

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS & ANSWERS

INTRODUCTION: Parents often ask me questions about my courses and about me, so I put together a handout of actual questions I've received from parents and the answers I provided them with the hope that it helps you make the best choices for your child.

- **I'm skeptical about online learning. What can you tell me about it?**
 - Online learning can be traced back to the inception of the Internet and has now been used by colleges and universities **for more than 30 years!** Some colleges and universities embraced the online learning approach and technology very early on and thus are far ahead of the curve compared to the schools that were slow in accepting it. However, almost every school in the U.S. has some sort of online learning program now including almost every Ivy-league school and the University of Notre Dame, to name a few.

- **Can students get real college credits and/or degrees taking courses online?**
 - Today, students can attend college and universities around the world online. They can take one or multiple courses or even complete an entire degree online—from an associate's to a bachelor's to a master's to a doctoral degree. These are legitimate and accredited degrees no different than degrees earned by attending school in a physical classroom. However, not every degree/subject can be completed online.

- **How does online learning benefit high school students?**
 - In today's world, about 1/3 of college students take one or more courses entirely online, about 17 percent take online and in-class courses, and about 15 percent are enrolled entirely online. In some cases, the student will take a blended course, which involves a mixture of in-classroom and online learning. Many companies also use online courses to help train their employees and it's projected that by 2020 that 98% of companies will be using online learning.
 - Subsequently, high school students who have had some sort of online learning experience will be better prepared for online learning in college and/or in the work world. My courses help students learn, develop, and hone the skills that benefit all college students, especially those skills needed for online learning, including: being well-organized, self-disciplined, and having effective time management, critical thinking, and written communication skills.

- **What experience do you have with online teaching and learning, Dr. Byers?**
 - For more than 30 years, I have been both a student, professor, and course developer at multiple in-class and online colleges and universities.
 - I've also been creating and teaching dozens of online courses to more than 200 homeschool students via the online method for the past 12 years.

- **In order to learn, don't students need the teacher to "teach" (talk to) them?**
 - When children are in grade school, the teaching-learning model is one of pedagogy—the wise teacher pours knowledge into the heads of the students because they not only don't know *what* to learn, they don't know *how* to learn. So, the teacher has to use a lecture-based model that controls what the students learn, how they learn it, and how they acquire the skills to do so. This approach is used in high school and college particularly in courses where the student has to learn information and skills they've never experienced before, such as aviation, chemistry, statistics, etc.
 - By the time the student reaches high school and college, he/she has a lot of learning experience/skills, especially with regard to not only how to read and write, but to learn by reading and writing. As such, in some subjects, the "lecture" part of teaching and learning does not have to be verbal and the student doesn't have to waste time listening to the teacher and then reading the textbook to learn the same information over again. The student can instead learn by reading the instructor's directions for assignments, as well as from the learning resources provided by the instructor, which works for the vast majority of students.

- **How do your online courses work, Dr. Byers?**
 - I use an active learning approach that engages the student via interesting and informative reading assignments, as well as challenging and intriguing written assignments that go beyond the type of rote learning found in textbook-based courses.
 - I create all of the assignments in each course. So, my "instruction" comes through both the reading and written assignments rather than audio/visual lecture. The reading assignments often include reading "lecture" materials that I create for the students both in Word and in PowerPoint
 - Students must have Internet access and have an email address of their own or they must be able to use their parents' email address. The email address is so I can send information and materials to the student, for the student to use to submit assignments, and so the student and I can communicate about assignments. If parents have their child copy them when they submit assignments, I will "Reply All" so the parent can see my grading replies to the student.
 - Instead of you having to buy expensive textbooks, the student must have Internet access for additional reading assignments beyond the materials I create. When creating the courses, I searched for these authoritative sources to make sure the content is useful, accurate, and appropriate for my students and their families.
 - I choose sites with no advertising or as little advertising as possible. The advertising and site content needs to not be offensive in any way. Of course, I cannot account for pop-up ads or ads that people see due to malware on their computers. **So, I always encourage parents to have strong security systems on their computers, which they would want to have anyway to provide protection from viruses, malware, phishing, etc.**

