

Technology

E-Book Readers Turning The Page 560 Years After Gutenberg's Day

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Too bad printing press inventor Johannes Gutenberg isn't around to see the e-readers on store shelves this holiday season.

He'd surely be impressed and might even buy one for himself or as a gift.

The world of paper books that Gutenberg helped bring about in 1450 is steadily giving way to electronic distribution. The written word is becoming the e-word.

While electronic book readers have been available for a few years, competition has driven down their price to a more affordable range. Some e-readers are priced below \$150, though more advanced or color models still cost a few hundred dollars.

If you're mulling one as a gift, keep in mind the reading habits of who'll get the e-reader. Most major booksellers such as Amazon.com ([AMZN](#)), Barnes & Noble ([BKS](#)), and Borders Group ([BGP](#)) offer a

Visitors attending last month's big Book Fair in Frankfurt, Germany, kept busy by experimenting with the many e-book readers on display at the show.... [View Enlarged Image](#)

huge number of best-sellers in digital format as well as e-textbooks. One sign that e-readers are becoming mainstream is that the New York Times ([NYT](#)) will

begin publishing e-book best-seller lists in early 2011.

E-Ink Is One Key

There are many things to consider before buying an e-reader. One is how well display screens show electronic text. Gutenberg would surely be impressed that display quality often comes close to printed books. The most widely used display technology, called e-ink, was originally developed at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

Monochrome screens with the e-ink technology are crisp and easy to read, but in a dark room or at night, they need a source of light to be readable. That's because the screen reflects, rather than generates, light.

Color screens are one of the new twists in e-readers. They're usually readable in low light. But, like laptop computer screens, color e-reader displays drain battery power more quickly than monochrome screens. Still, color e-readers may be something to consider as more magazines and e-books with color illustrations become available in digital format.

E-readers are generally easy to use. On-screen navigation, such as page turning, differs among suppliers. Some newer e-readers use touch-based gestures to flip a page or zoom in on text. Users simply swipe their fingers horizontally to turn pages, for example. Apple's ([AAPL](#)) iPhone and some other smart phones offer the same touch-based feature.

E-readers access online stores via USB connections to personal computers, or wirelessly. Most, if not all, e-readers now provide Wi-Fi capability for linking to wireless networks in homes or away, while some more expensive ones also connect to wireless 3G phone networks operated by the likes of AT&T ([T](#)). But it's not necessary to buy a wireless service plan. E-book sellers absorb the cost of wireless downloads when their customers order digital books.

Companies in the business of selling books are the biggest suppliers of e-readers. Most e-readers now support several digital popular formats, making it possible to download free digital books from Web sites like Gutenberg.org.

Here are a few popular e-readers:

- Amazon's Kindle, the device that launched the e-reader category, is tightly linked to the online retailer's bookstore. The Kindle is available with built-in Wi-Fi as well as both Wi-Fi and 3G wireless connections.

We tested the Wi-Fi-only Kindle, priced at \$139. It has a 6-inch electronic-ink screen from privately held E Ink, which provides the e-ink technology for the great majority of e-readers. The model provides touch-based page turning. A true keyboard under the screen may be easier for some people to use than virtual keyboards offered by some e-readers. A \$59 case not only protects the Kindle, but has a slide-out, battery-powered light.

- Gaining in popularity is Barnes & Noble's Nook. Like the Kindle, Nook is available with or without 3G wireless. All Nook models provide Wi-Fi links for downloading books and surfing the Web. We tested the \$149 Wi-Fi-only model, which has a 6-inch, e-ink screen and a navigation bar at the device's bottom. The Nook is closely tied to Barnes & Noble's online store, but it's not hard to download e-books and magazines for other sources. Newer color-screen Nook models start at \$249.
- Privately held Pandigital's Novel line is carried by a large number of retailers, includes Sears ([SHLD](#)) and Staples ([SPLS](#)). We tested the \$150 color-screen model, which has a 7-inch touch-screen and Wi-Fi. Unlike some of the other e-readers we looked at, the Novel's bottom control panel disappears when you start reading. That approach provides readers with a full-color screen for text and illustrations. The Novel accesses Barnes & Noble's online bookstore. It supports the popular ePUB and other digital formats.

While e-readers can make terrific gifts, there are more pricey alternatives. Apple's iPad and other tablets, such as Samsung's Galaxy Tab, provide software to read e-books. The iPad starts at \$499 for a Wi-Fi-only version. Tablet devices may be more attractive next holiday season as prices drop.

Tomorrow: High-definition TV sets.

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