

# Writing College Textbook Supplements

## SECOND EDITION



**The Definitive Guide to Winning  
High-Paying Assignments in  
the College Textbook Publishing Market**

**John Soares**

# **Writing College Textbook Supplements**

## **The Definitive Guide to Winning High-Paying Assignments in the College Textbook Publishing Market Second Edition**

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I also thank my niece Dionne Soares Palmer. She has applied the information in this book to launch her own career as a freelance writer, and she did an excellent job copyediting this second edition.

Finally, many, many thanks to my students and teaching colleagues at the University of California at Davis, Butte College, and Shasta College. The students especially are what textbook publishing—and textbook supplements—are all about.

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# Introduction

## How I Started Writing Textbook Supplements

I received my M.A. degree in political science from the University of California at Davis in June of 1989. The following spring I taught international relations at Shasta College near Redding in northern California, and a year later I began teaching American government, international relations, and politics of developing countries courses at Butte College near Chico, California, while continuing to teach both international relations and American government at Shasta College. So I was a part-time instructor at two colleges, and I was teaching a full-time course load between the two of them, yet I was making very low part-time wages.

I had always been interested in writing as a profession and had already begun a career in outdoors writing. My first hiking guidebook for northern California came out in 1992, the third and last in 1996. Two of those books are still in print. I also wrote 100-plus magazine and newspaper articles on outdoors topics in the 1990s, ranging from climbing Mount Shasta in northern California to swimming with manta rays on the Big Island of Hawaii.

At Butte College I met sales representatives for the major textbook publishing companies. I asked one “Who writes these instructor’s manuals and test banks?” She said, “People like you.” That book rep and her colleagues at other companies put me in touch with editors. In the summer of 1992 one of those editors called me and I landed my first big project, a test bank for a new American government textbook published by Harper Collins. They paid \$2.50 a question for 1600 questions: I made a cool 4000 bucks and was hooked on my new profession.

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## The Progress of My Career

I took advantage of my diverse educational background (A.S. degree in engineering, B.S. degree in biochemistry, M.A. in political science, with a lot of course work in history, geography, and earth sciences) to market myself to publishers in several fields using the methods described in this book, and I continued to get work. By the summer of 1994 I'd been a part-time college instructor for four years. For the previous three years I'd been teaching essentially a full-time load of 5 classes per semester, but I was making only about \$15,000 from it. Even though I loved teaching and got high evaluations from both students and administrators, I decided to leave that profession and become a full-time writer. By 2001 I had reached an annual income of \$53,000, about three-and-a-half times what I made as a part-time college instructor. I achieved my highest income in 2002: \$63,066. Since then I've scaled back my work schedule so I have more time for travel and hiking and backpacking, and also for writing my own books and creating blogs such as my [ProductiveWriters.com](http://ProductiveWriters.com) site.

## How I Wrote This Book

Since I've worked in many different disciplines, and I've been in the field essentially full-time for over 15 years, I have created just about every type of college textbook supplement that's commonly used. In my frequent talks with editors, I always took extensive notes. I wanted to know everything I could about both my own work and college textbook publishing in general.

I first had the idea for this book in the late 1990s, and I've been collecting information from editors, books, supplements, and the Internet ever since. Before and during the writing process, I interviewed several editors with detailed experience with textbook supplements (also called ancillaries), and I've also had the manuscript thoroughly reviewed.

## How This Book Will Help You Make Money

I show you everything you need to know to find editors at college textbook publishing companies and convince them to pay you good money to create textbook supplements. I also detail how to do a great job on your projects and maintain solid relationships with editors so they come back to you time and again with more high-paying projects.

