

The Evolution of Distance Education

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⌚ 20 min

13 Questions

Reading Passage 1

[A] Distance education — teaching students who are not physically present in a classroom — is often thought of as a recent development linked to the internet. In fact, it began nearly 200 years ago. In 1840, a British teacher named Isaac Pitman started sending shorthand-writing lessons to students across the United Kingdom. Pitman sent short exercises to his students through the post, and they copied out passages from the Bible and returned their work by post to be checked. This was the first time that organised teaching had been carried out over long distances without teacher and student ever meeting face to face.

[B] After Pitman's success, correspondence courses spread quickly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in areas with large rural populations. In the United States, the University of Chicago set up the first university department for correspondence courses in 1892. These early courses depended completely on the postal service, so materials such as printed lessons and textbooks could take several weeks to reach students. Even so, correspondence study opened up higher education to many people who had previously been excluded, including working adults and women. It was especially valuable for people living in the countryside, who often had no university nearby and could now work towards a qualification without ever leaving home.

[C] New forms of media changed distance education in the middle of the twentieth century. In the 1920s, some universities began broadcasting lectures on the radio to nearby towns and cities. By the 1950s, television was also being used to teach students who were studying from home. One important step forward came in 1969, when the Open University was founded in the United Kingdom. This was the first university built specifically for distance learning. It combined television programmes made together with the BBC, printed study books sent by post, and occasional meetings with a tutor. This combination of methods showed that students could study at a distance and still receive an education as good as that offered by traditional universities.

[D] The arrival of digital technology and the internet in the late 1990s changed distance education again. Printed textbooks and papers were increasingly replaced with electronic files, and students began using online discussion boards to communicate with one another. A typical online course followed several clear stages. First, teachers prepared their course materials and uploaded them to a central website. Next, students viewed video lectures that had been recorded in advance, watching them at a time that suited them. After this, learners took part in online discussions to exchange ideas with other students. They then completed short online tests, which were marked automatically and produced results straight away. Finally, teachers provided feedback based on these results, helping each student see their progress and identify areas that needed more work.

[E] In the 2010s, distance education grew on a much larger scale with the arrival of Massive Open Online Courses, known as MOOCs. These courses, offered by well-known universities and technology companies, allowed anyone to enrol for free, without needing any previous qualifications. As a result, hundreds of thousands of students around the world could take university-level courses at the same time. However, early MOOCs had a serious weakness: very few students — often fewer than ten in every hundred — actually completed the course. Despite this, MOOCs helped make online learning a normal part of education everywhere. Today, many online courses use artificial intelligence to offer students personalised learning paths and individual feedback, making distance learning a standard part of schools and universities around the world.



Questions 1–9

IELTS Academic Reading / Sentence Completion & Flow-Chart

cont.

Reading Passage 1

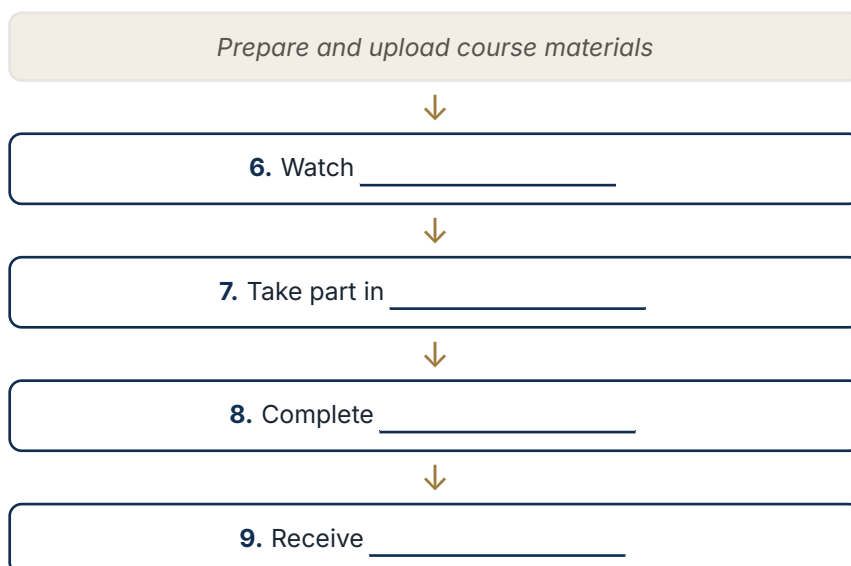
Questions 1–5 – Sentence Completion

Complete the sentences below. Choose **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** from the passage for each answer.

