

Tech Talk

Navigating the world of technology one gadget at a time
A service of the Hinsdale Public Library

Digital Audiobooks

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What are digital audiobooks?

Digital audiobooks are simply audiobooks that have been converted into a digital format. In some cases, they are the same recordings as those found on their audio cassette or compact disc (CD) counterparts. They exist only as digital computer files. To listen to these files, you use an MP3 player or other device capable of converting the digital files back into sound.

Why would I want to listen to a digital audiobook instead of a cassette or CD version?

Digital audiobooks have a couple of significant advantages over their physical counterparts. These are the same advantages that digital music has over music on CDs.

- **Space efficiency:** Digital audiobooks exist in the world of computer bits (a series of ones and zeroes). These computer bits are digitally compressed to take up less storage space without dramatically decreasing sound quality. Indeed, spoken word recordings can tolerate more aggressive compression



An 8GB MP3 player the size of a small stack of credit cards can hold digital versions of all of these audiobooks at one time.

than music without sounding lousy.

What does this mean in practical terms? It is possible to carry several audiobooks at a time on a single MP3 player. In fact, an 8 gigabyte (8GB) MP3 player can hold 15 or even 20 books at once. This quantity of audiobooks can provide enough entertainment for even the longest road trips. This capacity is remarkable considering that most current 8GB MP3 players are significantly smaller than a half-deck of cards. The same quantity of old-school audiobooks would fill up a medium-sized tote bag or backpack.

- **Available to download online:** eMediaLibrary, a new service available through the Hinsdale Public Library, allows HPL cardholders to check out and download audiobooks online for free. These can be listened to on your home computer or, more commonly, transferred to your MP3 player.



Having the ability to download audiobooks over the Internet can be a big advantage. For instance —

say you're going to your cabin in Door County for the summer. Before you left Hinsdale, you loaded several audiobooks on your MP3 player. However, in the intervening weeks, you've listened to them all. With the eMediaLibrary service and your library card, you can use your laptop computer to download another set of audiobooks over the Internet to listen to on your MP3 player. You don't have to physically return the old ones — they just expire after the checkout period is complete. In this way, you can always keep a fresh set of audiobooks on your player without ever setting foot in the library (though we'd enjoy seeing you from time-to-time anyway).

Check out and download digital audiobooks with your Hinsdale library card using the newly available eMediaLibrary service.

What else do I need to know about eMediaLibrary?

There is a limit of ten books that can be checked out at one time. The typical loan period is three weeks but may vary by title. You don't have to "return" your audiobooks, as they are checked in automatically when their loan period expires.

Can I use the the eMediaLibrary service with my iPod?

No. Unfortunately, the eMediaLibrary service uses Windows Media Audio (WMA) encoded with Microsoft digital rights management (DRM) technology. iPods can't play files of this type. There's no quick-and-easy way around this problem, unfortunately.

There has to be a way to listen to audiobooks on my iPod. Do I have any options?

Yes. Because iPods dominate the MP3 player market, many people have found ways to use their beloved players to listen to audiobooks. Here are a few methods:

- Just like normal music CDs, audiobook CDs can be copied into iTunes. Once the audiobook is in the iTunes music library, it can be synchronized with an iPod. Of course, audiobooks, like music CDs, are subject to any applicable copyright laws.
- iPods work with a commercial service called *Audible.com*, which offers a wide variety of spoken word content for sale. This includes thousands of bestsellers as well as audio editions of newspapers and magazines.
- It is technically possible to make an iPod-compatible copy of any digital audiobook on a Windows computer by recording the sound from the audiobook as it plays through your computer. One popular program which does this is Tunebite (www.tunebite.com). For what it's worth, Tunebite and other vendors claim this process is



iPods can work well as digital audiobook players once you develop a strategy for acquiring compatible digital audiobook files.

completely legal, though some regulatory agencies and organizations may beg to differ.

What MP3 players are best for audiobooks?

If you're interested in using the library's eMediaLibrary digital audiobook service, you'll want to start with this list of compatible MP3 players: www.overdrive.com/resources/drc/. More generally, though, consider a digital audio player with at least one of these key features:

- **Resume from last position:** This is an absolutely essential feature for playing digital audiobooks. With this feature, you can pick up exactly where you left off in the book, rather than starting at the beginning of the chapter, or worse yet, at the beginning of the book. Many MP3 players, including iPods, feature resume.
- **Bookmarks:** Some digital audiobook players let you place electronic bookmarks at multiple places during the audiobook presentation, not just at the point you stopped listening. Just like a physical bookmark, this can help you return to notable passages in the book.

Once you experience the convenience of digital audiobooks, you may never want to go back to CDs or audiotapes. Their impressive storage capacity and small size make it possible to keep several audiobooks with you at all times.

If you have questions, comments or suggestions, you can visit me at the Reference Desk, contact me via email (moetting@hinsdalelibrary.info), or call me at 630-986-1976.

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