



# TAA debunks the top 7 myths regarding textbook costs

**Students' purchase of used textbooks, and more recently, the theft of new textbooks via downloads** at file sharing websites, is based on misinformation about how textbook publishing works, how professors choose textbooks, the business practices of book resellers, and the motivations of authors who write textbooks, said Richard Hull, executive director of the Text and Academic Authors Association (TAA).

TAA recently interviewed publishers, professors and authors as a way to set straight the top myths regarding textbook costs:

**Myth #1:** Publishers churn out revised textbooks every year with little or no change from the previous edition so that students can't buy used books.

Bruce Hildebrand, executive director for higher education at the Association of American Publishers, said the charge that publishers are putting out new editions more frequently is bogus. "For the most popular and competitive textbooks the new edition cycle remains at three to four years," he said. A report by the Nebraska Book Company (See illustration at right.) found that in 2005, only 0.4 percent of books were being revised after one year, 1.0 percent after two years, and 3.1 percent after three years, Hildebrand pointed out.

"It is just not financially feasible to issue new editions every year or two; costs are too high and the volume of sales is too low," he said. "The principal costs for a textbook are what are called 'the intellectual inputs': authors, editors and designers. Textbooks are definitely labor intensive. Beyond those costs, there is printing, marketing, shipping, office overhead and of late, creating digital technologies."

As an example, Hildebrand noted that more than 10 man-years of labor went into publishing the 7th edition of *Biology* by Neil Campbell and Jane Reece. "This doesn't include the work of

producing the supplemental materials," he said. (See illustration "What goes into making a textbook?" on page two.)

Mary E. Edwards, a professor in the department of economics at St. Cloud State University, and author of *Regional and Urban Economics and Economic Development: Theory and Methods*, said her publisher, Auerbach Publications, doesn't want a revision until after four years or 60 percent of the textbook needs revising.

Anthony Buffa, coauthor of *College Physics*, published by Prentice Hall, said his books come out in a new edition about every four years, and are never done just for the sake of producing a new edition: "Each revision takes over a year out of our lives [he and his coauthors], working an average of several hours a day or more. In introductory physics there are no new fundamentals, but each edition is a challenge. We have user comments, of course, and we try to include modern up-to-date applications and develop new features for each edition that help the students learn from the book better and more efficiently. Some editions have more changes than others, but it is more of an evolution."

Marilyn "Winkie" Fordney, author of *Insurance Handbook for the Medical Office*, said she produces a revision every two years because the textbook has constant federal and state changes and a great deal of the technical material would be out of date if it was not on a quick revision cycle. "In the insurance billing field, procedure and diagnostic codes are enhanced each year and some are deleted," she said. "This affects both the textbook and workbook assignments as well as the instructor's manual."

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## New Editions Chart

Year	1992		2005	
1 Year	428	0.3%	655	0.4%
2 Years	740	0.4%	1700	1.0%
3 Years	2487	1.5%	5501	3.1%
4 Years	3571	2.1%	5255	2.9%
5+ Years	8637	5.1%	11455	6.4%
<b>Total Revised Titles</b>	<b>15863</b>	<b>9.3%</b>	<b>24566</b>	<b>13.7%</b>
<b>Total Universe</b>	<b>170338</b>		<b>178827</b>	

SOURCE: Nebraska Book Company proprietary trend data.

Who is  
TAA?

**The Text and Academic Authors Association (TAA)** is the only nonprofit membership association dedicated solely to assisting textbook and academic authors. TAA's overall mission is to enhance the quality of textbooks and other academic materials by providing its members with educational and networking opportunities.

# What goes into making a textbook?

For the new edition:

## AUTHORS

- Authors and contributors spent **7,425 hours** researching and writing this textbook.
- Authors spent **825 hours** reviewing final pages.

