How to Choose the Right eLearning Authoring Tool

13 Simple Things to Consider

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

Read the entire guide to get full insight into choosing eLearning software, or go straight to the checklist.

What's inside?

1. What determines 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 eLearning authoring tool. To figure out what the price includes:

- See the full list of features
- Find out if there are training 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 extra 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 also be excluded. It's better to make these things clear before making 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 online webinars.

What does the price include besides basic functionality?

Some vendors offer access to various supplementary tools and services, such as cloud storage or content libraries. Ask if they are included in the price or must 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 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 G2 and Capterra
- Client testimonials on the official website
- Feedback from users on forums
- Video testimonials and reviews on YouTube

Questions to ask a vendor:

- Where can I see the full list of features?
- Which features can I 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?
- What's included in my one-time price? Are there any recurring payments?

2. Desktop vs cloud-based

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:

- 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 (an up-to-date computer is required)	High (a high-speed stable internet connection is required)
Installation on computer	+	—
Easy access from any computer	—	+
May not be allowed according to the company security policy	—	+
Upgrades are available	+	+
Offline access	+	—
Collaborative work	—	+

As you can see, both desktop and cloud-based solutions have their pros and cons, so you need to see which one is better suited for your company requirements. If you decide to opt for a cloud service, make sure to consider **security aspects:**

- **Ask your company's IT department** if your corporate network security policy allows data to be stored on external servers.

- **Ask the web service vendor** where their servers are located and ask your company's legal department if it is appropriate 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. Obviously, both systems have their advantages. However, when it comes to choosing eLearning authoring software, we recommend that you not limit yourself to a particular operating system.

You see, the range of Windows programs for eLearning authoring is much broader. But the good news is that you don't have to confine yourself to a mere few choices that run on Mac.

What if I can't find any good Mac software for eLearning authoring?

Try searching among programs that run on Windows. It's quite easy to run Windows software on a Mac: all you need to do is 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 OSX and Windows.

Questions to ask a vendor:

- Will the 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 eLearning courses within a tight time frame. You're looking for a quick, effective, and reliable solution.

In eLearning, 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 a zero learning curve. This means you won't have to invest time and energy in software training.

The eLearning 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 eLearning results to your server. Keep that in mind when estimating eLearning 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 tutorials. The more resources a vendor provides, the better. Some thoughtful vendors offer webinars and individual team training.

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

There is a class of eLearning 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 eLearning 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 eLearning development. Such tools take much more time to master, but may provide more interesting results. For example, you can create a software simulation or even a VR training game.

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 tutorials, and guides?

- Can I receive 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 eLearning 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 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 learners' progress, the more effective your eLearning will be. E-courses may gather all kinds of useful information, such as 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 to 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 your tool and my current LMS are compatible?
- What reports are available and how detailed are they?

6. Games, video lectures, and simulations

Situation: You want to engage your learners with interactive content to make eLearning more effective.

There may be different kinds of eLearning content you want to use: slide-based courses, quizzes, surveys, dialogue simulations, videos, etc. For example, you may need to create a video tutorial to inform your employees about a new product and its features, build an online quiz to check how your learners understand the material, or create a dialogue sim to help your sales professionals or customer service agents master their communication skills.

The best option in this case is to use a special tool to create each content type, 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 learners need to develop. Compare this list to the list of available features.

The most popular types of training materials are:

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

7. Content library

Situation: You want to create professional-looking courses but don't have any experience in instructional design.

If you're a non-designer who wants to build attractive, captivating, and professional-looking courses in a short time, 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.

You can put a course together with versatile slide templates – just select slides that fit your learning scenario, enter texts, and add images, and your course is ready to go. Besides, you don't have to spend time searching for copyright-free images of characters, backgrounds, and icons on the web and process them. You can choose the ready-to-go pictures from the library and simply insert them in your course.

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 professional area?

- 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 videos, communicate with friends, play games, work, and study. Mobile technologies make eLearning more accessible so more and more people can be engaged.

Learners can study 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 eLearning 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 devices. There are two ways to create adaptive content:

1. Manually

Create multiple versions of your eLearning 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

With some authoring tools, you can create a single version of a 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 the Web.

Adaptive content

The course player can be adaptive, and the content can be adaptive as well. Some vendors only offer an adaptive player. In this case, all player controls will be usable on mobile devices, 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 and player will be adaptive.

Mobile apps for e-courses

To make the learning experience even better, some vendors provide special apps for iOS and Android. One advantage 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 might be pleasant and client-oriented prior to making the sale, but it's when a customer faces problems that 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, effort, and headaches.

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

Additionally, all essential instructions and guides should be provided on the vendor's website if a client needs off-hours assistance. Ideally, of course, tech support will be available 24/7.

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. Collaboration on courses

Situation: You need to gather feedback from your stakeholders and want several authors to work on the same course. How is this accomplished?

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

You only need to share a course link with stakeholders and they'll be able to open the course in a browser on any device.

This way of sharing is helpful for many reasons. First, instead of emailing copies of your project to your colleagues, you can just send a link to the course. Second, no additional software is required to access the course – a browser and an internet connection are all that are required. Third, this allows stakeholders to check out how the course will work from the learner's perspective.

In some cloud storage services, users can leave comments right on the slides, which makes the review process easier and more efficient.

Some services provide even more extensive options for collaboration. Not only can users leave their feedback on the content, but they can also edit a course draft by adding texts, inserting videos to slides, and polishing the appearance, for example. Involving several authors to cowork on the same project is a great way to speed up content development and deliver courses faster.

There are also cloud storage providers that allow you to upload other learning materials like PDF documents, PPT presentations, video, and audio, and share them with your colleagues via a link. This is a great option for those who have a lot of learning content, want to keep it in one place and easily share it with their team members.

Questions to ask a vendor:

- Is there any cloud storage available to me? What are the terms of service?

- What is the storage capacity?

- Does the service allow leaving comments?

- Can several authors work on development of the course?

- What file formats does the cloud service support?

- Is it possible to share uploaded files via a link?

11. Software updates

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

The eLearning realm 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 would that 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 single payment and you can use the tool forever. However, software becomes outdated rather quickly, and your perpetual license doesn't guarantee access to new features or even that the vendor will develop and offer the features that you will need.

Subscription. This license type allows you to use the tool for a defined length of time – for the duration of a project, for example. 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 with my license?

13. Who owns the rights to the content

Situation: Your e-course is ready to go and you want to sell it online. But first 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 me to sell my content online? Under what conditions?

Checklist for Choosing the Right Authoring Tool

Check if your authoring tool meets these basic requirements for eLearning 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 know what features a tool should have to meet my authoring needs.

- ☐ 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 eLearning standards: SCORM 1.2/2004, Tin Can, AICC.

- ☐ With the tool, I can create interactive eLearning 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 for taking courses on mobile devices.

- ☐ App users can access courses offline.

- ☐ Special cloud storage is available for sharing courses and gathering feedback.

- ☐ Several authors can work on the same project.

- ☐ The cloud storage allows you to gather all learning materials in one place.

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

Friendly and helpful customer service

☐ A company representative explained what's included in the price.

☐ I can contact technical support in multiple ways (by phone, email, and/or live chat) and get a response quickly.

☐ The vendor claims that the authoring tool is compatible with my LMS.

☐ Product updates are released twice a year, or even more frequently.

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

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Still not sure which authoring tool to choose?

Contact iSpring

Call us at **+1 844 347 7764** or drop us a line at
customer.care@ispringsolutions.com

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