

The DIY Solution to the Textbook Dilemma

By Ted Preston, Rio Hondo College

Like many instructors, I have struggled to balance a variety of interests when it comes to choosing textbooks for my classes. Over the span of my career thus far, I've developed numerous complaints about the textbooks that were available for my use:

- They're too expensive. As a community college professor, I have to contend with many students facing financial challenges, and simply will not purchase a textbook if it costs \$100-\$200—a not unusual range, even for philosophy texts.
- They're too difficult. Many of my students require remediation in reading comprehension. The often lofty and jargon-laden prose of many textbooks might as well have been Latin for some. When the prose is that intimidating, many just give up.
- They're filled with material I don't use. Standard philosophy anthologies contain a couple dozen chapters, of which I might use ten at most. The unused chapters represent a wasted expense.

Used books partially address the expense problem, but not other concerns. Even used copies of standard anthologies could run upwards of \$100, not to mention the chaos of having multiple editions of the text in use in my class with different pagination and content.

I experimented with custom publishing from some of the major companies. While that addressed the “unused material” concern, it didn't save enough money or ease the difficulty of the prose.

Several years ago, I hit upon a solution that seemed too good to be true: I would write my own textbooks. I partnered with Gnutext (www.gnutext.com) and began writing an Introduction to Philosophy textbook with the goal of producing a high quality, low cost, accessible text. Seven years later, I am working on the fifth edition of that [Intro book](#), and have written multiple editions of texts for [Introduction to Ethics](#), [Philosophy of Religion](#), [Ancient Philosophy](#), and have recently published on [Political Philosophy](#). The process has been enjoyable, wonderful, creative outlet, and I have managed to address each of my concerns:

- The books are cheap. After the bookstore markup, new copies are roughly \$25-\$30; used or rental copies cost even less. As a result, nearly 100% of my students purchase the book and bring it with them to class. I am able to control costs by relying solely on public domain primary sources, and, frankly, not profiting much from the sales.
- The books are accessible. I write with community college students in mind, actively seeking to convey understanding rather than confusion or intimidation.
- The books are efficient. I write only content that I intend to use, and that I think other instructors would be likely to use.

While it might not be a practical option for every instructor to write his or her own text, options are available that can address our concerns and serve our students. Whether it be open source materials, custom publishing, or pursuing low-cost alternatives, we have choices, and our students depend on us to make good ones on their behalf.

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