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## Less-Costly Options Make Textbooks More Affordable

By **KELLI B. GRANT***August 6, 2008; Page D6*

Filling a book bag with a course-load of college textbooks will weigh not only on a student's shoulders, but on his or her wallet.

On average, college students shelled out \$900 a semester for textbooks, according to a 2005 federal report. In some cases, a single science book can cost \$200.

The situation has led Congress to step in, and on Thursday it passed the Higher Education Opportunity Act. Among its provisions, the bill requires publishers to share pricing information with professors and forces them to unbundle packages of textbooks and supplementary materials so students can buy only items they need. President George W. Bush is expected to sign the bill.

"It's a critical step," said Nicole Allen, textbooks program director at Student Public Interest Research Groups, a consumer advocacy group. "Textbooks really can be the difference between affording higher education and dropping out."


Government intervention isn't the only way cash-strapped students can improve their odds of affording their textbooks. Here are more ways to save:

### Electronic Textbooks

Ditch the heavy hardcover for an electronic book, and save as much as 50%. In May, six of the biggest textbook publishers, including Pearson and McGraw-Hill Education, started [CourseSmart.com](http://www.course-smart.com)<sup>1</sup>, which sells subscriptions to digital copies of textbooks and other course materials. For example, a 180-day subscription to the 12th edition of "Earth Science" costs \$56.67, or 50% less than the print version.

Check with individual publishers -- Cengage Learning and Springer, among others, have their own eTextbook sites -- as well as Web sites such as [CafeScribe.com](http://www.cafescribe.com)<sup>2</sup> to compare prices. Also, ask whether your college bookstore sells electronic books. At the University of Dayton, in Ohio, students pay \$41 for electronic access to "Making Sense of Movies," saving 41% off a new \$70 text.

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Electronic texts also have downsides, however. Unlike their paper counterparts, they can't be returned. Also, subscriptions limit access to a semester or two, and copyrights typically prevent printing more than a few pages.

### Price Comparison Sites

You can buy almost anything used online these days, and textbooks are no exception.

To find the best deals, check textbook-specific search engines, such as [Bigwords.com](#)<sup>3</sup>, [CheapestTextbooks.com](#)<sup>4</sup> and [Booksprice.com](#)<sup>5</sup>.

Hunting for "Ten Essential Texts in the Philosophy of Religion" (regularly \$54.95 new) through CheapestTextbooks turned up listings at eight online retailers. The cheapest: \$4.21 for a used copy at [Half.com](#)<sup>6</sup> (plus \$3.49 shipping). Overall, that's a savings of 86%.

### Textbook Rentals

Once finals are over, the first stop most students make is at the bookstore, where they hope to sell their books and recoup some cash. If the store needs the text for the next semester, then they'll be lucky to get 50% of their money back.

Textbook-rental services, such as [Chegg.com](#)<sup>7</sup>, [BookRenter.com](#)<sup>8</sup> and [CampusBookRentals.com](#)<sup>9</sup>, offer a lot more certainty. Using these services, students pay as little as a third of a book's price to borrow it for a set period -- usually a semester, said Charles Schmidt, a spokesman for the National Association of College Stores. Chegg.com, for example, mails a copy of "Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature" for \$26.88 a semester, a savings of 59% off the price of the new version.

One warning: Renting isn't always cheaper than buying a used text, Mr. Schmidt said. Many rented texts don't include the supplementary materials such as CDs or workbooks. Also, these services typically require books be kept in good condition. Play fast and loose with a highlighter, and you could end up forking over the full purchase price.

### Subsidized and Open-Source Textbooks

It is even possible to legally download textbooks free, thanks to some new sites and services.

Freeload Press subsidizes the cost of offering dozens of eTextbooks free by selling ad space on its Web site, and on the pages of the books. Its free offerings include "Guide to Business Valuation" (\$30.95 new). Print versions of the textbooks offered on the site run \$19 to \$40, plus shipping.

Project Gutenberg offers more than 25,000 free eBooks and audiobooks for older, out-of-copyright texts, including classics like "Jane Eyre" and "The Iliad." (At Barnes & Noble, you'd pay \$7.95 for each.)

The pitfall to free texts: not much selection. The sites are worth a look, but don't bank on finding all the books on your required-reading list just yet.

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