- **Do students have to be online on certain days and at certain times to watch a live class or do they watch videos of you lecturing?**
 - Even though my courses are all “online”, in my program, there are no videos or live courses to watch, so students never have to log on at a certain day/time. Students work asynchronously and simply email their completed assignments to me by the deadlines provided.
- **How many weeks of instruction do you provide?**
 - A one-semester course is 15 weeks long. A two-semester course is 30 weeks long.
- **When does the week start and end?**
 - Each week of the course begins on Monday on the U.S. calendar. Assignments are due before midnight Omaha time on Sunday nights by the same calendar.
- **Where does schedule flexibility come into it?**
 - If your schedule changes for some reason, such as illness, visitors, unexpected vacations, extracurricular activities, or whatever, just email me to discuss your needs and we’ll figure out the best option from extending a deadline to extending the course length so your child has plenty of time to get the learning they need.
- **Do you provide the weekly assignments and do the students work at their pace?**
 - Yes, I provide all of the assignments for the entire course at the start of the course. The students have the instructions for the assignments and may work at their own pace in order to submit the assignments by the deadline, which is before midnight Omaha time on Sundays. Some assignments are due each week, but in some courses, the students may have more assignments based on a particular theme and thus have 3 weeks to complete them and then to submit them all together on the third week’s deadline, which is still on Sunday nights.
- **How many hours per course do you expect a child to spend each day/week in order to produce quality work? I realize this depends on the student’s attention span. But, what would be a reasonable amount of time?**
 - For one course, I would estimate that students spend 3-7 hours a week on the assignments. Much of it depends on how quickly the student reads, as well as his/her writing skills. Also, some weeks may require more or less time than for other weeks.

- **Does my child work only with you?**
 - Since I'm the only one teaching (and running the business), you and your child get 1-on-1 teaching and learning with just me.

- **What if my child or I have questions?**
 - As the student completes the reading materials and/or when working on the written assignments, he/she can contact me via email with any questions that they have. Parents are welcome to email me with questions at any time. As necessary, appointments for phone conversations can also be arranged. As needed, I'm also happy to talk to the student by phone to explain key points, but email communication usually works fine.

- **Do you talk to students only about their school work?**
 - Some students like to “chat” with me beyond just submitting their work (and some just like doing the work). So, when I have students who like to chat, they often provide additional thoughts and/or questions in their emails when submitting their work or even between deadlines.
 - Some will tell me how things are going in their extracurricular activities—sports, jobs, speech/debate, hobbies, etc. Some want to know more about me or what I think about something relative to our course topic or something close to it. I always express interest in whatever my students share with me because I care about them and enjoy such interactions, but I never push or pry.
 - I love to respond to my students and often I enjoy joking appropriately with them, providing information from my experiences as a student and/or teacher, and more. I offer my own experiences as a student and a teacher (good and bad) to help students realize I'm just human and that I understand them. These kinds of responses help build a strong rapport between the student and me and makes the learning experience that much better as students see me as human, on their side, and that their instruction is really individualized toward their interests and needs.
 - I never email students about anything other than school-related topics, such as replies to their assignments. If I haven't heard from a student, I'll send an email to him/her and the parent asking for an update on the student's status. When I know a student's ill, I'll often send an email indicating that I hope he/she feels better soon? Or, if the student had a game or competition of some sort, I may email to ask how it went?
 - I never ask for personal information from students. I discourage students from sharing photos of themselves or their family without parental permission and a reason for doing so.

- **What happens in the event of sickness or an unplanned vacation/trip? I guess I need to know that there is some flexibility in the schedule if it is needed.**
 - Before the start of the course, you simply let me know of all of the weeks you plan off and I simply adjust the schedule for no work on those weeks and then create the weekly deadlines and end date of the course accordingly. In some cases, a student may need to be “off” for a day or so, but can still meet the weekly deadlines and so we don’t change the schedule. And, in some cases, the student may have 3 weeks to complete the assignments before the deadline and even with a day or two off for whatever reason, the student doesn’t need a change in the deadlines/schedule.
 - For unplanned situations, please just let me know if your child is sick, you’re going on vacation, or have a family emergency or other needs and we’ll adjust and extend the course schedule outward accordingly by that number of weeks.
 - I’m completely flexible. I work around your schedule and needs. Since there are no daily assignments and no daily interactions with me, it doesn’t matter to me if your child starts working on school at 7 a.m. or 3 p.m.

