

Tech Talk

New! Getting the world of technology one gadget at a time.
A series of articles published weekly

.....

E-Book Readers

Volume 4, Number 1

What is an e-book reader?

E-book readers display electronic versions of books on small black-and-white screens. To turn the page, you simply press a button.

What's so great about them?

E-books have several advantages over paper books:

- **Book Prices:** Many e-books are sold at a discount. For example, a hardcover bestseller which retails for \$24.99 might only cost \$9.99 as an e-book.
- **Finding Information Within the Book:** Unlike paper books which rely on indexes, e-books are completely searchable. Keyword searching is ideal for finding specific information in name-and-date packed nonfiction books but can also help you track down memorable passages in novels.
- **Bookmarking and Note Taking:** E-books allow you to add virtual bookmarks so you can return to a specific spots in the text. In addition, you can highlight certain passages and add virtual margin notes without affecting the original content of the book.



An e-book reader like the iRex Technologies Iliad can store dozens of full-length books at a time.

- **Space Efficiency:** Most e-book readers can hold dozens of books at a time. This makes them perfect for commuters or travelers who don't want to tote three or four novels and a dictionary with them onto planes and trains.



A current-generation e-book reader is about the size of a trade paperback book like a Chicago travel guide. They are generally light enough to hold with a single hand. In comparison, imagine a backpack or briefcase crammed full of books. Which would you rather carry?

The Amazon Kindle e-book reader is smaller than many hardback books.

Are there any problems with e-book readers?

- **Availability of Book Titles:** The selection of books in electronic format pales in comparison to those in print. For example, Amazon's store for their Kindle e-book reader offers fewer than 90,000 titles while their traditional book inventory consists of millions of items. You'll probably be able to find a recent bestseller pretty easily, but older titles will take a while to appear in e-book format.
- **Different Physical Experience:** There's something familiar and comfortable about holding a book in your hand. The smell of an ancient volume, the creak of a new hardcover binding and the slightly rough feel of the page are missing with an e-book reader. Future generations of readers may not find benefit in such trivial matters, but many current readers do.
- **Text Quality:** While the technology in today's e-book readers is significantly enhanced over that of previous designs, display quality still doesn't measure up to the printed page.
- **Proprietary Formats Limit Transferability Across Brands:** For example, the Amazon Kindle uses an e-book file format for purchased books which won't work on Sony e-book readers, and vice-versa. A universal standard which allows

transfer of books from one device to another would be more desirable to owners.

- **Battery Dependency:** If you're away from a wall-socket for an extended time period, your e-book reader will stop working. That's not to say that you'll lose your books from memory, but merely that you won't be able to read them until you recharge the reader. Even though battery life in an e-book reader is much better than that of a notebook computer, it will eventually run out of juice. That's not an issue with traditional books.
- **Initial Cost:** Before you can take advantage of any per-book cost savings, you must first buy a reader. How many books does it take to recoup the initial cost of investment for the Amazon Kindle (\$400)?

Assuming a typical bestseller costs \$25.00 in print and \$10.00 as an e-book, you would break even at roughly the 26th book you buy. Keep in mind that less popular titles are not discounted as aggressively. For someone who reads a couple of books per month, the economics make perfect sense. For the more casual reader, it's harder to justify on the basis of price alone.

Tell me more about the Amazon Kindle. What's the big deal?

The Kindle is noteworthy in a few ways:

- It uses a wireless data standard called EVDO to download books. Other book readers rely on Internet connections (both wired and wireless) to download books. Generally speaking, EVDO provides much wider coverage in the United States than public Internet sites. Unlike cell phones which have a per-minute cost for EVDO data access, Kindle owners don't have to pay for network time.
- It offers free access to Wikipedia, a popular Internet-based community-edited encyclopedia.
- It uses the best currently available e-book display

technology, known as electronic paper (manufactured by the E Ink Corporation). Unlike common flat screen displays which use backlit Liquid Chrystal Displays (LCDs), electronic paper provides a crisp flicker-free display which consumes relatively little battery power. Other e-book readers like the Sony Reader also use electronic paper.

- **Subscriptions:** In addition to purchasing e-books, the Kindle allows you to subscribe to newspapers like the *New York Times* (\$13.99/month) and magazines like *Time* (\$1.49/month). Whenever a new issue is released, the Kindle will automatically retrieve it for you. You can also subscribe to select weblogs (blogs) for a couple of dollars per month.

What's the bottom line? Should I get one?

It depends. If you buy a lot of books and don't mind pressing a button instead of turning a page, an e-book reader may be a good choice. Likewise, if you are a student or frequent traveler who would benefit from the ability to keep dozens of books with you at all times, you might want to jump in now. Even if you don't fit into any of these categories, you may be intrigued by the Amazon Kindle's ability to automatically retrieve your daily newspaper and access Internet blogs. Other users might want to wait until the next generation of e-book readers drives prices further down and offers improved screen technology.

You can find an electronic version of this document on the Tech Talk blog at www.hinsdalelibrary.info/techtalk.htm. For information on subscribing to the Tech Talk blog, visit www.hinsdalelibrary.info/Blogs/TechTalk/subscribe.htm. If you have questions or comments, you can visit me at the Reference Desk, contact me via email (moetting@hinsdalelibrary.info), or call me at 630-986-1976.

Mike Oetting, Reference Librarian
1/31/2008



201 East Waukegan,
Hinsdale, IL 60142
630.986.1976
www.hinsdalelibrary.info
eservices@hinsdalelibrary.info