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## What's New in This Second Edition

It's been two years since the first edition of *Writing College Textbook Supplements* came out, and since then I've learned a bit more about the craft, and I've also explored many more options for finding clients. Here are the main highlights of the improvements I've added in the second edition:

- How to find jobs on the Internet
- Using LinkedIn as a way to connect with editors
- Working for other companies and nonprofits besides textbook publishing companies
- The pros and cons of having your own website, and what to include if you do decide to have your own website
- Increased information on how to please editors and increase the likelihood you'll be hired again
- More tips on how to get the actual work done well and quickly
- Discussion of Bloom's taxonomy for test questions, along with an extensive list of resources
- The most important chapters from my e-book *Intelligent Productivity for Freelance Writers*
- More Internet resources, along with updated URLs

## The Writing College Textbook Supplements Blog

I write multiple entries each month on the [Writing College Textbook Supplements blog](#). Some entries cover textbook publishing in general. Others discuss useful freelance writing tips. Still others give you important information that will help you be a more successful supplements writer.

I strongly suggest that you subscribe to the RSS feed or email updates. It's easy to do: just go to the site and follow the directions in the right-hand column.

Note that some of the material in this book also appears on the blog, although I may abbreviate it or elaborate a bit. Most of the info, though, will stay in here.

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## **The ProductiveWriters.com Blog**

I also have a website focused on helping freelance writers get good assignments and get their writing done quickly – [ProductiveWriters.com](http://ProductiveWriters.com). I share a lot of useful info there, so you should also subscribe to it via RSS or e-mail.

## **The Motto**

This is my motto for creating textbook supplements:

*Help Instructors Teach Better; Help Students Learn Better*

I'm committed to helping students become more informed about the world. We need educated citizens and leaders to deal with the many challenges we face – environmental, economic, political, technological, international – and those undergrads in college courses around the world truly are the future.

The motto guides me and keeps me focused on producing only the highest-quality work.

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## Chapter 1

# The Benefits of Writing Textbook Supplements

There are two main areas in which writing textbook supplements will benefit you: helping your career and putting money in your bank account.

### Help Your Career

Having one or more textbook supplements on your résumé or c.v. will boost your chances of career advancement, especially if you are in the teaching profession. Here's how.

### Increase Chances of Getting a Better Job

Many supplement writers are part-time faculty at a community college or a university. I was a part-time instructor at the community college level for several years, so I know what it's like, and I know that most part-time instructors would love to be full-time instructors. Hiring committees, whether for community colleges, teaching-focused four-year colleges, or research-focused universities, are impressed that you have written textbook supplements. It shows you are active in education beyond just teaching, it shows you have initiative, and it shows you can tackle and complete large projects.

### Increase Chances of Getting Tenure or Promotion

Of course, if you already have a full-time teaching gig, you want tenure, and beyond that, you want promotions. Textbook supplements stand out to promotion committees for all the reasons discussed above.

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## **Other Writing Possibilities**

You likely have other writing interests besides doing work in educational publishing. Having textbook supplements on your writing résumé will make it easier to convince publishers—be they newspaper, magazine, Internet, or book publishers—that you can do quality work and follow a project through to completion.

## **Get a Job with a Textbook Publisher**

Writing supplements is a good way to get to know people in the textbook publishing industry. You may decide you'd like to work for one of the publishers in editorial, marketing, or sales. It really helps when your publishing credits show you have experience in the field, and you'll also know editors that can recommend you for jobs.

## **Make Good Money**

### **What Affects How Much You Make**

There are several factors, all discussed in detail in subsequent chapters (especially Chapter 4, Negotiating Payment), that determine how much money you will make:

- Most importantly, your desire to succeed in this field
- How well you market yourself to textbook publishing companies
- How well you write
- How well you communicate with editors
- Your areas of academic expertise and the demand for supplements in those areas
- Your overall skill level with software programs such as Microsoft Word™
- Your ability to understand and use the Internet
- How well you understand the textbook publishing business
- How well you negotiate with editors
- Your flexibility with publishing cycles and publishing schedules
- Your willingness to work hard when necessary to meet deadlines

### **Sample Rates of Pay**

Pay rates range from minimum wage (rarely) to over \$100 per hour (uncommon). However, most of the work I have been offered paid in the \$35-60 per hour range. I

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have had some projects where I made \$100-\$150 per hour, and I've had a few where I only made \$20 per hour. Keep in mind that I have experience in the field, type quickly, and am a full-time writer. However, you could be, or with more experience could be, better and faster than me.