## PUBLISHER

- **245 biologists** read and reviewed **55 chapters** to make sure that the manuscript was accurate and current.
- Developmental editors spent **8,830 hours** reading multiple drafts of revised chapters, querying authors, synthesizing faculty feedback and crafting the layout of each page, every one of which was recreated.
- Developmental artists spent **2,630 hours** evaluating every figure in the text and creating sketches for new and improved figures.
- Artists spent **2,200 hours** rendering and revising art.
- A copyeditor spent **825 hours** editing final manuscript to correct errors in grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
- During production stages: editors and developmental artists spent **1,430 hours** checking and rechecking pages.
- Production work on **55 chapters** required **60 hours per chapter**, or **3,300 hours** to typeset, create page layout, check and proofread pages, revise pages, and create final files for the printer.
- The first printing of the 7th edition is **75,500 copies** and required **675,000** pounds of paper, **6,950** pounds of ink, and two presses that will run for a total of **200** hours. After publication there will likely be at least **6** subsequent printings.



BIOLOGY  
By Neil Campbell  
and Jane Reece

that much of the criticism he sees of textbooks in terms of whether a revision is a “substantive” revision is based on student perceptions. “They flip through the book and because it ‘doesn’t look much different’ or ‘it’s about the same size’ they assume that there has not been a substantive revision,” he said. “I think such a test fails on at least two levels. First, I don’t think a student who has not yet even taken the course is an appropriate judge for making this determination. Second, such a method of investigation (‘flipping through’) is not likely to reveal the data needed to make such a determination.

Janet Belsky, author of **Experiencing the Lifespan**, said it will take her about a year of full-time work to revise her book.

“My anatomy and physiology textbooks are chock full of very technical scientific concepts that are in a constant state of progress,” said Patton. “During a revision, I typically spend many hours researching new developments. In fact, even when I’m not actively revising, I spend a lot of time scanning and evaluating the huge

Janet Belsky, author of *Experiencing the Lifespan*, said it will take her about a year of full-time work to revise her book. “Over the past two years there has been a TREMENDOUS amount of new research in lifespan development that I can’t wait to share with my students,” she said. “Yes, my book is on a three-year cycle, but I now realize that to give the students the very best, it is imperative to update the material at least every three years.

I estimate that I’ll be changing at least 30 to 40 percent of my book—often dramatically. These certainly aren’t cosmetic changes.”

Kevin Patton, a professor of life science at St. Charles Community College and coauthor of *Anatomy & Physiology*, said

literature of human biology. When I do begin a revision, I may then spend several hours trying to find just the right wording to reflect a new development in an established concept. The result may be ONE CHANGED SENTENCE, but it is a sentence that substantively changes the content of the affected chapter or section. It may not LOOK like a big difference, but it is.”

Patton said he would hate for his own students to be learning concepts (or certain aspects of concepts) that have recently been found to be wrong: “Just a handful of those could land them into serious trouble later on.”

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## **Myth #2:** Professors choose textbooks with little or no thought for how much they cost or how useful they will be to students.

Malcolm Kahn, professor emeritus of psychology at the University of Miami, said he definitely took the cost of textbooks into consideration when choosing texts for students in the abnormal psychology classes he taught before retiring in June 2008. "I told the students that 50 percent of the material on the exams would come directly from the textbook, and I tried to stick to that policy, though there was much overlap between the lectures and the reading material," he said. "I believe that students would have failed my class without reading the text. I greatly valued the test banks that accompanied the text along with video tapes and DVDs of case histories and similar interesting supplementary material."

Rebecca Plante, associate professor of sociology at Ithaca College and author of *Sexualities in Context: A Social Perspective*, said her decision of what textbook to use for her courses takes into account five factors: 1) how the author(s) or editor(s) address some of her key issues (gender, inequalities, etc.); 2) length of the textbook and readings; 3) style of writing – does it bore me?; 4) price of the textbook singly and total for the course; and 5) portability, since she actually opens and reads from the text or directs students' attention to the textbook in many classes.

"I don't assign textbooks for my courses out of obligation, and my syllabi are structured around the readings," she said. "The readings give the students a road map—today we're talking about, say, prostitution—and it gives me a starting point from which to develop class activities, lectures, etc. I supplement with updated research and other materials that only I read. Students learn that they need to bring the books to class, as we will turn to passages, analyze quotes, etc. All assignments use the readings as well."

