

Selecting a Course

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WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial covers the process of course registration and how to select the right course for you. This includes defining course numbers and prerequisites and describing the different types of courses you will encounter with regard to requirements. It also entails identifying resources you can consult to help you choose, such as academic advisors, course descriptions, and other basic research methods. Here is what will be discussed:

1. The Process of Course Registration
2. Course Levels
3. Prerequisites
4. Types of Courses: General Education, Required, Elective
5. The Role of an Academic Advisor
6. Reading Course Descriptions
7. Researching Basic Course Information

1. The Process of Course Registration

In order to officially *enroll* in a course, you have to *register* for it. Registration means that you have reserved one of the available spaces in the course. Before you register for courses, it's important that you spend some time thinking about which courses you want to take and why. The process of choosing courses that are right for you is absolutely essential to a positive and productive higher learning experience. The first step in the process is locating the complete list of courses you have to choose from and reading through it carefully. This list, with the names of courses and basic information about them, is often called a *course catalog*. Course catalogs used to be only available in print, but these days they are most widely accessed and read online.

Once you've given thoughtful consideration to all of your options and selected your courses, it's time to register for them. Your school should provide you with complete instructions about *how* to register. Often students are given a *registration window* or a set timeframe when they need to register. At many schools, *upper-class students*, that is, students who have more seniority or are close to completing their degrees or programs, usually get to register first. The registration hierarchy means that courses can sometimes fill before students have a chance to register for them, so remember that the process is time-sensitive. Proceed carefully, and when you're finished, double check that everything is in order.

IN CONTEXT

You're a first-year student, so you don't get to register for your courses until all the students with seniority have had their opportunity to register. You had your eye on a particular course because it's on an interesting subject; unfortunately, you're not the only one who finds it interesting. The course has already filled up. There's another course that excites you less but has an open seat.

Do you have any options when it comes to closed classes or do you have to settle for a class that has room for you? If you're really interested in a class for which enrollment is closed, there are a couple of things you might do. First, you can look into when the class will be offered again; maybe patience is the best way forward. You can also monitor the enrollment as a lot can happen with students adding and dropping, especially as the start of a term approaches. Finally, you can contact the instructor and see if they will grant you permission to enroll in their closed course; this is up to the instructor's discretion, but it is certainly not uncommon for permission to be granted.

2. Course Levels

In many schools, you will find courses sorted and listed with a three or four-letter abbreviation of the academic department that is offering the course and then a three or four-digit number. For example, "ECON 1001: Introduction to Economics." The numbers are a way of indicating a course's level of difficulty or the level of experience in the subject a student taking the course should have. Course numbers beginning with a "1" are typically introductory or "lower division" courses; courses beginning with a "3" are more advanced and will likely draw more experienced students; courses beginning with a "5" or higher are intended mainly for graduate students. You'll want to understand and consider course numbers when you choose courses and register, not only to decide whether this is a course you want to take but also, as we'll discuss next, whether this is a course you are ready to take.

3. Prerequisites

Course numbers do not merely describe a course's level of difficulty; they also indicate the suggested, or sometimes required, sequence that classes should be taken in. You start with the lower numbers and work your way up to the higher numbers. This is not always the case; for instance, an upper-class student might take an introductory course because they are finishing up degree requirements or simply because they are interested in exploring a subject outside of their major that they have no experience with. Conversely, a lower-class student can take an advanced course, but the difference is that an advanced course may have *prerequisites*.

If an advanced course has a prerequisite or prerequisites, this means there is a course or courses you have to have taken before you can enroll in the course. For example, in order to register for a class titled "FILM 5010: Advanced Film Seminar," you may need to have taken the prerequisite, "FILM 2000: Introduction to Filmmaking." Prerequisites are designed to ensure that students are properly prepared for the challenge of upper division courses.



Prerequisites can seem like academic bureaucracy enjoying rules and regulations for their own sake, but they really are there to ensure that students in a course have the best chance to succeed. You don't want to show up to the first day of class and realize there are foundations of knowledge you don't have that the course assumes students are already bringing with them. Advanced courses build on the foundations established in introductory courses. In fact, as the term "course" suggests, there's a particular way to go that has been laid out for you by those with the wisdom of experience. Even if you are intent on making your own path with your education, it's best to see and recognize the value of the paths already set out before you.

4. Types of Courses: General Education, Required, Elective

When you choose courses, you need to think about which courses you want to take and which courses you have to take. Typically, there are three types of courses you'll be considering: general education courses, courses required for your degree program, and elective courses.

General education courses are those "core requirements" that every student has to take, regardless of their major or particular course of study. They will vary from school to school, but often general education courses are in the same broad major subjects that you studied in high school—English, Math, Science, etc.

The next category includes courses that are required to complete your chosen degree program; for instance, if you are pursuing a degree in philosophy, you might have to take PHIL 3200: The Enlightenment.

Finally, the courses that you take simply because you want to, not because you are required to, are called elective courses because you elect to take them. If you are a computer science major but you have room in your schedule and you are really interested in that philosophy course on The Enlightenment, it would be an elective course for you.

5. The Role of an Academic Advisor

If the process of choosing the right courses and understanding the courses you need to take seems daunting or overwhelming, there is no reason to panic. There are professionals whose job it is to help you with these kinds of issues. They are typically called *academic advisors*, and their role at an institution of higher learning is to consult with students in order to help them develop short and long-term plans and goals. An advisor will know about or be able to find out about different sets of requirements for the programs you are interested in and registration procedures. They may also have information and advice about particular courses or instructors, and they will have valuable experience working with students in your situation. Advisors can be a great resource for a student looking for help with selecting a course, so don't hesitate to seek their assistance.

6. Reading Course Descriptions

You can find course descriptions in a course catalog, on the website of a particular academic department, or other places where course information is provided. A course description includes a number of important details about a given course, including when it is offered, how many credits it is worth, whether there are any prerequisites, and a brief description of the content the course will cover. As it collects all the relevant basic information you will need to make a decision about whether you want to take a course, a course description is one of the most important resources in selecting a course.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** A course description might look something like this:

ENGL 1001 - 001: Introduction to Literature - Leslie Garfield
Fall 2018 - TTh 10-11:15 - Morrison Hall

This course introduces students to the study of literature at the college level. Students explore different literary genres, including short fiction, poetry, and drama, from various time periods and cultures. Students are asked to read selected poems, stories, novels, and plays carefully, to think about them and the issues they raise, and to bring their opinions and observations to class where they will ask questions, make comments, discuss, think, and write.

7. Researching Basic Course Information

After you've read a course description and carefully considered factors like whether a course fits into your schedule or whether it will be useful in satisfying the requirements of your degree, there is even more you can do to learn about a course in order to help you make your decision. You might see if you can find a syllabus online from when the course was offered in the past, so you can investigate the workload and the kinds of work that is assigned in the course.

Another good idea is to find out as much you can about the instructor, since they will play a significant part in whether you have a positive experience with the course. The instructor might have a webpage, either through their academic department or elsewhere, which includes vital personal and professional details about them. There are also internet sites where students anonymously review their instructors; though another student's experience won't necessarily match up with yours, these sites can be an interesting way to gauge popular opinion about an instructor.



SUMMARY

This tutorial has detailed **the process of registering for courses** by explaining the meaning of **course levels**, defining **prerequisites**, describing the different **types of courses**, highlighting the role of **academic advisors**, and relaying the value of reading **course descriptions** and **other basic research about courses** that you might conduct.