

# iTunes U Makes Learning More Fun and Less Expensive



iTunes U brings learning to iOS devices

CREDIT: Apple

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Last month Apple updated its iTunes U online education program to include not only universities, but also K-12 and other schools. Apple also released a free iTunes U app for iPad, allowing users to view lectures and supporting materials from the comfort of their living room. We took the iTunes U app for a test drive, and here's what we learned.

**iTunes U** The new iTunes U is a major upgrade on the version first revealed in 2007 as a way for universities to manage their online audio and video content. (More than 1,000 universities now use it, including Cambridge, Harvard and Stanford.) While courses were previously accessed through iTunes on a computer, users can now also use the new app, which allows them to subscribe to courses and access all aspects of a course, including syllabuses, books, lectures, assignments and quizzes, from their iPad.

**Subscribing** Given our interests, we decided to try a course from Stanford called "iPad and iPhone App Development." Downloading the course is like installing an app: Just browse the catalog, tap the "Subscribe Free" button, and the course appears in your iTunes U library as a book on a bookshelf. On our iPad 1, browsing the catalog often caused crashes; though with persistence, we were able to add the courses. Once you've subscribed, tap a course to open it, and you'll see a spiral-bound notebook with four tabs along the right side: Info, Posts, Notes and Materials. On the Info tab, we found that our course has two prerequisites. So we downloaded them as well.

**Posts** While viewing a course, the Posts tab lists all the lectures, each having components such as video, a syllabus, readings, assignments and software listed for download. Our first lecture video was a 162MB download that played smoothly and took us right into the classroom with the students. Once done, you can mark any components of the lecture, including videos, PDF files and software downloads, as "Viewed" so you can track your progress in the course.

**Notes** If you want to jot notes, tap the Notes tab to type them in and sort through them at any point during or after the lectures. In practice this is a bit clumsy, as you need to switch from the content tab you are looking at to the Notes tab to write the note. A better option would be to have a note window pop up above the content or to have a sidebar with notes.

**Materials** We downloaded the lecture components as we needed them. If you are going to be away from Internet access and want to download all the components ahead of time, you'll have to click on each one individually from the Materials tab. There isn't a bulk download option. Be aware that many courses, especially those with numerous video lectures, exceed one gigabyte in size once all the components are downloaded. If you don't have a lot of space to spare, you may want to download lecture components as you need them, and remove them once completed. You can always download items again later if you want to revisit them, including those you've paid for (at no extra cost). For our course, all the materials were free, but this isn't always the case. Some courses that have no subscription fee may still have components that cost money, such as an ebook.

**Final thoughts** Being able to access lessons and material from qualified instructors, many of them highly accredited, at your own pace in the comfort of your home is a great way to learn. Even better is that many of the courses are free to subscribe to, and have minimal or no extra material fees, greatly reducing the hit to your wallet that normal courses can have. As long as you can learn on your own with online direction and don't need grades or credits, iTunes U offers access to well-organized knowledge that can greatly expand your horizons.

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