

Ten Questions To Ask When Buying Digital Textbooks

When I first started buying digital textbooks (eTextbooks) during my first year of college, I assumed that all textbook publishers and platforms offered similar accessibility features and that I would be able to access any book as long as it was in a digital format. As a student with low vision, I quickly learned that a digital format is not necessarily an accessible format, and realized that I would need to do more research when buying eTextbooks for my classes instead of just choosing whichever platform had the lowest price. Here are ten questions to ask when buying digital textbooks for students with print disabilities and/or visual impairments, from a college student with low vision.

Should I rent this textbook, or can I purchase it?

Similar to physical copies of textbooks, students can choose to rent eTextbooks or buy eTextbooks from a publisher/platform, with the rental book disappearing after a set period of time. Many textbooks offer a minimum rental period of 90 days (which is shorter than a 16-week semester) or up to one year, and students can access their rented eTextbook using the same applications and reading tools as a purchased eTextbook.

I typically buy textbooks that I am likely to use for multiple classes or that I will continue to reference after the semester is over, such as the textbooks for my assistive technology classes or the programming textbook I used for three different classes. I will also buy textbooks if there isn't a significant cost savings compared to renting, which was the case for some of the books I used in general education classes. If I do rent a textbook for a class, I try to do a six-month rental so that I have "buffer" time at the beginning and end of the semester and don't have to worry about the textbook disappearing before finals.

In some cases, an eTextbook may only be available as a rental for the semester or as part of a subscription service, which was what happened with my online math classes and another business class. Again, it's important to make sure that the textbook does not disappear before the end of the semester.

Is the textbook in a fixed layout, or reflowable layout?

Digital textbooks often come in one of two formats/layouts, fixed or reflowable. This information is typically included on the eTextbook product listing or in the product description, and some publishers/platforms may offer content in both fixed and reflowable layouts on different websites.

Fixed layout for eBooks

Fixed formats (fixed layouts) are designed to mimic the physical textbook pages as much as possible, with preset font styles, line spacing, text alignment, and font sizes determined based on the size of the user's screen. The appearance of the page cannot be changed, and users will have to use pinch-to-zoom or screen magnification and horizontal scrolling to enlarge text. Some fixed format textbooks have support for text-to-speech, though this is not guaranteed. A PDF is an example of a file with a fixed layout/fixed format.

Reflowable layout for eBooks

Reflowable layout allow for display customizations that can be configured by the user, such as adjustable font sizes, options to choose different font styles or text alignments, adjustable line spacing, and additional features such as hyperlinks and options to view images in a new tab. Many reflowable format textbooks have support for text-to-speech, though this is not guaranteed— however, it is more common for reflowable layouts to support text-to-speech. An EPUB or HTML page is an example of a file with a reflowable layout/reflowable format.

Which is better— fixed layout or reflowable layout?

As a student with low vision that accesses large print, I prefer reflowable layouts because I can adjust the font size more easily or increase the line spacing. It is also easier for me to read reflowable layouts on both my computer and tablet— I find fixed formats more challenging to read on my computer due to the horizontal scrolling involved. That said, some students prefer fixed layouts because they closely mimic the physical textbook, and fixed layouts tend to look better for image-heavy content.

How can I access this textbook— is it available offline?

When purchasing an eTextbook from a publisher or platform, students are generally restricted to reading the textbook using specific reading tools such as apps or web readers. For example, if I purchase a textbook for Kindle, I can't read it in my Nook app or add it to my Apple Books library. Web browser applications can be useful for reading eTextbooks because they can be used on multiple devices, though mobile applications often offer options for offline reading.

Another option for offline reading is to print/save part of the textbook or download individual chapters from the web reader application, though some publishers/platforms have a restriction on how many chapters or pages can be saved for offline viewing. Additionally, some publishers/platforms offer options for downloading content as a PDF or EPUB that will be available for a set number of days. When my professor recommended that students print out a copy of textbook pages to annotate, I exported the PDF of the textbook pages to Notability to write on top of during class.

Where can I buy textbooks for class?

Unlike physical textbooks that can be purchased secondhand or from multiple stores besides the bookstore, eTextbooks are generally only available on a few different platforms. By the time I finished my third

semester of undergrad, I had used seven different platforms for accessing textbooks because I couldn't purchase everything from the same place.

While it is helpful to buy textbooks on the same platform so that students can have their reading preferences configured automatically, it's pretty rare for students to only use one platform or access textbooks from a single publisher during the semester. However, there are some platforms/publishers that use the same eReading technology, which can help students with maintaining a more consistent reading experience. One example is VitalSource, whose reading tools are used on the VitalSource Bookshelf, Chegg, Macmillan, some Elsevier books, and some online college bookstores.

For students with print disabilities, I highly recommend checking out Bookshare, an online accessible library for individuals with print disabilities that provides books in accessible formats like EPUB, Word, DAISY, audio, and refreshable braille. Bookshare is free for K-12 and college/university students in the United States, and is a helpful place to start when searching for accessible textbooks in college since students can download a set number of books each month for free. However, Bookshare may not offer all editions of a textbook, and some publishers do not offer their latest books on the Bookshare platform (such as Pearson).

Can I access the textbook during class or open-book quizzes/exams?

For one of my math classes, I discovered that I couldn't open the eTextbook while also taking a quiz, even though my professor had indicated it was an open-book quiz— the proctoring software prevented me from opening the textbook. In another instance, I couldn't zoom in to enlarge the fixed layout of the textbook on my iPad in a size I could read during a programming class. While I could access both textbooks in my dorm while studying or when I wasn't completing another assignment, I couldn't use the textbook in either of these situations and received lower grades as a result.

