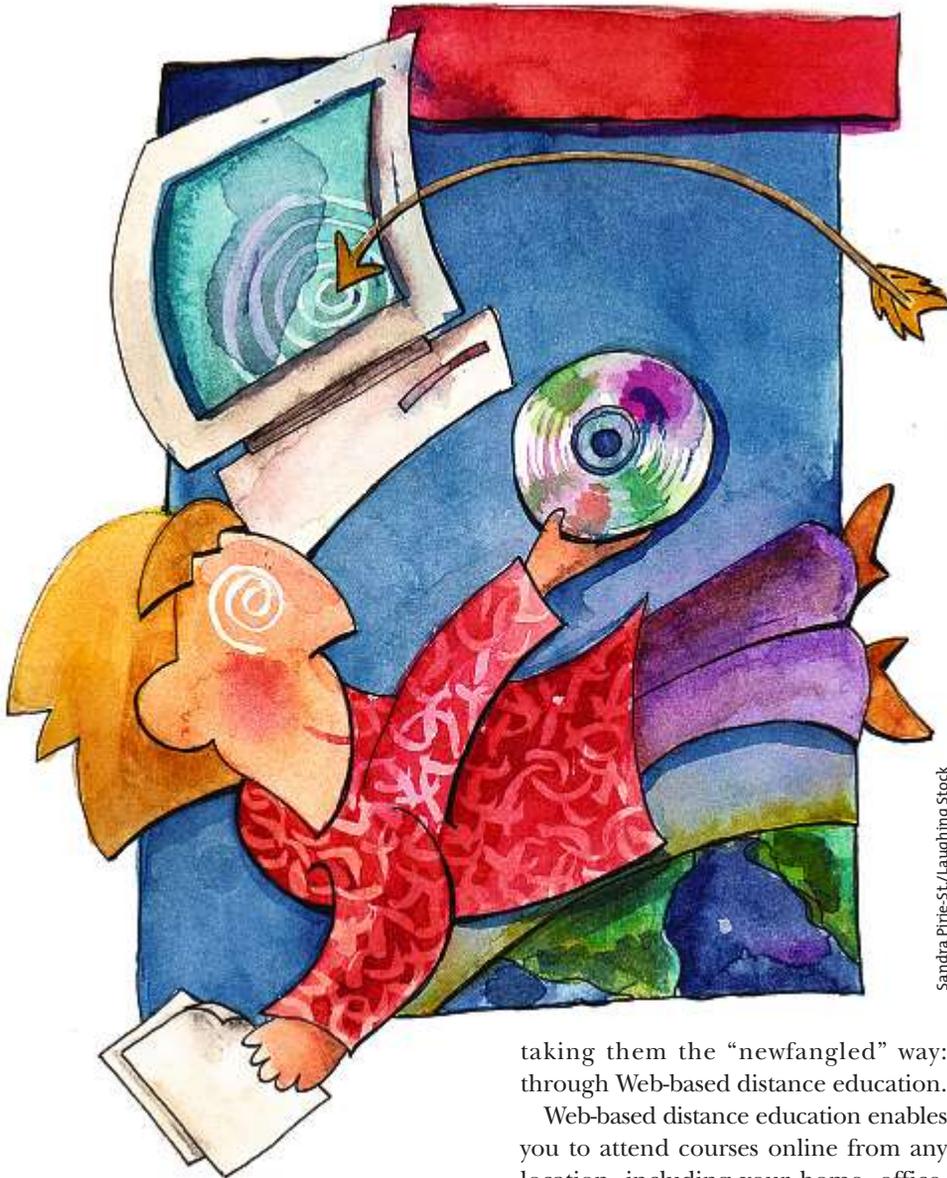


DISTANCE EDUCATION: One Student's Perspective

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If you took writing courses before 1995, chances are that you attended class the “old-fashioned” way: by sitting in a classroom. Today, if you’re planning to take writing classes as part of a degree or for ongoing education, you can consider

taking them the “newfangled” way: through Web-based distance education.

Web-based distance education enables you to attend courses online from any location, including your home, office, and local coffee shop. If you have an unpredictable schedule, physical disabilities, or geographic restrictions, online courses are an excellent alternative to classroom courses because you can receive the same benefits without being present in a classroom.

You may find the distance education experience very similar to that of a traditional classroom, except that you’re in cyberspace. This article describes what you can expect from an online writing course based on my distance education experience in Advanced Professional and Technical Writing, an online course through the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). I will discuss the structure of the course, the improvements it has made in my writing, and some of the challenges that students may encounter in distance education courses.

Advanced Writing

Learning advanced professional and technical writing through an online course provided me the same range of experiences and benefits I would have received in a traditional classroom. The Advanced Writing course improved my writing by broadening my awareness of various writing techniques.