Plante says she agrees that some professors don't have any idea of what textbooks cost, but that others like her do: "When I visit the bookstore every August and January to check that my orders have arrived, I also note the costs for used and new books, and tell the students those costs on day one," she said. "When I make orders, I ask the book rep how much things will cost if new, because I strive to book all my courses for \$100 or less (and I normally have more than one book)."

Scott Harr said that as chair of the criminal justice department at Concordia University Saint Paul, he lets his faculty select the books they will use for their courses. But before he provides the final approval, the materials must meet two basic requirements: that the majority of the book will be used, and that more than one book can be used only if absolutely beneficial to the course.

"Reading in and of itself does not a course make; there are discussions, writing and other activities I expect in addition to

reading," he said. "Of course, reading requirements vary by course and topic (i.e., a literature class may necessitate more books). My faculty and I seek relevant books from the various publishers, as well as ask colleagues for suggestions (even from other schools), and then compare and contrast them. I do ask my faculty to consider cost. I also encourage my faculty to consider supplemental online readings that may be so current they haven't yet appeared in hardcopy format, making additional texts unnecessary. I place great value on student assessments about each course, including the book(s) used. I'm much happier with one book being assigned that is so meaningful that students might even want to keep it in their own personal library."

Julie Lobur, an adjunct lecturer at Pennsylvania State University, and coauthor of *The Essentials of Computer Organization and Architecture*, said that as an adjunct she is allowed to choose the textbooks for most of the classes she teaches. Her criteria in choosing a textbook are that it must support the pedagogical goals of the class, and it must do so with a clear, and readable style; be accurate and current; and serve the student even after he or she graduates.

"While cost is not on the list, I would avoid any text that I feel is excessively expensive, but sacrificing quality (e.g., currency, accuracy) for the sake of cost does our students a disservice," she said. "Incidentally, while my coauthor and I were writing our computer architecture text, our students were able to download and print the text for free. It seemed that there was no end to the students' complaints regarding the effort involved in doing this."

**"... I would avoid any text that I feel is excessively expensive, but sacrificing quality (e.g., currency, accuracy) for the sake of cost does our students a disservice."**

Patton believes that many of the students who complain that their professors don't actually "use the book" in the course don't really know what "using the book" means: "To some students coming right out of high school, 'using the book' means the teacher reads (or has students read) passages from the book during a class session, or that at least the teacher assigns 'homework assignments' from the book. Many college courses do not use the book in that way. Instead, the student is expected to read the textbook on their own to supplement and complement the other course activities. But students who are not adept at higher education, or are inexperienced in this method of learning, could easily interpret the situation as 'not using' or 'not needing' the textbook."

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**Myth #3:** Textbook authors are motivated by the royalties they receive from textbooks and many who are instructors teach from their own textbooks as a way to make money from this “captive” market.

“Being a textbook author is not easy, yet the hard work that we do seems to be overlooked when textbook costs are being debated,” said Carolyn M. Seefer, professor of business administration at Diablo Valley College, and coauthor of several business-related textbooks, including *Essentials of College English*. “What always seems to be omitted from the discussions of textbook costs is the fact that there is a real person behind each textbook, a person who is putting in countless hours, researching, planning, writing, proofreading, editing, revising, and updating the textbook and supplemental materials, not to mention replying to questions and comments from students and faculty who are using the textbook.”

Belsky, whose *Experiencing the Lifespan* textbook garnered a five-star reviewer rating on Amazon.com for its depth, insight and clarity, said: “You can’t make money from writing textbooks. Hour by hour, writing a text pays the author less than minimum wage, even for a potentially blockbuster, huge-market book.” Writing a textbook is a labor of love, she said, not one undertaken for money, and it’s a process that takes years.

Although many don’t see the hours upon hours that turn into years upon years that textbook authors, publishers and review committees composed of subject experts devote to making academic texts concise and valuable to would-be learners in a given field, the motivation to undertake writing a textbook is usually rooted in a desire to make a difference, said Belsky.

