

Textbook advice: Shop early, online

Heading back to college might be the furthest thought from students' minds, but now is a good time to start thinking about textbooks.

That's right. Those outrageously priced tomes are likely to cost the average student nearly \$1,100 this school year.

Textbook prices have increased at twice the rate of inflation over the past decade and recently equaled a quarter of the tuition-and-fees expense at four-year public schools and nearly three-quarters of the cost for a two-year school, according to a report from the Government Accountability Office. Many textbooks cost more than \$100 each.

Reasons include more frequent updates to the books that make used copies worthless and the addition of supplementary materials, such as CD-ROMs.

You can save big money on college texts with a little effort and planning, which is why now is the time to start. Many students can find out what books they need from the Web sites of the college bookstore or professor.

The best spending advice is to avoid the campus bookstore, which is the most expensive place to shop for textbooks. It

might be convenient and you probably won't have to worry about buying an out-of-date edition, but you'll pay dearly for it. And once in the store, you may be susceptible to impulse buys of college-monogrammed coffee mugs and other items.

Textbook Savings Tips 101 would include buying used books, studying from textbooks on reserve at the campus library and buying previous editions of the book if the professor approves. Below are 200-level tips on textbook savings:

SHOP EARLY. You'll get the best deals because you'll have time to research the best prices and choose from the largest quantity of used books.

"Procrastination is definitely the enemy of these students," said Steve Loyola, president and founder of BestBookBuys.com. "The ones who are on the ball and order early get the cheap books. You can definitely save hundreds of dollars."

And when shopping online, a retailer is less likely to bungle your purchase during a slow period, as opposed to when it is swamped with orders near the start of school. Also, you will have time to choose the cheapest shipping option, which

sometimes is free if you're willing to wait a couple weeks.

PLAN AHEAD. Find out what books you really need, even by contacting the professor if you can't find out online or through the bookstore. Get the 10-digit ISBN code. It's easier to use the number than shopping by title. Remember that there's a big difference between what a professor recommends and requires. Don't get the optional books until you know you'll read them.

SHOP ONLINE. Anyone of college age already knows Internet shopping can yield bargain prices. But it's also smart because you avoid state sales tax when ordering from an out-of-state seller. That's most beneficial when there's free shipping. Otherwise, shipping costs could devour the savings in sales tax.

Check such Web sites as Amazon.com, eBay.com, Abebooks.com and BestBookBuys.com. Order early enough to leave time for processing and shipping, and read the return policy.

STRIP DOWN THE BOOK. If you have a choice, skip the bundled study materials, such as CD-ROMs, unless you know your professors will use them. Often they won't. Look for textbooks that are available in cheaper

softcover and black-and-white versions.

BUY OVERSEAS. International editions are usually the same books but cheaper—and wildly cheaper if used. For example, the popular "Calculus: Early Transcendentals" sells new for about \$136. A used international edition can be had for \$7.69, including shipping, according to a recent listing on Half.com. Three other copies were selling for less than \$25 each, according to recent listings on BestBookBuys.com.

"There's definitely serious savings there," Loyola said, who added that content does not typically vary significantly between domestic and foreign editions of textbooks. "Publishers thought they could keep these markets separate, but the cat is

out of the bag now."

GET THE BOOK FREE. English majors especially can benefit from downloading for free classic novels that are out of copyright protection. "Oliver Twist" by Charles Dickens is just waiting to be downloaded via such Web sites as Project Gutenberg, www.gutenberg.org.

Free study guides are available at SparkNotes, www.sparknotes.com.

Another free way to get books is to swap them with other students on campus or at www.campusbookswap.com.

SAVE RECEIPTS. If it turns out your instructor doesn't really use the text or you end up quickly dropping the class, return the book for a refund.

SELL EARLY. If you can finish studying for finals before every-

one else, you'll have a better chance of selling back the book if the bookstore is accepting a limited number of book buy-backs. But you may receive more money by selling it yourself in person or online.

The point is that some summertime clicking around the Web could easily save you half off your \$1,000 worth of books this fall—which, come school-time, buys a lot of pizza.

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For additional discussion on spending wisely, see the Spending Smart blog at http://blogs.mcall.com/spending_smart/.

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