- **Is all communication done with my son/daughter? Or, do you update the parent just as needed or do you do so regularly? How does that work?**
 - I communicate directly with the student if he/she has their own individual email address.
 - If you tell me to do so, I’ll send all communication to the parent’s email address and you can then share it with your child.
 - Some parents have their child copy them on every email and I just **Reply All** when responding.
 - Some parents only want to be notified if there are any issues during the course, otherwise they just want the report card at the end.
 - In short, I can do whatever you like. Also, you are more than welcome to contact me whenever you like to ask questions, to see how things are going, and so on.

- **Do students need to buy expensive textbooks or other materials?**
 - There are never any expensive books or materials to purchase for my courses.
 - Everything is provided in my courses *with the exception of* books and movies that I use in literature and movie analysis courses, respectively. Parents and students select which books they want to read for the literature courses and which movies they want to watch for movie analysis courses.
 - Books and/or movies are sometimes used in other courses either as optional reading/viewing or sometimes required reading/viewing assignments. Students/parents are notified ahead of time which books and/or movies will be used in a course and during which weeks so they can plan accordingly.
 - I try to find as many free, online books and movies for my students to use. If that's not possible, students can usually borrow books from the library or other free sources, or they can purchase used books for a low cost. The same goes for movies. Libraries often have movies that can be borrowed, or they can be streamed for free or low cost using a variety of services, or they can be purchased in a used condition for a low cost.

- **What other materials do you use in your courses and how do student obtain them?**
 - At the start of the course, the student and parent receive the course syllabus, course assignments, and learning materials via email.
 - The syllabus explains how the course is structured, how grading works, what the deadlines are, what the formatting requirements are for written assignments, and so on. The syllabus or separate documents for the assignments provide all of the instructions for the reading and writing assignments for each week of the course.
 - I've created some of the materials for the reading assignment that will come as pdf versions of Word and/or PowerPoint (PPT) documents. These materials may include lecture notes, examples of written assignments, and other learning material pertinent to the subject matter.

- **What other kind of work do students do online?**
 - In some cases, the reading materials will include online materials via websites to which I provide the links I want the students to use to supplement the reading materials I've provided.
 - For example: For the Famous Speeches course, the reading assignment may provide a link to an online source where the student can read Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. In addition, I'll send a PPT that helps break down and analyze the speech to help the student better understand it. An additional link or handout may provide information about the circumstances leading up to the speech so the student can best understand the context in order to better understand the subject matter, and so on.
 - As applicable, I provide multiple link options just in case a link I've provided is no longer working or a student can contact me for help with a link that suddenly goes bad.
 - Students learn research and reading analysis skills via different types of online assignments.
 - In some courses, students are given links to specific websites to view and they are told exactly what to read on them.
 - In some courses, students are given one or more subjects to learn about and I provided links to multiple sites that have the information the student needs. The information will be relatively easy to find, but students may have to read more carefully to pinpoint exactly what they need for the written assignment.
 - Sometimes students have to compare/contrast information from more than one site in order to build their knowledge about the topic and/or to verify the accuracy of the information they need. I never try to trick my students by making assignments impossible or extraordinarily difficult to accomplish, but I do challenge them. I'm also always available if they need help or have questions.
 - For some assignments in more advanced courses, I have students find their own resources on the Internet as part of learning to conduct research online.

- **Do you provide a letter grade at the end of the year? I just need to know how I'll report hours!**
 - I do provide a grade transcript after the course work has been completed. It provides the name of the course, my name and contact info, the course description, number of credits, subject area, and a description of major topics and types of assignments. As to the number of clock hours, you can report whatever number you find appropriate.
 - If you have to report the specific numbers of hours your child spends working on the assignments for each course, that is information to track on your end as each student is different.

