



American Opportunity Credit: Questions and Answers

Q1. Are there any changes to the tax credits for college expenses?

A. The American opportunity tax credit, which expanded and renamed the already-existing Hope credit, can be claimed for tuition and certain fees you pay for higher education in 2009 and 2010.

Q2. The Hope credit originally applied only to the first two years of college. Has that changed?

A. Yes. The American opportunity tax credit can be claimed for expenses for the first four years of post-secondary education.

Q3. How much is the American opportunity tax credit worth?

A. It is a tax credit of up to \$2,500 of the cost of qualified tuition and related expenses paid during the taxable year. That is a \$700 increase from the previous Hope credit.

Q4. What education expenses qualify for the American opportunity tax credit?

A. The term "qualified tuition and related expenses" has been expanded to include expenditures for "course materials." For this purpose, the term "course materials" means books, supplies and equipment needed for a course of study whether or not the materials are purchased from the educational institution as a condition of enrollment or attendance.

Q5. Does an expenditure for a computer qualify for the American opportunity tax credit?

A. Whether an expenditure for a computer qualifies for the credit depends on the facts. An expenditure for a computer would qualify for the credit if the computer is needed as a condition of enrollment or attendance at the educational institution.

Q6. How is the American opportunity tax credit calculated?

A. Taxpayers will receive a tax credit based on 100 percent of the first \$2,000 of tuition, fees and course materials paid during the taxable year, plus 25 percent of the next \$2,000 of tuition, fees and course materials paid during the taxable year.

Q7. How will the American opportunity tax credit affect my income tax return?

A. You will be able to reduce your tax liability one dollar for each dollar of credit for which you're eligible. If the amount of the American opportunity tax credit for which you're eligible is more than your tax liability, the amount of the credit that is more than your tax liability is refundable to you, up to a maximum refund of 40 percent of the amount of the credit for which you're eligible.

Q8. Who is eligible for the American opportunity tax credit?

A. A taxpayer who pays qualified tuition and related expenses and whose federal income tax return has a modified adjusted gross income of \$80,000 or less (\$160,000 or less for joint filers) is eligible for the credit. The credit is reduced ratably if a taxpayer's modified adjusted gross income exceeds those amounts. A taxpayer whose modified adjusted gross income is greater than \$90,000 (\$180,000 for joint filers) cannot benefit from this credit.

Q9. What is "modified adjusted gross income" for the purposes of the American opportunity tax credit?

A. It is the taxpayer's adjusted gross income increased by foreign income that was excluded, and by income excluded from sources in Puerto Rico or certain U.S. possessions.

Q10. How is the credit claimed?

A. The credit is claimed using Form 8863, attached to Form 1040 or 1040A.

Q11. I'm just beginning college this year. Can I claim the American opportunity tax credit for all four years I pay tuition?

A. The American opportunity tax credit is for amounts paid in 2009 and 2010 only. You may be eligible for the lifetime learning credit for any tuition and fees required for enrollment you pay after 2010.

Q12. Can I also claim the tuition and fees tax deduction in addition to claiming the American opportunity tax credit?

A. No. You cannot claim the tuition and fees tax deduction in the same year that you claim the American opportunity tax credit or the lifetime learning credit. You must choose among them. You also cannot claim the tuition and fees tax deduction if anyone else claims the American opportunity tax credit or the lifetime learning credit for you in the same year. A tax deduction of up to \$4,000 can be claimed for qualified tuition and fees paid. Though the credit will usually result in greater tax savings, taxpayers should calculate the effect of both on the tax return to see which is most beneficial — the tax credit or the deduction. Often tax software will automatically compare the two for you.

Q13. Is there a new benefit that applies to college savings plans (commonly known as 529 Plans)?

A. Yes. A qualified, nontaxable distribution from a Section 529 plan during 2009 or 2010 now includes the cost of the purchase of any computer technology or equipment or Internet access and related services, if such technology, equipment or services are to be used by the beneficiary of the plan and the beneficiary's family during any of the years the beneficiary is enrolled at an eligible educational institution.

Related Items:

- [Tax Breaks for Education: Information Center](#)
- [IR-2009-78](#), Special IRS Web Section Highlights Back-to-School Tax Breaks; Popular 529 Plans Expanded, New \$2,500 College Credit Available
- [Fact Sheet 2009-12](#), How 529 Plans Help Families Save for College and How the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 Expanded 529 Plan Features
- [529 Plans: Questions and Answers](#)
- [American Opportunity Credit](#)
- [IRS Information Related to the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009](#)