



6 ways to save on college textbooks

January 14, 2013

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Family, Money



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When I was a student at New York University in the late 1980s, there was an end-of-semester ritual that nearly every cash-strapped student on campus followed — heading over to the local Barnes & Noble to sell our textbooks. While this ritual didn't **save money buying college textbooks** for the new semester, at least I could put some money back in my pocket.

Some 25 years later there are still plenty of college students that turn to used textbooks at the start of the semester and sell their old ones at the end of the semester. But the textbook landscape has changed to include many other ways to save money buying college textbooks — good to know as college students across the country head back for the spring semester.

Here are six ways you can save money on college textbooks:

1. **Buy used or older textbooks.** Though times have changed since I was in college, the practice of saving money by buying used textbooks has not. **Zac Bissonette**, author of "Debt-Free U: How I Paid for an Outstanding College Education Without Loans, Scholarships, or Mooching off My Parents (Portfolio Trade/Penguin; \$16)," says that when he was a student of the University of Massachusetts, not only would he tend to buy used textbooks, but also he found he could save even more by getting the older editions of the current textbooks. "Instead of spending \$500 on books one semester, I spent \$13 — including shipping! And they worked just as well as the new editions! Old editions of textbooks can usually be had on Amazon for between one cent and \$3. So the savings work out to something like 95% off of retail," says Bissonette, adding, "It's a good idea to check with your professor to see if there's any problem with doing this for your class."

2. **Rent your textbooks.** College bookstores now rent textbooks. My guess is that they started doing this after seeing much of their revenue going to online upstarts that focus on college textbooks rentals: Think **Chegg.com**, **Bookrenter.com**, **Campusbookrentals.com**, **Ecampus.com**, **Textbookrentals.com** and **Bookrenter.com**. "The number of college stores offering textbook rental over the past three years has skyrocketed," says Charles Schmidt, National Association of College Stores (NACS) director of public relations. He estimates that these days nearly all of the more than 3,000 college store members offer rentals, including Barnes & Noble stores that are part of the NACS network.

Not sure renting makes financial sense? Let's say you needed a biology textbook. You could rent it from Chegg.com, for example, for the semester for only \$49. If you were to buy it new, it would be \$186. At the end of the semester Chegg.com sends you a postage-paid shipping label so you can return the book on Chegg's dime. Which student (or parents of students who might be footing the textbook bill) wouldn't want to save close to \$140 per textbook?

3. **Borrow textbooks from the library.** Most college and university libraries stock nearly all the books that professors assign, from textbooks to novels, and if you act fast, you can usually check these books out for free at the start of the semester. That's what Carol Meerschaert's son Andrew, who is a freshman at Drexel University in Philadelphia, does. "He goes to the library and uses the textbooks instead of buying them," she says. Since there is a chance that others may try the same trick, see if you can't borrow the book from another library that perhaps your college is in a consortium with. That way if the library on your campus doesn't have the book you need, you can search for and request it from another library in that consortium.
4. **Download your textbooks.** When Andrew Meerschaert, the Drexel student, discovered that one of the textbooks he needed from the library wasn't available anywhere, he decided to buy a downloadable version on **Amazon for his Kindle**. It was 25% cheaper to purchase the download than it would have been to buy the hardcover used.

Other online outfits — including **Barnes and Noble** — have many downloadable textbooks, often called eTextbooks, as do other lesser-known sites, including Ecampus.com and Chegg.com. Even though that latter site is known for traditional textbook rentals, it now has them available for rent in digital format as well.

5. **Sell your old textbooks.** While selling your old textbooks doesn't directly help you save money on the new textbooks you need for the start of the semester, it's a smart way to recoup part of your initial investment from the previous semester. Amazon.com will give you free Amazon.com gift cards when you sell your old textbooks to it. I believe you'll always find a market for used textbooks. Think about it: Your local college store — or even the online sites — has a vested interest in buying your old textbooks. This gives them inventory that they can turn around and sell or rent to new students in the future.

6. **File for a tax Credit.** If you file taxes on your own, you could get reimbursed for up to \$2,500 in college expenses, including textbooks. This **tax credit was just renewed** with the fiscal cliff-avoiding legislation that passed at the beginning of January as part of the American Taxpayer Relief Act of 2012. So save all your textbook receipts for tax season.