How to Choose the Right e-Learning Authoring Tool

14 Simple Things to Consider

Every day, the iSpring Support Desk is contacted by dozens of e-Learning developers searching for the right authoring tool. In this guide, we share the answers to their most frequent and important questions. This guide covers all the essential details to discuss with potential vendors.

Read the entire guide to get a full insight into choosing e-Learning software, or go straight to the checklist.

What's inside?

1. What makes up the price
2. Traditional software vs Cloud
3. Windows or Mac
4. Learning curve
5. LMS compatibility
6. Games, video lectures, simulations
7. Content library
8. Mobile learning
9. Technical support
10. Feedback from stakeholders
11. Software updates
12. License type
13. Who owns the rights to the content
14. Checklist

1. What makes up the price

Situation: *There are multiple tools of similar functionality, but their prices vary considerably. Why?*

Let's take cars, for example. What makes up the price of a car? Its technical capacity, level of comfort, service quality, and brand reputation. The same is true for the price of an e-Learning authoring tool. To figure out what the price includes:

- See the full list of features
- Find out if there are trainings resources available
- Call technical support
- Explore additional services
- Find out how often updates are released
- Read testimonials and feedback from customers

Where can I see the full list of features?

Most vendors provide a hefty list of features on their website, but don't get overwhelmed by the quantity. If you only need 10 out of 100, why pay for the rest? Ask vendors which features you can really use in your projects.

Feeling uncomfortable with all these new features and trendy buzzwords? Simply make a list of desired use cases. For example: I want my learners to be able to take courses on the go, say on a plane.

Jot down all required use cases and leave it up to the vendor to pick features for each task.

Also, ask if they can implement custom features for your specific needs, and how much it's going to cost.

Does the price include updates and technical support?

Technical support is often not included in the price, making it seem more affordable. Updates/upgrades may well be excluded. It's better to make these things clear before you make your choice.

Are there training resources available?

Ideally, a vendor not only provides the tool, but also shows how to use it most effectively. On a tool's website there should be a knowledge base with training resources: tutorials, articles and guides. Some vendors offer individual online webinars.

What does the price include besides basic functionality?

Some vendors offer access to various supplementary tools and services — for example, cloud storage or content libraries. Ask if they are included in the price, or should be purchased separately.

In many cases, the price on a website is much less than the full price of ownership. Find out the total cost of the tool and what it includes. If you don't get clear answers, consider talking to other vendors.

What the clients say

To avoid spending too much time on research, read testimonials and feedback from users. This is the quickest way to get an idea of a tool's quality.

Places to find information:

- Software reviews on g2crowd and capterra
- Client testimonials on official website
- Feedback from users on forums
- Video testimonials and reviews on YouTube

As soon as you narrow the list down to a few options, you can move on to deeper research.

Questions to ask a vendor:

- Where can I see the full list of features?

- Which features I can use in my projects and how?

- What does the price include besides basic functionality? Does it include supplementary tools or services, like cloud storage or a content library?

- What training resources are available? Can I get individual training?

- What's included in my one-time price? Are there any recurring payments?

2. Traditional software vs Cloud

Situation: *You want to decide what will work better for you: a traditional desktop solution or a cloud service.*

Desktop tools appeared way earlier than cloud solutions, which means that, for now, they provide a considerably bigger range of features and opportunities.

On the other hand, web services are becoming more and more popular for many reasons. For example, they require no special OS or hardware configuration. A user simply opens an application in a browser, logs in and starts working.

However, they also have certain nuances:

- Web services are only available by subscription
- An internet connection is required to work
- Data is stored on external servers outside the company

Let's take a closer look at how traditional software is different from cloud-based.

	Traditional software	Cloud services
Functionality	Advanced	Basic
Productivity	High (up-to-date computer is required)	High (high-speed stable internet connection required)
Installation on computer	+	-
License type	Perpetual license / subscription	Subscription only
Meets the requirement of corporate network security	+	-
Upgrades are available	Depends on the license type	+
Free trial	+	+
Offline access	+	-
Collaborative work	-	+

If you have decided to opt for a cloud service, make sure to consider **security aspects:**

- **Ask your company's IT department** if it is allowed according to your corporate network security policy to store data on external servers.

- **Ask the vendor of the web service** where their servers are located, and consult your company's legal department if it is legitimate to use them.

3. Windows or Mac

Situation: You want to know if you will be able to create e-courses on your Mac.

There is a never-ending debate as to which is better: Mac or Windows PC. Obviously, both systems have their advantages. However, when it comes to choosing e-Learning authoring software, we recommend not to limit yourself to a particular operating system.

