

eBook Readers Revisited

Volume 7, Number 8

What are eBook readers and why should I care?

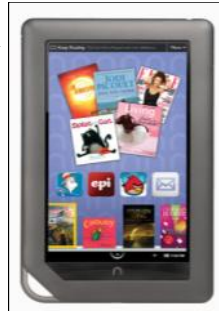
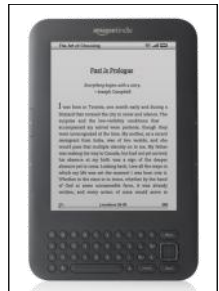
They are small, thin devices which display electronic versions of books, magazines and other media. These eBook readers (eReaders for short) were a hot gift item last holiday season, and are likely to be in more demand this year as prices fall and functionality rises.

Sales of electronic books are trending strongly upward. In fact, online bookseller *Amazon.com* noted that their unit sales of eBooks exceeded print books for the first time in May, 2011.

The Hinsdale Public Library has offered free eBook downloads to cardholders for nearly two years (since October 2009). Our eBooks are compatible with popular eReaders like the Amazon Kindle and the Barnes and Noble Nook as well as tablet devices like the market-leading Apple iPad.

What advantages do eBooks have over traditional print books?

- **Capacity:** This is perhaps the biggest advantage that eBooks have over traditional books. An eBook reader is roughly the size of a 200 page trade paperback and is light enough to hold in one hand. Despite their petite size, even entry-level models hold hundreds of eBooks at a time.
- **Ease of purchasing books:** Once you've registered an eReader with its corporate bookstore, it's a simple to purchase a book.



Popular eReaders include Amazon's Kindle 3 (top, \$114 – \$189) and Barnes & Noble's Nook Color (bottom, \$249).

Generally speaking, you can begin reading an eBook within a minute or two of buying it. This is certainly more convenient than buying a print book from either an online or local bookseller.

- **Price of books:** The price of an eBook tends to be somewhat lower than an equivalent hardcover, though this is often not the case for current bestsellers, whose prices tend to be heavily discounted in hardcover.
- **Finding information within books:** Because the full text of eBooks is searchable, it's easy to find specific words, dates and phrases within a book. Consequently, even poorly indexed nonfiction books become more useful and novels with scores of characters can be more readily unraveled.



The Amazon Kindle and other eReaders make it easy to search books for words and phrases.

What should I consider when buying a device?

- **eReader vs. tablet:** One of the critical early decisions you'll need to make is whether an eReader is the best choice for you, or if you might be better served with a multifunction device like a tablet (e.g., iPad). Dedicated eReaders tend to be lighter, smaller and cheaper than their tablet cousins. Their single-minded focus on displaying the written word means that eReaders are unlikely to add many bells and whistles other than email retrieval or basic Internet browsing. The Barnes and Noble Nook Color is a noteworthy exception.

Tablet devices, on the other hand, are capable of running thousands of different applications (apps for short), allowing you to check the weather forecast, monitor your investment portfolio, navigate to an unfamiliar destination, play games and much more. If you're expecting to read eBooks occasionally but are intrigued by additional app functionality, you should take a close look at a tablet device.

The Barnes and Noble Nook Color (\$250) straddles the worlds of dedicated eReaders and tablets. It's got a beautiful color screen yet is smaller and lighter than most tablets. The Nook Color is capable of running applications like a tablet, but the number of

offerings for the Nook Color are in the hundreds rather than the hundreds of thousands for iPads and Android Tablets.

- **Screen technology:** Among dedicated eReaders, you'll need to make a choice between a black-and-white/grayscale screen and a color screen. Black-and-white screens are based on E-Ink technology (*eink.com*), which is designed to replicate the printed page as closely as possible. E-Ink screens are purported to cause less eye-strain than color models (which use the same technology as LCD monitors). On the other hand, color screens are clearly superior in displaying the nuances of illustrated books and magazines and have the added benefit of playing video and games.

One other thing to consider when deciding on a screen type – battery life. E-Ink screens have incredible battery life. It wouldn't be uncommon to use one for three or four weeks before recharging. On a color eReader, you'll probably need to recharge after a full-day's use. E-Ink screens are fabulous in sunlight, while color eReader screens are nearly impossible to read outside unless in shade. Conversely, E-Ink screens can't be seen in a dark room, while color models have a built-in backlight.



Amazon's Kindle and other black-and-white eReaders use E-Ink displays for long battery life and soothing screens which evoke the printed page.

- **Page-turning method:** Some eBook Readers (notably Kindle) require you to press buttons to turn pages, but recent models like the new Nook incorporate touch-screen technology. This allows you to swipe a finger or tap the edge of the screen to move forward or backward in a book.

What emerging developments might affect my buying decision?

- **Tablet wars:** New entrants at the low end of the tablet market may provide alternatives to Barnes and Noble's category-blurring Nook Color eReader. Specifically, Amazon is rumored to have a 7" touch-screen color tablet in that price range due for release sometime in the next few months.

- **Holiday shopping season:** Manufacturers often introduce new device models or provide special incentives on existing models to spur sales in the last quarter of the calendar year. If you're not in a big hurry, it may pay to wait a little while to see what happens.
- **Amazon's possible Netflix model for books:** another Amazon rumor gives Amazon Prime members (\$79 per year for unlimited free 2-day shipping) free access to a portion of their massive Kindle book inventory (part of its back catalog, most likely). This would benefit Kindle, iPad, Android tablet and [rumored] Amazon tablet users, each of which would likely be able to access Kindle books. Amazon will need to convince reluctant publishers to cooperate in order for this to occur. Business models which potentially decrease the perceived value of individual book sales frighten publishers, a group historically resistant to change.

Conclusion

It's an exciting time for readers of eBooks, as the devices which display them are joining the mainstream. Prices continue to drop for dedicated eBook readers, and the tablet wars to dethrone the iPad may invade the low end of the price range. Barnes and Noble's well-received Nook Color has thrived at the \$250 price point without much competition, but new models just past the horizon promise to make it interesting.

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 ext. 225.

An archive of Tech Talk issues can be found at: tinyurl.com/HPL-techtalk.

Mike Oetting, Reference Librarian
9/27/2011



20 East Maple St.
Hinsdale IL 60521
630-986-1976
www.hinsdalelibrary.info
reference@hinsdalelibrary.info