

What Are Textbooks For?

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Most college courses require at least one textbook; some classes employ no texts, but these are in a distinct minority. With rising college text costs, students raise concerns about texts they are asked to buy. This essay discusses the various uses textbooks serve and offers insight into selection criteria.

Textbooks commonly serve as a suggested way of teaching classes; most text authors are or were college teachers and their writing suggests a way of choosing from an enormous array of choices in any field as well as a preferred sequence of that chosen material. Such texts commonly offer teachers and students citations to other related material to be used as course supplementary data or as supporting data for the claims the text author makes.

Texts, especially at the introductory level, serve as a guide to discipline nomenclature, exposure to basic field dependent theories, and exposure to applications of theories expressed in the text. In some classes, texts are written so that one text is used as a nomenclature and theory introduction and another text provides case studies [applications]. Instructors need to exercise great care when such dual texts do not share the same author or publisher as basic assumptions in these resources may not coincide and/or basic terminology may be divergent causing potential reader anxiety.

Textbooks also serve as a common body of research in a field that all students share. In some cases, this collection of know-

ledge is adequate for the class; in other cases, what is in the text serves as a starting point, a platform from which instructor and student leap further into reserve readings and/or individual research readings to grasp more sophisticated/detailed/technical information.

Some textbooks serve to bridge multi-disciplines. An example in my field of communication is one textbook in Family Communication in which there are four authors: one is a sociologist, another is a psychologist, a third is a therapist, and the fourth focuses on communication variables. In such interdisciplinary cases, authors need to be careful to coordinate multi-field citations so as to not cause reader confusion or anxiety.

Some texts become outdated quickly; others endure. Outdatedness occurs, in part, due to a field in which innovations and discoveries are rapidly emerging; other texts become outdated due to emerging new and revised theories explaining occurrences. Some texts never go out of date; these are seminal works whose value to scholars remain constant.

Text selection demands that many questions be asked: (1) just how current/cutting edge does a text need to be to serve the readers and to fulfill course requirements? (2) How much detail and volume of information does a text need to provide? (3) how advanced and sophisticated a reading level will the intended readers possess? and (4) Are there other educational resources available to supplement intended texts?

Students need to let instructors know if they sense that the

texts used in their classes seem insufficient in sophistication, breadth, or depth; appear overly complex; seem unduly voluminous; appear too simplistic; or seem tangential to the major course thrust. Instructors need to articulate to students what the text selection criteria were; how the text(s) fit the purposes of the instructor and the course.

Textbooks are the link between students, instructors, and scholars in the field of inquiry. They are one of the many ways to include students in the fabric of scholarship.