If you have good qualifications, if you market yourself well, and if you negotiate well with editors, you should be able to make \$25-\$75 per hour, depending upon the project and company.

### **The Most I Made in One Year**

My top year in this business was 2002: I earned \$63,066 working on textbook supplements. I was fairly busy in 2002; however, I probably averaged about 25 hours per week over the whole year. There were periods when I worked long days for weeks on end, and then there were periods where I had little or no work, periods in which I pursued other business and personal interests or took time off to travel, hike, and visit with family and friends.

### **Be Aware of Publishing Cycles**

Most college textbooks are on either a two-year or a three-year publishing cycle. This means that a new edition of a given textbook is released with updates to the field that have occurred since the last edition was finalized. In addition, the authors and publisher may decide to add more breadth to the book or perhaps some new pedagogical features.

Publishers time the release of new editions so they are available either at the beginning of the fall semester (mid-August) or at the beginning of winter quarter (early January). The bulk of textbook supplement preparation occurs in the two to four months prior to publication of the book. This happens because supplement authors need to work from either the page proofs (PDF files of the book that are very close to the final product) or from the manuscript of the new edition, and these are typically not ready until this time.

This means that work is very concentrated in certain months and can be lean in other months. You need to be prepared to work hard and make your good money while you can, and then make good use of the slow times doing other pursuits that either make you money or bring you joy.

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**When to Transition to Full-Time**

Yes, you can make good money in this field. However, it takes time to reach the point where you command high levels of pay and get offered projects on a steady basis. Therefore, you must initially look at writing textbook supplements as a way to augment your current income, not replace it. This is especially the case if you work in only one academic discipline. If you work in more than one, you of course have more opportunities to get projects.

Many of you only want to write textbook supplements in order to boost your income a bit. However, if you do want to earn your living doing this, be sure you are getting more than enough work to pay the bills. You should have three or more months of savings as a cushion for potential gaps in the publishing cycle when there is little or no work available, and six months' savings is optimal.

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## Chapter 2

# Students, Instructors, Editors, Publishers

### What Students Want

The students are ultimately what we—you the writer, your editor, the textbook authors, and the publishing company—are all about. We want students to be well educated so they can understand the world better, be able to pursue their hopes and dreams, and be able to take care of themselves and their loved ones financially.

Students want quality textbooks, useful supplements for those textbooks, and they want their instructors to teach well. To that end, you the supplement writer need to create great supplements that help students learn and teachers teach.

### What Instructors Want

Instructors want a high-quality textbook that covers the material at the appropriate level and present the material in manner that is easy for the students to understand. Instructors also want supplements that help them teach and make it easy for them to test their students fairly, and they want high-quality supplements for their students. Much of what we as textbook supplement writers do is help instructors to do their job better, and when we do that, the students learn better.

### What Editors Want

I cover in detail what editors want from you as a writer in other chapters in this book. In brief, they want you to do high-quality work and finish it on time, and they want good communication with you and a pleasant working relationship.

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They also want all aspects of their projects to go smoothly, although this is rarely the case. Keep in mind that editors have to deal with many other people besides you, both within the publishing company and with outside vendors.

## **Who Editors Are**

For starters, most editors at publishing companies are not what most people think of as “editors.” While a few may have been English majors and may be excellent writers with good copyediting and proofreading skills, most editors at college textbook publishers spend most of their time coordinating various aspects of their specific area of specialty within the company, not perfecting manuscripts.

## **Characteristics of Editors**

**Varied Educational Backgrounds.** Nearly all have at least a bachelor’s degree, and some have advanced degrees. Often editors will work with an academic discipline that is quite different from what they studied in college.