“I have been writing books in developmental psychology for 30 years,” she said. “I do it because I have a desire to make a difference. My life’s passion is to make students think more deeply, to look at the world in a new way, to influence minds and captivate hearts. But also, I’m a knowledge pack rat; I love to learn all I can about a field — and I’m trying to make a real contribution to my field.”

For the most part, said Belsky, textbook authors and publishers — along with a cast of editors, reference checkers, artists, reviewers and designers, among many other project contributors — join forces, oftentimes for years on the same book project, to create what they hope will “look like a lovely work of art” while providing faculty and students with accompanying study guides, websites and other related materials to complement the book and its contents.

Plante said that she knows that students have NO idea what goes into the production of even the most basic texts, such as the ones she has written, which have no pictures, color, hard covers, etc. “They think academic texts should cost what a trade book costs,” she said. “When I explain how a text gets produced and how little many authors earn on royalties (for example, I earn \$2.50 for a new book; my text is 2 1/2 years old, so very few new copies are sold anymore), they understand a bit more.”

Another issue, she said, is the general decaying of understanding of intellectual property: “My textbook took me hundreds of hours over many months, and I have earned about \$1,500 from it because of the small market, small courses and small publisher. The book was a labor of love, not of profit. Given that I earn almost nothing from it, I have a vested interest in it not being available for free, not being scanned, and not potentially being plagiarized.”

Patton, who uses his own textbooks in his courses, said: “My students often appreciate the fact that reading their textbook ‘sounds like I’m talking to them’ because I guess my voice carries through in both media.” And because he knows the book more thoroughly than if it was someone else’s book, he said, he can more effectively use it as a teaching tool.

Steven Barkan, a professor of sociology at the University of Maine, and author of several textbooks including *Criminology: A Sociological Understanding*, said he donates his total royalties from the textbook copies bought by his students to his department’s gift account, which is used for student needs (travel, awards, etc.).

“Hour by hour, writing a text pays the author less than minimum wage, even for a potentially blockbuster, huge-market book. Writing a textbook is a labor of love ... a process that takes years.”

Jay Devore, a professor emeritus of statistics at Cal Poly State University who has written several textbooks in his discipline, said he has frequently taught classes where one of his textbooks was a required book. “Almost always the adoption decision has been at the departmental level, and I absented myself from the deliberations,” he said. “I don’t feel it necessary to reimburse individual students for purchases, but I have made appropriate donations to my department and university. Even when the decision is not departmental, it seems kosher to me for someone to use his/her own book provided it has been published by a reputable company and therefore peer reviewed prior to publication.”

**Myth #4:** Booksellers are helping students by selling used textbooks and complimentary copies of textbooks.

“The real culprits forcing up the cost of textbooks are the people sitting at the college buyback tables, ripping off the students and making more profit — for doing almost nothing — than either my publisher or I will ever see for our years of work,” said Belsky.

“Imagine working for eight years to produce a compelling text — one that entices students to learn — then, on your book’s

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publication date, up pops a raft of the complimentary review copies sent to faculty by the publisher,” she said. “They are being sold at online sites as ‘new’. A few months later, the market floods with many hundreds more used copies, from which you and your publisher also won’t recoup a cent.”

New copies of her textbook sell at retail for \$80.95. From this Belsky earns only a few dollars on each sale. When the book is sold as a used book, she earns nothing. “When students sell their new book back at the end of the semester or quarter, from then on the author and publisher get nothing, nada, zip,” she said. “Basically, with a book like mine costing \$80 new, the booksellers are going to pocket \$20 on the first sale, then \$40, \$50, or even \$60 on each used book sale, depending on how often it is sold back and bought again.”

**Myth #5:** Textbook pirates are the heroes fighting greedy publishers and authors who sell new textbooks at unreasonable prices.