- **Do you teach subjects with a religious or a secular focus?**
 - Neither. I try to approach every subject objectively and factually as my students have been Christian, non-Christian, and even of no religious faith whatsoever.
 - For example, when it comes to teaching natural science courses, I don't focus on only a creationist approach nor do I focus only on an evolutionary approach. When it is absolutely necessary, such as discussing the timeline of dinosaurs, or the age of the earth, or where the first people came from, I simply indicate that there are different beliefs and/or theories about such things and briefly explain the differences. Then, I encourage the student to chat with his/her parents in order to follow the family's beliefs.
 - I don't shy away from references to the Judeo-Christian God in literature, such as including a reading of certain psalms for poetry courses or certain famous speeches that reference God, particularly in relationship to the development of the United States of America. Some students refer to their religious beliefs/faith quite often in some assignments and that's perfectly okay with me. I accept and support their expression of their beliefs without judgment.
 - I don't teach religion courses. And, since I am unfamiliar with faiths other than those of a Judeo-Christian background I don't teach about other faiths. However, I won't prohibit or discourage a student from studying such topics as long as his/her parents approve.

- **How do you give students feedback?**

- When students submit their assignments, I read them and when I respond I provide not only the assignment grade, but feedback about the student's work itself include specific compliments about what the student did well, corrections, and other guidance. This approach allows me to provide individualized instruction and learning experiences for my students.
- Often, as applicable, I also provide additional thoughts about the topics via my own comments/insights, questions for the student to answer or consider, supplemental resources, such as recent news articles about the topic, etc. If the student has emailed me any additional comments and/or questions, I answer and address those in my response. The types of responses I provide depends on the course and the assignments.
 - For example, in a writing course, the focus of my responses is praising and encouraging students, providing clear and specific corrections, edits, and writing guidance. In most writing courses, the student may work on one written assignment multiple times by submitting it, getting my feedback, revising the work and resubmitting it, and so on until we feel the work is the best it can be.
- For a social or natural sciences course, I will also provide writing edits and feedback, but I will also provide responses about the subject matter as I noted above.

- **How do you handle your writing courses?**

- For writing courses, parents always comment about how much easier writing is for their child and how the child no longer complains about writing, but instead enjoys and looks forward to each assignment. All of that creates less stress at home and allows the parent to be the “good guy” again as their child is working with someone else’s feedback and corrections so they take it less personally than they did with their parent being the writing teacher.
- Parents and students often tell me how pleased they are with my writing courses. They share how much the student now loves to write and how he/she has become confident as a writer as a result of my courses.
 - Parents often share that they’ve tried other writing programs and have been severely disappointed in them because they often provide little to no feedback and when they do, it often focuses on corrections without also including praise and guidance. As a result, the student becomes frustrated, confused, and defeated. And, as a result, the student learns to hate writing, which is horrible to hear about any student, but especially those who were tentative about writing in the first place.
- Subsequently, I believe that self-confidence is vital when it comes to writing. Often, even the smallest amount of encouragement goes a long way toward affording students the opportunity to develop self-efficacy, which makes each subsequent assignment that much more useful and helpful. It’s a virtual perpetual motion of the development of self-confidence and skills! I provide specific, clear, and helpful feedback offered in a non-threatening manner to encourage students and to build their confidence.
- Each of my courses involves reading and writing in some way because those are vital skills for college and life. The more the student does of both, the stronger his/her skills in each area become, the better and easier their written work becomes. And, reading and writing skills are universal—they are needed in every course and throughout almost every work and life task. So, as students get guidance, feedback, and edits for spelling, punctuation, grammar, etc. in a writing class, it helps in a history course, and vice versa!

- **What else can you tell me about how your program works?**
 - In all honesty, parents and students are always pleasantly surprised with how well each course goes, including the quality of the instruction, how much the student learns and enjoys doing it, and how well the student works independently. Parents often tell me that they rarely, if ever, have to prompt their children to do their work or to remember their deadlines for my courses.
 - I never offer a course about a subject that I haven't studied and/or have already taught.
 - As a teacher and as a student, I spend a great deal of time researching information to not only learn, but to make sure that I have it correct so that I can explain the information clearly to the student and I can both discuss it with the student and answer any questions I may get.
 - As I noted earlier, I always try to make sure the materials are clear enough to minimize, if not eliminate, the need for questions from students. It's not that I mind answering questions—in fact, I love doing so, but if a course is designed correctly, students typically don't have any questions!
 - I'm sorry, but I don't offer physics. That's beyond my talents and expertise.
 - I don't teach algebra, geometry, trigonometry, or other mathematics—those are my wife's expertise and she feels that teaching our children those subjects is sufficient!
 - I don't teach chemistry and your homeowners insurance thanks me for that.