

Textbooks 101: Textbook Buying Options On the Internet

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While a recent college student, there weren't many things that irked me more than buying textbooks. Long bookstore lines and high prices found at the campus bookstore drove me to the Internet in search of discounts – and there were plenty to be found.

All Internet textbook sources, be they for new or used textbooks, fall into three main categories: traditional vendors affiliated directly with publishers or wholesalers, consumer to consumer marketplaces, and auction services. When searching for textbook bargains, students need to be able to identify and understand these main types of textbook sources, and be able to make an educated decision as to which source properly fulfills their particular set of needs. There is no one source that is good for all situations, and it behooves the consumer to properly choose among the several types of textbook sources, dependent upon the buyer's current needs.

Online Bookstores - Amazon.com, Barnes & Noble, etc.

The most abundant, as well as the most widely used textbook sources on the Internet today, are large vendors that attempt to bring the traditional brick-and-mortar bookstore to your home via your personal, Internet enabled computer. These vendors include big familiar names such as Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and Powell's. These stores are able to provide discounted textbooks by cutting out the middleman wholesaler and dealing directly with publishers, then passing the savings on to consumers. Another way they are able to cut costs is through their ability to sell large quantities of books – relying on volume sales to enhance profits.

Most books for sale on these services sell for about 2%-15% less than what you would find at your local campus bookstore. These vendors are generally quite reliable and are very convenient, seeing as how you can order the books you need without ever having to leave your home, while being reasonably assured that your books will arrive on time and in good condition, although the savings are not altogether that dramatic or life-changing.

Online Marketplaces - Half.com, Amazon Marketplace, campus exchanges, etc.

Consumer to consumer marketplaces are the second major division in the textbook industry, and have spread widely on the Internet. The majority of these marketplaces call themselves "exchanges," when in fact they are merely a type of classified ad site, with payment and sometimes shipping features built in. Some major players in this classification are companies like Half.com, TextbookX.com, and Amazon Marketplace. Additionally, there are many smaller, campus and regionally based services, all with varying levels of service and support.

All these services allow users to buy and sell books with each other, and normally result in books being sold for about half the cover price (hence, for example, the name Half.com). Unfortunately, because these services are open to all sellers, be they a single student selling one math book, or a large local bookstore that is listing its entire store inventory, things become slightly unfair. Potential buyers tend to shy away from individual sellers, not merely because of price, but also because of fears of product condition and delivery reliability. Therefore, when a single student lists a book for sale, he or she is forced to lower the price far below what the book is actually worth in order to be reasonably competitive with the larger sellers, and to have a better chance of actually finding a buyer for the book.

Because of this, consumer to consumer marketplaces are a really great place to buy books at a considerable discount, so long as one is willing to buy from an individual seller, but are not a very good place to sell if you are only selling for your own benefit and do not own a store. Also, if you are selling, these services charge a sales commission based on the final sales price of your book, which further lowers one's net price.

Online Auctions - Ebay.com, etc.

Auction services make up the last common division in your online textbook buying options, and when one says the word "auction," one can't help but immediately think of the current industry dominatrix, Ebay.com. There are several lesser known sites out there, but I'm sure you get the idea.

These services are fun to use on a recreational level, and are a great way to locate hard to find books. As far as textbooks go, these sites can sometimes be very fruitful, allowing you to get a book for a ridiculously cheap price as long as the specific book you are bidding on is in relatively low demand. If the book you are looking for is indeed in some type of normal to high demand level - which is normally the case as regards the books required for current classes - you can expect to pay about the same as when buying on sites like Amazon.com, or if you're lucky, maybe around Half.com's price range.

When using auction sites, one can expect to wait several days for an auction to end before a sale is confirmed, so make sure to allot the appropriate amount of time before you really need your book. These sites are fun, usually take more time than buying books outright, and will usually get you a competitive price - sometimes a remarkable one. When selling on Ebay.com, remember to factor in their fee to list items for sale, in addition to the commission charged based on the final sales price.

SwapSimple.com - Eliminating Buying and Selling

Lastly, a final option is SwapSimple.com, which was created as a distinct alternative to all of the above mentioned textbook buying options. SwapSimple.com distinguishes itself from all others by enabling its users to get the books they need without having to buy or sell anything.

Instead of posting books for sale and having to wait for auctions, or otherwise wait to find buyers, SwapSimple.com awards what it calls Trade Credits immediately when books that users are finished with are listed. The Trade Credits issued will be equal to the current market value of the posted book, and those Credits can immediately be used to get any of the other books listed on SwapSimple.com by other SwapSimple.com users from all across the country.

This is a uniquely good solution, because it not only allows one to get needed books immediately, it enables the user to get those books virtually without having to spend any more money. All one pays to use SwapSimple.com is the actual cost of shipping, plus a set fee of \$2.00 per book, which is paid at the time a book is ordered. The only drawback to SwapSimple.com is that its book selection is limited to what its users post for exchange; but as SwapSimple.com's user base continues to grow, as it has over the past months, users can expect to find the majority of books they are looking for.

As you can see, there are many choices when it comes to purchasing textbooks on the Internet. We hope this guide was helpful, and if you have any comments or suggested additions, please email us at contact@swapsimple.com.

About the author:

Elliot E. Hirsch is the President and Co-Founder of SwapSimple, Inc., and SwapSimple.com

(<http://www.swapsimple.com>). In 2003, as a recent college graduate troubled by the seemingly endless rise in the cost of textbooks, Elliot, along with fellow recent college graduate David J. Goldblatt and computer engineer Eric R. Haszlakiewicz, founded the company as a powerful exchange solution to give students a modern, effective, and low cost alternative to purchasing costly used textbooks. Mr. Hirsch feels that SwapSimple consistently upholds its goal of positively impacting the lives of students and families across the United States, by giving all students the ability to afford the textbooks which are so vital to their education. SwapSimple is headquartered in the founders' hometown, the tropical paradise of Chicago, Illinois.