FAQs

What is OpenStax?

OpenStax is Rice University's nonprofit education technology initiative. We provide free, peer-reviewed textbooks that cover standard scope and sequence requirements for introductory college and Advanced Placement® courses. We are also developing digital courseware that helps students understand and remember what they've read. With our college textbooks and Advanced Placement® textbooks, we have saved over 14 million students more than $1 billion since 2012, and at least one of our titles is in use at 60 percent of higher education institutions in the United States.

Who can use OpenStax textbooks?

OpenStax textbooks can be used by everyone. Anyone can visit OpenStax.org and view the mobile friendly online view or download a PDF – without having to create an account. You do not need to be at a particular school and you do not need to be part of the Institutional Partnership Program to use OpenStax textbooks. In fact, even if you are a student and your instructor hasn't adopted an OpenStax book in their course, OpenStax books meet scope and sequence requirements for most introductory courses and can be a vital supplementary resource for you. If you are an instructor adopting a textbook for your course, we ask that you complete a short survey (https://openstax.org/adoption?) so we can gauge our progress and report to our philanthropist supporters.

How does OpenStax make any money or remain sustainable, considering you offer free textbooks?

OpenStax is part of Rice University, and we are also supported by the Laura and John Arnold Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation, Google Inc., The Calvin K. Kazanjian Economics Foundation, the Hewlett-Packard Company, National Science Foundation, the Maxfield Foundation, the Bill and Stephanie Sick Fund, the Michelson 20MM Foundation, the Girard Foundation, Chegg, Inc., the Arthur and Carlyse Ciocca Charitable Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, Ann and John Doerr, the Charles Koch Foundation, Jumee Yhu and David E. Park III, the Brian D. Patterson USA-International Foundation, Robin and Sandy Stuart Foundation, the Stuart Family Foundation, Tammy and Guillermo Treviño, Rusty and John Jaggers, the Leon Lowenstein Foundation, Inc., and Burt and Deedee McMurtry. These philanthropic foundations and donors give OpenStax the funding to create high quality, peer-reviewed textbooks that have the same look and feel as traditional publisher texts.

We focus on providing a high-quality textbook that meets the scope and sequence requirements for that course; however, we also understand that faculty and students often need additional resources, such as online homework. To meet that need, we have partnerships with for-profit companies that provide these extra, optional resources that integrate with our textbooks. These companies give us a mission support fee in return for using our content, contributing to our sustainability. For a full list of partners, visit openstax.org/partners. These mission support fees also help OpenStax keep texts up to date. OpenStax has also received grant funding for its burgeoning adaptive learning projects.

How did OpenStax get started?

The first iteration of OpenStax was founded in 1999 by Richard Baraniuk, an electrical engineering professor at Rice University. Originally named Connexions, OpenStax was an open educational resource (OER) repository where faculty around the world could publish, share, and remix educational materials. By 2008, it became clear that simply providing a delivery platform for course materials was not enough to increase access for the majority of students. After observing the upward trend of student debt and the well-defined and staying nature of introductory college course materials, OpenStax used grant support to create a line of free, peer-reviewed textbooks that meet scope and sequence requirements for introductory courses, making it easy for faculty to adopt ready-made high quality resources, and then use them or adapt them to meet their course's needs. The first book was published in 2012, and the library has since scaled to over 40 titles. In 2014, OpenStax received grant funding to begin developing digital courseware.

Is there a difference between other openly licensed books and OpenStax texts? What is the difference between OpenStax textbooks and a traditional publisher's textbooks other than price?

OpenStax textbooks are different from many open educational resources (OER) in that OpenStax textbooks are peer-reviewed, are written by experts, and employ professional art programs. Our textbooks have the same look and feel as the traditional textbooks that cost hundreds of dollars.

What are your plans when it comes to expansion (such as new books, etc.)?

Our primary mission has been to provide textbooks for the nation's highest-enrolled introductory college courses, of which we currently have 32 published. We have also published four titles for Advanced Placement® courses. We intend to publish additional titles for select degree paths and to continue to pursue improving access and learning.

How do you create the textbooks?

We hire a core team of authors who write the content with the help of our editors. Then, the content is reviewed for accuracy and quality by a board of reviewers. There are often well over 100 reviewers for each title because quality is a top priority for OpenStax. Once the title is finished, we publish PDFs and web versions via our website, openstax.org. These books are entirely free and don't require a login to access. Most books are also available for free for Kindle or for $4.99 in the iBooks Store. OpenStax released a free app in fall 2019. The app, OpenStax + SE, is available in the App Store and on Google Play. Additionally, we offer hardcover, full color print versions essentially for the cost to print — all of our titles are $65 or less. If you would like more information about our technology, please contact media@openstax.org.

What are the legalities of professors customizing their textbooks and the cost of the printed copy/selling it in the school bookstore?

All of our textbooks are openly licensed (all titles are CC BY, except for Calculus and Accounting, which are CC BY-NC-SA.) You can read more about these Creative Commons licenses at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/. These licenses allow faculty to customize and distribute their version of the textbooks at no cost to them. Our textbooks meet the scope and sequence requirements for the course they are designed for, so many instructors often use the book as is or simply assign sections from the complete title. Hard copies of each textbook are available via Amazon or campus bookstores for nearly the cost to print the book, making even the hard copies much less expensive than traditional textbooks.

OpenStax has 41 books currently available on its website. Does OpenStax intend to expand its collection into courses such as art, English, writing, and extracurriculars?

Our goal is to provide textbooks for the nation's highest-enrolled introductory college courses and we have 35 published so far. We also have seven high school and Advanced Placement® titles, totaling 42 textbooks. Eventually, we plan to develop the textbooks required for select degree paths. College Success is coming soon, and a second edition of Psychology is underway. The two main factors we consider when deciding which books to publish are 1) how many students are taking the course nationwide and 2) how expensive are the existing textbooks for that course, so whether we expand into other courses depends on whether they provide an opportunity to significantly drive down student costs. Certain subjects, such as art and English, present copyright restrictions that make it difficult to publish with an open license. We are exploring our options for those subjects.

How does OpenStax handle revisions and keeping content up to date?

OpenStax revises books when it is pedagogically necessary. For example, our Biology title needed clearer, more current, and more dynamic explanations to better serve students, so we released a second edition of Biology in 2018. Smaller changes (like typos) are updated regularly and reflected in real time in the online version. New PDFs and print versions with updated errata are published each June.

What is next for OpenStax?

College Success is coming soon, and OpenStax is exploring new areas in which to publish textbooks.

OpenStax Tutor, OpenStax's digital courseware for biology, physics, and sociology, is currently in beta. Rover by OpenStax, an affordable online math homework tool, is currently available for select math titles.

Why does OpenStax sell print copies?

Based on feedback from instructors and students, OpenStax offers print versions of its textbooks at low cost. OpenStax is committed to offering our free content where it is most convenient for instructors and students, leading us to publish our books in an online view, PDF, print, and iBooks.