1. In 1840, Isaac Pitman sent lessons to his students through _____.
2. Course materials could take several weeks to reach students because early courses relied completely on the _____.
3. Correspondence courses were especially valuable for people living in the _____, who had no university nearby.
4. The Open University worked with the _____ to produce its television programmes.
5. Today, many online courses use _____ to offer students personalised learning paths.

TIP Find the matching phrase in the passage first, then check that your answer fits the sentence grammatically — the exact wording is usually taken straight from the text.

Questions 6–9 – Flow-Chart Completion

Complete the flow-chart below. Choose **NO MORE THAN TWO WORDS** from the passage for each answer.

Questions 10–13

IELTS Academic Reading / Multiple Choice

cont.

Reading Passage 1

Questions 10–13 — Multiple Choice

Choose the correct letter, **A**, **B**, **C**, or **D**, for each question.

10. What is the author's primary focus in Paragraph A?

- ☐ **A.** To argue that modern online learning is superior to early correspondence courses.
- ☐ **B.** To explain how Isaac Pitman invented modern shorthand writing.
- ☐ **C.** To show that distance education began long before the creation of the internet.
- ☐ **D.** To detail the religious importance of Bible transcription in 19th-century Britain.

11. According to Paragraph B, what was a key benefit of early correspondence courses?

- ☐ **A.** They provided free textbooks to all enrolled students.
- ☐ **B.** They allowed groups such as working adults, women, and rural residents to access higher education.
- ☐ **C.** They eliminated delays associated with postal delivery.
- ☐ **D.** They required students to visit university campuses for final exams.

12. Why was the founding of the UK Open University significant, according to Paragraph C?

- ☐ **A.** It was the first institution to stop using printed study materials entirely.
- ☐ **B.** It showed that distance learning could offer an education as good as that of traditional universities.
- ☐ **C.** It allowed students to study without completing any formal assessments.
- ☐ **D.** It operated without using any broadcast media.

13. What point does the writer make about Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in Paragraph E?

- ☐ **A.** Most students who enrolled in early MOOCs did not complete them.
- ☐ **B.** They required expensive prerequisite qualifications for entry.
- ☐ **C.** They were restricted to students living in rural communities.
- ☐ **D.** They had no lasting influence on the design of modern online courses.

TIP Eliminate options that contradict the passage or introduce information not mentioned at all — the correct answer will be directly supported by the text.



Model Answers & Explanations

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🕒 reference

Reading Passage 1

Explanations reference the paragraph and exact evidence used to reach each answer — use these to check your own reasoning, not just the final answer.

Q	ANSWER	EXPLANATION & PASSAGE LOCATION
1	the post	Para A: "Pitman sent short exercises to his students through the post..."
2	the postal service	Para B: "...these early courses depended completely on the postal service..."
3	countryside	Para B: "It was especially valuable for people living in the countryside, who often had no university nearby..."
4	BBC	Para C: "It combined television programmes made together with the BBC..."
5	artificial intelligence	Para E: "...many online courses use artificial intelligence to offer students personalised learning paths..."
6	video lectures	Para D: "...students viewed video lectures that had been recorded in advance..."
7	online discussions	Para D: "...learners took part in online discussions to exchange ideas with other students."
8	online tests	Para D: "They then completed short online tests, which were marked automatically..."
9	feedback	Para D: "...teachers provided feedback based on these results..."
10	C	Para A: The paragraph's point is that distance education "began nearly 200 years ago", well before the internet — not a comparison of quality, an account of Pitman's invention, or a religious discussion.
11	B	Para B: Correspondence study "opened up higher education to many people who had previously been excluded, including working adults and women", and was "especially valuable for people living in the countryside."
12	B	Para C: "This combination of methods showed that students could study at a distance and still receive an education as good as that offered by traditional universities."
13	A	Para E: "...very few students — often fewer than ten in every hundred — actually completed the course."