You see, the range of Windows programs for e-Learning authoring is much wider. But here's the good news: you don't have to confine yourself to just a few choices that run on Mac.

What if I can't find any good Mac software for e-Learning authoring?

Try searching among programs that run on Windows. It's very easy to run Windows software on a Mac: all you need is to install a special program that will create a virtual Windows desktop on your computer. The most popular are Parallels, Apple Boot Camp and VMware. These programs allow you to switch between your Mac OS X and Windows.

Questions to ask a vendor:

- Will their software run on my platform (Windows, Mac)?
- If not, what solutions do they suggest?

4. Learning curve

Situation: *You need to develop a number of e-Learning courses within a tight time frame. You're looking for a quick, effective, and reliable solution.*

In e-Learning, as in other areas, the "learning curve" concept applies. In the context of software, the learning curve is the period of time required to master the program from the moment of purchase. Ideally, if the tool is intuitive enough, it may have zero learning curve. It means you won't have to invest in software training.

The e-Learning software implementation process includes these steps:

1. Installation and setup: 5 minutes to 3 days.

In most cases, it only takes a few minutes for the program to install. However, sometimes expert configuration is needed — especially if your company has high network security requirements, or if you are planning to send e-Learning results to your server. Keep that in mind when estimating e-Learning implementation costs.

2. Mastering the tool: 1 day to 1 month.

If you have never used similar software before, it may take you some time to learn how to use the tool. This adds another couple of weeks to your project schedule.

How to learn the tool faster?

Learning is faster with guides, articles and video lessons. The more resources a vendor provides, the better. Some thoughtful vendors offer webinars and individual team trainings.

PowerPoint add-in vs. standalone program: what's the difference?

There is a class of e-Learning tools that work as add-ins to PowerPoint. With such tools, you can quickly turn existing PowerPoint presentations into e-courses.

A big advantage of a PowerPoint-based solution is the familiar interface. Because most PC users already know how to use PowerPoint, it will be much easier to start creating courses there.

On top of that, an add-in may enhance PowerPoint's basic functionality with special e-Learning features: interactive quizzes, video lectures, and dialogue simulations, just to name a few.

As opposed to add-ins, a standalone tool is usually a more focused solution, specially designed for e-Learning development. Such tools take much more time to master, but may provide more interesting results. For example, you can create a quiz task to sort out pictures, etc.

Questions to ask a vendor:

- Is any training required to start using the tool?
- How much time does it take to install and set up the program?
- What kind of assistance from an IT expert (if any) will I need?
- Is there a knowledge base with training resources, free video lessons, guides?
- Can I get individual team training?

5. LMS compatibility

Situation: *Before purchasing the tool, you want to make sure that the courses will work in your LMS.*

With modern authoring tools, you can create courses that support major e-Learning standards: SCORM 1.2, SCORM 2004, AICC, cmi5, and xAPI (Tin Can). Usually this guarantees compatibility with most LMSs.

If your authoring tool doesn't support these standards, it puts certain limitations on the generated content. For example, if you decide to migrate to a new LMS, it may be difficult to move content from your old one without losing anything.

Checking compatibility

What if you doubt that a tool is compatible with your LMS? Usually a vendor provides a list of supported LMSs on their website. Many LMS providers also have a list of recommended authoring tools that are perfectly compatible with their LMS and provide all required statistics.

If you're still unsure, contact the vendor and ask them to test the compatibility, or let them help you publish your first course to an LMS.

Detailed reports

Find out about available reports and how detailed they are. The more information you get about your students' progress, the more effective your e-Learning will become. E-courses may gather all kinds of useful information: for example, how much time it took a student to study each slide, or which questions turned out to be the hardest.

If such reports are not available for you, find out why. Sometimes the reason is not the tool itself, but the LMS. For instance, an LMS may not support a certain publication standard (SCORM, AICC, etc.), or the required report may not be implemented. *Questions to ask a vendor:*

- What publication formats does the tool support?
- Is it possible to test if their tool and my current LMS are compliant?
- What reports are available and how detailed are they?

6. Games, video lectures and simulations

Situation: *You want to engage your students with interactive content to make e-Learning more effective.*

E-Learning courses may include all kinds of interactive elements: quizzes, surveys, dialogue simulations, videos, and animations. A video lecture is better than a plain text, but an interactive game is more captivating than a video lecture.

A dialogue simulation, for example, can be a very effective way to train the communication skills of salespeople. All you need is to import your sales scripts into the system, and the simulator is ready. The results of each simulation will be sent to you, so that you can monitor how well the students communicate with their virtual clients.