When it comes to taking open-book quizzes or tests with an eTextbook, I usually read the book from my iPad with the web reader application and Guided Access enabled, or I would get an alternative/accessible copy of the textbook from my university that I could open in a separate application (more on that later). For the fixed layout book, I used Bookshare to download a copy of the book as a Word document or EPUB so I could enlarge the text more easily, and made a note to check for reflowable textbooks in the future.

Does the publisher or platform have an accessibility page?

For students with visual impairments or other print disabilities, I strongly recommend checking the accessibility information page for a publisher or platform before purchasing or downloading an eTextbook. These pages can provide more information about accessing content with assistive technology (specifically screen readers) and requesting alternative formats, which is facilitated through Disability Services or a similar office at the college/university. On the accessibility information page, there is also usually information about available accessibility settings, tips for configuring books for assistive technology, and contact information for reaching the accessibility team for a publisher/platform.

One example of how I used the contact page as a student with light sensitivity to bright and flashing lights (also known as photophobia/photosensitivity) was to confirm if a textbook had any embedded videos that contained strobe, flickering, or flashing lights. The publisher responded by sharing page numbers and descriptions of videos that contained flashing lights, along with information about where to find video transcripts in the book.

Is this textbook enabled with text-to-speech?

When I was studying information technology, I would frequently use the text-to-speech feature available in Kindle books to read passages from my textbooks using Amazon Alexa on an Echo Dot, which provided a screen-free way to read books and the option for voice controls. I also use text-to-speech to read books with Read Aloud functionalities so I can listen to text as I read it, or to read content with a screen reader when I cannot otherwise read print. This is only available for textbooks that specifically support text-to-speech or have text-to-speech enabled— this information can be found on the product listing or product description. If a book does not have text-to-speech enabled, it is reasonable to assume that it does not support screen reader access.

Can I access this textbook through my college/university library?

Many professors use textbooks that are available online through college/university libraries, especially when assigning short readings from a book that they won't otherwise use in the class. While the accessibility features for reading tools will vary across platforms, this is another helpful strategy for finding textbooks in digital formats. If a book is listed on multiple platforms, I recommend checking each one to compare accessibility features or options for large print and text-to-speech/screen readers.

In some cases, I could only access a copy of a textbook through the university library in a fixed layout/fixed format, but I found it in a reflowable format either in a different database or on another platform. Again, for students with print disabilities, I recommend checking Bookshare to determine if the book is available there first.

Will I need to request an alternative/accessible copy?

For students that cannot locate an accessible copy of a textbook for their classes or when an eTextbook does not fit their accessibility needs, many colleges and universities have an access specialist, assistive technology specialist, or accessible media specialist that can provide copies of accessible textbooks to approved students. This is typically offered by the Disability Services office or a similar department— here at George Mason University, I get my accessible textbooks through the Assistive Technology Initiative (ATI).

Requesting accessible eTextbooks through a college or university

In order to request an accessible textbook, students will have to submit information about the textbook they are requesting, such as the title, author(s), edition number, ISBN, or similar information. They will also be required to submit a copy of the receipt or order confirmation as a proof-of-purchase/proof-of-rental to confirm that they purchased the textbook— this is required for copyright reasons.

I recommend doing this as soon as students know what class(es) they will be taking or when they learn they will be using a particular book, though requests for accessible textbooks can be accommodated at any time. For example, my professor started using a different textbook halfway through the semester, and I had to submit a request to get an accessible copy shortly after spring break.

How colleges fulfill accessible textbook requests

Once the student submits a request, the appropriate staff member can request an accessible version of the textbook from the publisher, eBook platform, or another source like the AccessText Network that provides accessible materials for students with print disabilities. If no accessible file is available, one will be created by removing the spine of the physical book

and feeding the pages into a high-speed scanner, followed by using OCR to extract/recognize text. This “dissection” option is not available for rented copies of physical textbooks, so students may need to purchase a book if a digital copy is not available.

How long does it take to get accessible textbooks?

Students will typically receive their accessible textbook files within two weeks, though this will depend on whether digital files are available or if a book has to be remediated. In my personal experience, I have received books as quickly as 24 hours after submitting an accessible textbook request or up to a month later when the university had to create a digital copy of the text. I request an EPUB or Word document because I prefer reflowable layouts, but I have also received PDFs for some of my books.

Is the eTextbook missing anything, like access codes, images, etc.?

There have been some instances where I have purchased an eTextbook from a mainstream eBook store (like Amazon, Barnes and Noble, iBooks, Chegg) and realized that it didn't include the access code I would need for submitting homework or taking quizzes. Other times, I have downloaded books from Bookshare or another platform only to realize they were missing images, tables, or other text formatting that affected the reading experience. Some professors require students to purchase eTextbooks from a specific platform to get access to homework problems or custom resources created for the college/university, or offer bundled access codes that include free textbook access. In many instances, I could purchase the access codes separately, but I was still annoyed I didn't check the product listing before purchasing the book to begin with.

In the case of the book with the missing images from Bookshare, I found a copy of the book with images intact on another platform such as Chegg or Amazon Kindle. When I encountered a different book with missing images on another platform, I had to find a copy of the book in a different layout so that I could view the images that way.

Another example of something that was “missing” from an eTextbook that can be particularly frustrating is hyperlinks or page numbers, both of which can be helpful for page navigation. This is where having search tools in an eTextbook is very useful!

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