

**Bucks**

Making the Most of Your Money

AUGUST 3, 2010, 3:01 PM

## How to Find Cheaper College Textbooks

By *TARA SIEGEL BERNARD*

You might call it the college student's first lesson in exploitation: paying \$100 for a textbook, then getting a mere \$12 when reselling to the campus bookstore at the end of the semester.

College textbook prices rose about 6 percent, on average, every year — that's twice the rate of inflation — from 1986 to 2004. And there's nothing more infuriating than paying the sticker price on textbooks (well, with the exception of tuition itself), when many other books are available at a discount. The cost of buying the textbooks can easily add up to \$1,000 a year or more.

Thankfully, federal rules that went into effect in July may help ease the pain. Publishers can no longer bundle their textbooks with accompanying materials like workbooks, and they must reveal their prices to professors when making a sales pitch. Colleges, meanwhile, are now required to provide students with a list of assigned textbooks during course registration, which allows for more time for shopping before classes begin.

That's especially important now because there are an increasing number of ways to save on books if you buy or rent them online. This Times [article](#) from last year provides a lot of helpful information. But we also spoke with Nicole Allen, textbook advocate at the [Student Public Interest Research Groups](#), for some more tips:

**Free Books** [Google Books](#) has scanned a lot of texts into its database, though you may not find everything you need — or, you may only have access to every 10th page, Ms. Allen said. Meanwhile, [Project Gutenberg](#) has taken out-of-copyright books in the public domain and scanned them into its library. “If you're studying Jane Austen, you are not going to have an easy time following along with page numbers, but you can definitely get access to the text without paying for it,” she added.

Want to download a copy to your computer, Kindle or iPhone? Head to [ManyBooks.net](#).

The use of so-called open source textbooks, offered by companies like [FlatWorld Knowledge](#), is also on the rise. “Students who are assigned open source textbooks can usually download a copy for free, or they can buy a printed and bound version for \$20 to \$40,” Ms. Allen said. (Suggest it to your future professors.)

**ETextbooks** Are you the type of student who is completely at ease reading on your computer or iPad and won't be tempted to print anything out? Then consider using

eTextbooks, which are digital versions of textbooks that usually sell for about half the full retail price.

[CourseSmart.com](#), for instance, is a consortium of major textbook publishers that provides eTextbooks that allow students to highlight and take notes electronically. Printing, however, is limited to just 10 pages at a time. “We are finding that 75 percent of students still prefer print to digital,” Ms. Allen added.

### **Renting...**

**On Campus** Some universities have started programs that allow students to rent their textbooks. [Rent-A-Text](#), for instance, has teamed with 800 college bookstores. It says renting books for the semester costs about half the purchase price, while online purchases can be picked up in your college bookstore. (Note to highlighting fanatics: you won’t be penalized, as long as your markings are not “excessive.”)

**Online** But you’ll also want to find out how those prices compare with renting online. [Chegg.com](#) has a reputation for being the Netflix of book rental companies — its used books are known for arriving in a bright orange box, and, more important, in good condition. [Shipping](#) starts at \$3.99, and return shipping is free.

There are a number of other online companies that rent books, including [BookRenter.com](#) and [CampusBookRentals.com](#), which provide free shipping both ways. [ECampus.com](#), meanwhile, rents, sells and buys back textbooks. Our colleague’s [article](#) also suggests [Textbookrentals.com](#) and [Collegebookrenter.com](#).

### **Buying Online...**

[Campusbooks.com](#) and [Bigwords.com](#) are similar to, say, [Kayak.com](#) or [Expedia.com](#) — they are search engines that scour sites for the best prices on buying new or used books.

Campusbooks is simple to use, and the results are easy to compare. For instance, a recent query (search using the ISBN number) for a [sociology](#) textbook generated results that listed the lowest prices in each category: used, new, rentals, e-books, and international editions (those versions can be cheaper).

New and used books can be found all over the Web, including on [Half.com](#), part of eBay, and [Amazon.com](#). “Your best bet there is to just go to a search engine,” Ms. Allen said. Just keep in mind that buying used books online can be risky because you don’t know the true condition.

Don’t forget to check for coupon codes. [PromotionalCodes.com](#), [CouponWinner.com](#), and [PromoCodes.com](#), for instance, offer an entire category of [discount codes](#) for textbooks and eBooks, for various book providers and renters.

### **Cutting Out the Middle Man ...**

Some students have listed the books they have available on Facebook, Ms. Allen said, or

even Craigslist. The Student PIRGs also has its own book swapping [Web site](#), which allows students to look up their university and post the books they have available, or look for the ones they need.

### **Selling Your Books ...**

You usually won't get the best deal from your campus bookstore. But if the store knows it will need the same book the following semester, it could pay as much as 40 or 50 percent of the retail price, Ms. Allen said.

Most of the large used booksellers will also buy them back. [Campusbooks.com](#) doesn't purchase used books, but it has a neat search engine that lists who's buying and how much they're willing to pay.

And if you're feeling charitable, you can donate or sell your books to [BetterWorldBooks.com](#), which raises money for literacy initiatives.

Where have you found the best deals on college textbooks? Do you think it's better to buy or rent? Please share your tips in the comment section.