> *The best option is to use a special tool to create each interactive element, and to have all these tools within a single toolkit.*

At this point, you probably have a list of learning objectives: knowledge and skills that your students need to develop. Compare this list to the list of available features.

The most popular types of training materials:

- Video lectures
- Quizzes and surveys
- Dialogue simulations
- Interactive e-books
- Screencasts

7. Content library

Situation: *You need to develop a series of e-courses, and you're way behind schedule.*

If there're always a number of urgent tasks on your to-do list, you should go for a tool that provides a content library. A content library is a collection of ready-made assets, including various course templates, characters, locations, objects, icons, and controls.

With a content library, developing e-courses is faster than ever.

Some people say that templates lack uniqueness. On the other hand, templates dramatically speed up course development. With templates, you don't have to spend time searching for copyright-free images on the web and processing them. Even a

non-designer can create attractive, captivating and professional-looking courses in a very short time.

Questions to ask a vendor:

- Does the tool provide access to a content library?
- Is it included in the price?
- Are there templates and assets related to my area of profession/education?
- Is it possible to add custom images to the library?

8. Mobile learning

Situation: *You want your users to be able to access content from mobile devices.*

Smartphones and tablets have grown to become an essential part of our lives. We use them to play videos, communicate with friends, play games, work, and study. Mobile technologies make e-Learning accessible, and get more and more people engaged. Students can learn anywhere and anytime using their mobile devices.

However, there are a number of nuances to mobile learning.

Format of e-courses

While computers support almost all e-Learning formats, when it comes to mobile devices, there are certain limitations. For example, in order to work on mobile devices, your interactive e-courses and quizzes must be in HTML5 format.

Adaptive courses

Adaptive courses can fit any screen to provide a better learning experience on mobile. There are 2 ways to create adaptive content.

1. Manually

Create multiple versions of your e-Learning course for every device and screen size. For every version, you will need to adjust the layout, move and resize player controls, and customize font sizes and other objects (images, videos, etc.). This process is quite tedious, but it ensures perfect playback on all devices.

2. Automatically

Use a special authoring tool. All you need to do is create a single version of your e-course, and it will automatically adapt to all screens and orientations.

Most modern tools produce adaptive courses that automatically fit smartphones and tablets.

Another useful feature is previewing on various devices. It allows you to check out how the course will work on phones and tablets before publishing it for web.

Adaptive content

The course player can be adaptive, and the content can be adaptive too. Some vendors only offer an adaptive player. In this case all player controls will be usable on mobile, but since the content itself doesn't adapt, students will have to zoom in to read it. To avoid that, make sure the e-course's content will be adaptive as well as the player.

Mobile apps for e-courses

To make the learning experience even better, some vendors provide special apps for iOS and Android. One of the advantages is that such apps allow users to access content offline. Ask your potential vendor if they have an app, and what features it provides.

Questions to ask a vendor:

- Is it possible for students to access courses from mobile devices?

- Which elements of the e-course will be adaptive: the content, the player, or both?

- Do you have a special mobile app? For which platforms (iOS, Android)?

- Does it allow users to take courses offline?

9. Technical support

Situation: *What if you face some technical difficulties while developing your e-course? You want to be sure a vendor will provide prompt and competent assistance.*

Salespeople may be really nice and client-oriented, but when a customer faces problems, that's when a company's true colors show. If a company can provide prompt and professional technical support, it saves the client a great deal of time and effort.

It's always nice to have more than one way to contact tech support: by phone, email, or live chat.

Additionally, all essential instructions and guides should be provided on the vendor's website, if a client needs off-hours assistance.

Install a trial version and try to contact tech support:

- How fast did you get a response from tech support?

- Did they help you solve the problem?

- How comfortable did you feel talking to the support engineers?

10. Feedback from stakeholders

Situation: *You want to send your e-course to stakeholders to get their feedback. How is it possible?*

Some vendors provide special cloud services. To share your content, you simply upload your project to a cloud storage, and it gets automatically converted to web format.

All you need to do is share a course link with stakeholders, and they will be able open it on any device.

This way of sharing is good for many reasons. First, no additional software is required to access the course. Second, this allows stakeholders to check out how the course will work from the learner's perspective.

In some cloud storages, users can leave comments right on the slides, which makes the review process more efficient.

Pricing and terms of such services may vary from vendor to vendor: some companies include cloud storage in the price, while others sell it separately. Perhaps the latter is more cost-effective, unless you're planning to use the service all the time.

Questions to ask a vendor:

- Is there any cloud storage available for me? What are the terms of service?
- Does the service allow leaving comments?
- Is it possible to give private access?