Course Description

The Advanced Writing course is for students who want to become professional writers in an organizational setting, such as a business, science laboratory, or government entity. I enrolled in this course in fall 2004 under the instruction of Gerald Alred, professor of English at UWM. Students were expected to produce high-quality work; the goals of the course, listed below, were not compromised by the online environment:

- Develop the skills and ethos of a professional technical writer.
- Develop a professional writing process to produce high-quality documents and diagnose problems in documents.
- Learn audience analysis and develop a “sense of audience.”
- Learn the rhetorical strategies of document organization: sift, evaluate, and integrate information from multiple sources to produce a document that meets the readers’ needs.

Access

Students access the course through the UWM Desire 2 Learn (D2L) site, a Web-based course management system. D2L enables distance education students to access course information, con-

tent, and discussion boards and upload completed assignments.

Some online courses are synchronous, which means the instructor and students log on to the course Web site at the same time and participate in a real-time environment. Advanced Writing is asynchronous—that is, we did not participate as a class in real time. I participated in weekly lectures and class assignments on my own schedule and at my own pace.

How My Writing Improved

As a professional proposal writer, I looked to the Advanced Writing course to improve my writing skills. The course met my expectations through a wide range of learning experiences that broadened my awareness of writing approaches and techniques and helped me write better proposals. I attribute my improvement to the variety of challenging writing assignments and quality feedback from the instructor.

Assignments

Taking an online course does not mean that you have to sacrifice quality for convenience. In the Advanced Writing course, Professor Alred assigned challenging papers, grammar exercises, and readings that helped me write better paragraphs, improve my editing skills, and understand nuances in professional writing, such as the difference between “conciseness” and “brevity.” While writing instructors in traditional courses also provide these types of assignments, online courses do not diminish the challenges and rewards in your assignments—or eliminate thirty-page research papers.

Instructor Feedback

Before taking the Advanced Writing course, I did not expect the instructor’s feedback to be as helpful as that of instructors in traditional classrooms, where assignments are returned with comments about the strengths and weaknesses of your work. But with the technology available today, you can receive the same type of feedback in an online environment.

Receiving feedback in an online course is quite different from receiving

it in a classroom. The instructor may mark your assignment, scan it, and convert it into a PDF file so that it can be e-mailed back to you. Here’s how the feedback process worked with the Advanced Writing course:

1. I upload my assignment to the course dropbox on the site.
2. The instructor retrieves it and writes his feedback on a hardcopy of my assignment.
3. The instructor scans my marked assignment to create an electronic copy of it; then he converts it into a PDF file.
4. The instructor sends me an e-mail with the PDF attached.
5. I open the PDF file from the e-mail and review the marked assignment.

The online review process may be seven to ten days longer than that in a traditional classroom because the instructor has to take more steps to prepare the document for review. However, the quality of feedback from an online course is just as good as that in a classroom. Professor Alred thoroughly reviewed and responded to my work; as a result, my writing became stronger.

Keep in mind that other distance education courses may follow a different process.

Challenges of Distance Education

While there are many benefits to distance education, I discovered there are some challenges inherent in an online environment, such as time management, technology issues, and the lack of personal interaction.

Time Management

Balancing work, family, and school can be difficult and stressful. Distance education students need to be especially flexible and learn how to work within unpredictable schedules. For example, unexpected late nights at work or a family situation can easily throw you off schedule and leave you scrambling to complete an assignment.

In addition to keeping up with coursework, distance education students need to make time to check the course discussion boards every day for messages, updates, and changes to assignments. It’s also important to reply promptly to class-

mates because you may have information they need to complete their assignments.

Technology Issues

Your computer and Internet connection are the lifelines to your online course—you can’t participate without them. Unlike classroom students, distance education students need to worry about computer crashes, slow dial-up connections, or viruses that render computers useless. It’s critically important to invest in the right computer equipment, Internet service provider, and virus protection system to keep your computer healthy and maximize its functionality.

Lack of Personal Interaction

One of the benefits of a classroom is the opportunity to meet new people, share opinions, and learn from others’ perspectives and experiences. Online courses provide the same opportunities, except you don’t actually meet your classmates. For this reason, lasting friendships with your classmates are difficult to achieve, and, since the course and discussions aren’t conducted in real time, you may feel isolated. A benefit of this arrangement, however, is that your classmates will never see you on a bad hair day or participating in class in your pajamas.

Newfangled Education

Distance education is an excellent way to take professional and technical writing courses. The courses are convenient and challenging, and provide an education similar in quality to that which you would receive in a traditional classroom. I highly recommend distance education and encourage you to consider online writing courses in your education plans. **1**

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