**Varied Editorial Experience.** Consider yourself fortunate if you are working with an editor who has been in her position for more than a couple of years. Be prepared to deal with editors who have just been promoted, or have just switched to your discipline and are still learning the ropes.

**Varied Interpersonal Skills.** Some editors are adept at communication while others are not. (See Chapter 3, Getting the Assignment, and Chapter 6, How to Make Editors Happy, for details on good communications with editors and maintaining good relationships with them.)

**Varied Organizational Skills.** Some editors are great at getting you the materials you need when you need them and taking care of other important details upstream of what you are doing. However, others are not. (You need to keep close track of what is happening with your projects and ensure you get what you need when you need it.)

**High Turnover Rate of Lower-Level Editors.** Many lower-level editors (associate editors, assistant editors, and editorial assistants) don’t remain in one position for long. They typically leave their current positions for one of four reasons. First, they may transfer to a similar position in a different discipline. Second, they may go into sales for a while. (Many publishing companies encourage this.) Third, they may get promoted to a higher-level position. Fourth, they can leave the company.

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## Types of Editorial Positions

Here's a general hierarchy within the college textbook publishing world, from the most powerful to the least powerful:

- Executive Editor
- Senior Editor
- Development Editor/Project Manager
- Associate Editor
- Assistant Editor
- Editorial Assistant

Depending on which project you are involved with, you could come into contact with any of the bottom five. However, the people most likely to hire you and work with you are assistant editors and associate editors, and occasionally development editors. Editorial assistants help higher-level editors with a variety of tasks, so you will also deal with them.

## What Publishers Want

Publishers are in business, so publishers, first and foremost, want to make profits. If they don't make profits, they will go out of business. Publishers typically make profits by selling high-quality textbooks and other instructional materials that are in demand by professors.

Always keep in mind the bottom line when working in this industry. Some key points:

- If the publisher is doing well financially, there is a greater likelihood of more money for supplements and their authors.
- If the publisher is doing poorly, supplement budgets may be decreased, which will mean less money to pay you and perhaps fewer supplements overall.
- You help the publisher make money by creating the best supplements possible, which increases the likelihood of textbook adoption and retention.
- Large publishers like Pearson and McGraw-Hill are involved in many different businesses besides producing higher education textbooks, and these other businesses obviously affect profitability.
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## **An Overview of the Textbook Publishing Industry**

There are many companies that publish books for use in college classes. However, as a freelance supplements writer, you are interested primarily in the large commercial companies that publish textbooks for lower-division college courses, the ones taught to freshmen and sophomores. The size of these markets supports creating a large number of supplements for students and instructors. (There is also some work creating supplements for popular upper-division textbooks, but this is only a small fraction of the total.)

The main trend in the college textbook publishing industry in recent years has been consolidation. Basically, the larger companies have been acquiring the smaller companies. Often they keep the acquired imprints intact, although sometimes they absorb the textbooks of the acquired firm into their existing imprints.

Another potential trend is privatization: The textbook publishing arm of a public traded company can be sold to a group of investors who then run the company privately. A prime example is the creation of Cengage in 2007; it bought the college textbook assets of Thompson Corporation, including Brooks-Cole and Wadsworth, among others.

As a textbook supplements writer, you need to pay attention to changes in ownership. Such changes can create new work opportunities, or potentially create problems with existing work relationships. Major shifts in companies can mean editors get reassigned to different disciplines or leave the company altogether, requiring you to market yourself to new people. Of course, you also have the opportunity to make new connections and also keep your old ones. This is a key reason why you need to maintain good relationships with editors: They can hire you when they move to new positions, and they can recommend you to their replacements. It's always a good idea to connect with editors on LinkedIn. That way you can stay in touch with them – and stay on their radar – if they move to a different company.

See Appendix One for a list of college textbook publishers.

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