Textbook piracy will most likely only result in another rise in textbook costs, said Hull. “I don’t think students realize that using pirated textbooks will not solve the problem of high textbook costs any more than purchasing used books has,” he said. “In both cases, publishers and authors receive no income from the use or

sale of these books, causing publishers to have to increase the prices of new textbooks to recoup those losses.”

Hildebrand said that it is his impression that some of those engaged in print piracy are purely out for profit: “While many online pirates consider their efforts to be a cause to fight for free information and to ‘stick it’ to the publishers, some sell ads on their sites, making money off other people’s work and investments and hurting the majority of students by pushing up prices.”

**Myth #6:** International editions are a low-cost good option for students.

Another issue contributing to textbook costs is international versions of textbooks being sold back into the U.S. Publishers sell international versions to countries for the specific purpose of providing low-cost access, said Anthony Buffa, emeritus professor of physics at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo. “Thus royalties and profits are considerably lower, although the volume is supposed to make up for it,” he said. “Lately I have seen an international version of my book being used illegally by students in the U.S. This has amounted, for our text, to thousands of U.S. copies being returned from bookstores, as the students opt to buy the international versions from the Internet.”

**Myth #7:** Free textbooks, materials shared on the Internet for free, and open textbooks are the solution to the high cost of print textbooks. Publishers don’t offer e-books.

“With regard to the availability of ‘open textbooks’ for students on the Internet,” said Mary Ellen Guffey, emeritus professor of business at Los Angeles Pierce College, and coauthor, with Seefer, of *Essentials of College English*, “I wonder how many of the instructors who might adopt these books are willing to prepare their own test banks, PowerPoint slides, solutions, websites, videos, audio lectures, and endless supplementary materials that authors and publishers provide at little or no cost to instructors or students. The instructor’s manuals for my textbooks are now larger than the books themselves.”

Said Susan Fawcett, author of *Evergreen: A Guide to Writing and Grassroots: The Writer’s Workbook*: “I am amazed by the idea that textbook authors should not be paid for our hard work. Who would dare ask members of any other profession to pour heart

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and soul into a project for years and then give away the fruits of their labor? The idealistic creators of the Internet laudably conceived of a free information highway, but many now acknowledge that this notion has been used to rationalize the pilfering of intellectual property from the inventors, the musicians, and the writers. Let's find a solution that is fair to students, authors, and yes, even publishers."

Belsky said that the solution to the high cost of textbooks isn't to publish her "eight year labor of love on the Internet for free. Making textbooks totally pro-bono ensures that there won't be any real textbook authors left."

"Let's be real, there is no free lunch," said Hull. "The people who are advocating for 'free books' are going to large donors and to state legislatures asking for millions of dollars to pay authors to develop and then update textbooks. Does that make them free or does it mean that they are simply asking someone else to pay the bill?"

For Belsky, the suggestion from some that texts be "farmed out to writing committees to get rid of those so-called greedy publishers and authors" is unfathomable, as is the idea that a professor would instruct his or her students to merely "look this stuff up on the Internet, don't bother buying the book."

Such suggestions make sense, Belsky reasons, "only if we want to lose the essence of what education is all about — enticing students to love to learn!"

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Yet most major publishers already offer e-books as a low-cost alternative to purchasing a print version. More than one third of the most popular college textbook titles (those expected to sell at least 200 copies nationwide this Fall) are now available in eTextbook versions from CourseSmart ([www.coursesmart.com](http://www.coursesmart.com)),

an e-book company founded by five higher education textbook publishers: Pearson, Cengage Learning, McGraw-Hill Education, John Wiley & Sons Inc., and the Bedford, Freeman, Worth Publishing Group.

CourseSmart's e-textbooks are being sold for half the cost of the equivalent printed text.



The Text and Academic Authors Association (TAA) is the only nonprofit membership association dedicated solely to assisting textbook and academic authors. TAA's overall mission is to enhance the quality of textbooks and other academic materials, such as journal articles, monographs and scholarly books, in all fields and disciplines, by providing its textbook and academic author members with educational and networking opportunities.

TAA is governed by a TAA Council made up of textbook and academic authors.

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