11. Software updates

Situation: *You have decided to purchase a perpetual license, but it troubles you that the tool might get outdated over time.*

The sphere of e-Learning is young and constantly developing. New methods, technologies, and tricks are emerging every day. To keep up with the trends, new authoring features are constantly being implemented.

In fact, updates should be released at least twice a year. This means that a company is actively developing the product, fixing bugs, and adding few features. To find out about updates, check out the 'What's new' section. Also, browse through blog posts and press releases to find out how often updates are released.

It's always nice when a vendor listens to their customers. Find out if and how you can make feature requests. Maybe through a form, or by email?

If you already have a feature request, ask if they are planning to implement your feature. Some vendors agree to implement custom features for an additional charge.

Questions to ask a vendor:

- How often are updates released?
- How do I find out about available updates?
- Is it possible to implement a custom feature? How much is it going to cost?

12. License types

Situation: *You have decided on the tool, but you're still unsure which license type is best suited to your needs.*

Today there are three common license types:

Perpetual license. This type of license is more convenient to manage, because you only make a payment once, and you can use the tool forever. However, software becomes outdated rather quickly, and your perpetual license doesn't guarantee access to new features.

For example, in 2010, when Steve Jobs officially declared that they "do not allow Flash on iPhones, iPods and iPads," it became a big issue for e-Learning developers who were creating their e-Learning content in Flash. That's why most e-Learning vendors have embraced HTML5 technology.

Subscription. This license type allows you to use the tool for a defined length of time, for example, for the duration of a project. When the license expires, you will no longer be able to edit existing courses or create new ones.

Mixed model (perpetual license + updates + tech support). The tool is yours forever, but you have to pay extra for maintenance. Maintenance usually includes advanced support services and upgrades. What's great about this model is that you can use the tool as much as you want, and you only pay for upgrades and tech support if you need them.

Take a look at this comparison table:

	Mixed model (perpetual license + updates + tech support)	Perpetual license	Subscription
Unlimited period of use	+	+	-
Minimum initial price	-	-	+
Availability of updates	+	-	+
Advanced support services	+	-	+
Recurring payments	+	-	+

Questions to ask a vendor:

- Is the tool available by perpetual license or by subscription?
- Does the price include tech support?
- What level of support will I receive within my license?

13. Who owns the rights to the content

Situation: *Your e-course is ready to go, and you would like to sell it online. But beforehand, you need to make sure that everything is 100% legal.*

If you're planning to sell courses, carefully study your license agreement with the authoring tool vendor. There are some freemium tools that allow users to create courses for free, but oblige them to contribute a fixed rate for each sale. Read your license agreement in detail, or contact the vendor about ownership rights.

Questions to ask a vendor:

- Does the license agreement allow selling my content online and under what conditions?

Checklist for Choosing the Right Authoring Tool

Check if your authoring tool meets these basic requirements for e-Learning development. **20 out of 20 means you've found yourself a good authoring tool.**

Quick Start

- ❏ It doesn't take long to master the tool.

- ❏ A knowledge base is available with free video lessons and detailed guides.

- ❏ The vendor can provide individual training for my team.

Software features

- ❏ I've explored the full list of features, and I realize how each feature may be useful for me.

- ❏ I can launch the tool on my platform (Windows or Mac).

- ❏ The tool generates courses that are compatible with my LMS.

- ❏ The tool supports universal e-Learning standards: SCORM 1.2/2004, Tin Can, AICC.

❏ With the tool, I can create interactive e-Learning content (quizzes, surveys, video lectures, dialogue simulations, etc.)

❏ The tool allows publishing fully-adaptive e-courses.

Additional services

❏ A free app (Android or iOS) is available to take courses from mobile devices.

❏ App users can access courses offline.

❏ A special cloud storage is available to share courses and gather feedback.

❏ The tool includes a content library with templates, character sets, locations, objects, backgrounds and buttons.

Friendly and helpful customer service

❏ A company representative explained to me what's included in the product price.

❏ I can choose a license type that best matches my requirements.

❏ I can contact technical support in multiple ways (by phone, email, or live chat) and get a response within 2 hours.

❏ The vendor has tested the compatibility of the tool with my LMS.

❏ Product updates are released twice a year, or even more often.

Security and rights of ownership

❏ Using the tool does not violate our corporate security policy.

❏ The vendor doesn't claim to own the copyright to my content, and they don't oblige users to pay royalties on sales.

Still unsure of which authoring tool to choose?

Contact iSpring

Call us at +7 800 333 7873 or drop us a line at
customer.care@ispringsolutions.com

We will research your case, suggest a suitable solution, and calculate the cost.