E-Course Reviews

Reviewed by Catherine Bull for Lguide.com

Can e-learning help you Excel? The need for Excel training is widespread: Excel is on nearly every desktop in America, but the program can present novice users with an unfamiliar and confusing environment.

To help you choose the best introductory Excel course for you, our team of reviewers looked at more than 40 courses from nine different publishers. We evaluated the content, design, delivery, and value—asking questions about each course's performance. Did the course provide accurate, useful information? Was it well written and easy to navigate? Did the interactive features (text examples, audio, graphics, simulations) enhance learning? We then graded on a five-star scale. Five stars means the course is the best that e-learning has to offer. One star courses waste your time and money.

The very best, the very good, and the very average

These six courses represent the current spectrum of Excel e-learning. Prices range from free to US$199.99. Some take six to eight hours, others only one or two. The best courses fully exploit Web technology, cover topics with gusto, and can be as fun and challenging as your favorite computer game (really!).

All of these courses teach Excel basics: features and functions, icons and bar menus, data manipulation and formatting, printing methods, and Web options. The best courses also provide context for what you are learning—the why behind the functions. Which course is right for you depends on your learning style, priorities, and training budget.

Highly recommended

★★★★★ *Microsoft Excel 2000 Series:* 8 hours, US$99 for six months of course access. Publisher: DigitalThink

This is the best introductory Excel course we've found. Audio clips, glossary links in the text, assessment tests, and colorful graphics enhance the learning experience, and "mouse-over" text boxes offer explanations when you move the cursor over par-

ticular images or areas. There are also "flipbooks" that let you move forward or back as the course demonstrates Excel features.

You complete the exercises on your desktop, instead of a controlled simulation within the courseware. That lets you experiment with the real thing and refer back to the course if you lose your way. The course also features a well-written series of practical and challenging exercises. The level of detail is entirely within your control. In addition to explaining the basic functions any Excel user must know, the course provides multiple sidebars with extra tips you can choose to view or skip. The downside is that the desktop exercises are long and sometimes distracting because you have to move between your desktop and the Web-based course.

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Recommended

★★★1/2 *Excel 2000: Level 1:* 1 to 2 hours, US$199 for one year of access to Element K's Office Productivity Library. Publisher: Element K

Element K's package pricing lets you take courses on every Microsoft Office product and other popular desktop applications. If you need broad desktop training, that's a great value. But even if you're interested only in Excel training, Element K is still a good choice.

If you need to learn Excel fast, this is the course for you. It's brief but comprehensive, with shortcuts. There are no cute phrases, anecdotes, or cartoonish graphics; the lessons are purely functional. But you won't be bored because the course won't progress without your

participation. As you learn vocabulary, functions, nifty formatting shortcuts, and Web applications, you apply your knowledge to practice worksheets. A giant red arrow points to what you're supposed to do—a welcome feature for complete beginners.

★★★1/2 *Microsoft Excel 2000:* 4 to 6 hours, US$49.95 for one year of course access. Publisher: Knowledge Quest

Knowledge Quest's course offers a lot of information—many of the functions are in other publishers' intermediate courses. With the clear explanations, Excel beginners should have little difficulty understanding the advanced features. The course has no extra graphics, but it does a good job of using color to highlight pertinent areas of the screen (for example, highlighting columns in green while they're being discussed).

For the price, it's a good value. Interactivity is limited to short quizzes and some point-and-click activities. Unfortunately, the course doesn't have a pre-assessment quiz or customized learning path, so you might have to sit through content you already know.

★★★ *Excel 2000:* 4 to 6 hours, US$74.95 for one year of course access. Publisher: Catapult

Catapult uses a "See It, Try It, Do It" format for simulations. The course demonstrates a function or an operation, prompts you to try it while it offers hints, then has you complete it once more on your own. That's a good way to reinforce learning, but if it gets boring, you can easily skip some steps. If you're already familiar with Microsoft Office products, you may not need the lessons on basic text formatting.

Though the format and easy navigation impressed us, the rich simulations mean incredibly long downloads. In fact, it's the seemingly interminable downloading time, even on a fast connection, that dropped this series from four stars to three. If you're a multitasker and can be productive during those waits, we recommend this course. But if you can't shift focus quickly, the forced breaks will work against you.

Catapult's modules can be purchased individually, but the series price is a great bargain.

Excel at a Glance

- **DigitalThink:** Most user-friendly and most engaging.
- **Element K:** Crash course. Access to the entire library. Good if you plan to take more than one desktop e-learning course within the next year.
- **Knowledge Quest:** Good value for the price.
- **Catapult:** Good for multitaskers with fast connections, unless your bandwidth or attention span is limited.
- **NETg:** Not bad, but $30 more expensive than the higher-rated Knowledge Quest offering.
- **Learnlots.com:** A reasonable last resort if pricing is a priority.

Good enough

★★1/2 *Microsoft Excel 2000:* 6 to 8 hours, US$74.95 for one year of course access. Publisher: NETg

NETg's course starts at the beginning and leads you through basic exercises such as opening the application from the desktop. You get some hands-on training through simulations, but the interactivity is minimal and the graphics are plain. For people with no Excel experience, the course isn't user-friendly. The explanations are wordy and overly detailed, and the formal tone and long stretches of text can be slow going.

If you quickly tire of concentrated lumps of information, you might want a course with a more conversational tone. However, the information is complete.

The course is a bit expensive for the quality, but we don't warn you against it.

If it's your only option

★★ *Excel 2000:* 3 to 4 hours, free. Publisher: Learnlots.com

There are only two things going for this course: It's funny and it's free. Its simple screen shots and text instruction do cover all of the basics (barely), but the instructions run to such comments as, "Sorting is kind of a databasey thing." There's absolutely no interaction or instructions on how to navigate.

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