



The SAGE Encyclopedia of Online Education

E-Books

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An e-book is a book-length text document in digital form that is formatted to be read on electronic screens such as e-readers, computers, tablets, and mobile phones. E-books usually have the traditional elements of a print book, such as tables of contents, title pages, indexes, and page numbers. Like print books, e-books include books from trade publishers (popular works) and scholarly publishers, including university presses, as well as reference publishers. The focus of this entry is on the scholarly and reference publishers that traditionally serve the academic market. This entry discusses the evolution of e-books, including the influence of e-readers and the development of Google Books. It then discusses the use of e-books in academic libraries and the growing popularity of e-books.

First-generation e-books (1990–1999) were available only on the Internet and were not downloadable. There was no off-line access, and the e-books were viewable only on a desktop or laptop computer. These early e-book sites contained only texts available in the public domain, meaning they were no longer under copyright protection or were a work that failed to meet the requirements for copyright protection and could be used freely without permission. Examples include materials available through Project Gutenberg (classic works of literature and reference works) or the Perseus Project (a collection of ancient Greek texts). This was an important advancement in making research available to scholars and making large collections available online. These e-books were also a leap forward with regard to utilizing aspects of multimedia, such as dictionary definitions and images delivered alongside relevant text, but they were less useful for the average student as the collections were mostly limited to classical works.

Second-generation e-books (2000–2006) were still not very popular with readers as the experience of reading an e-book from cover to cover on a computer was not very enjoyable. Though some readers adopted PDAs (personal digital assistants), these devices were not ubiquitous, so for most users, reading an e-book required the user to be tied to a desktop computer or a laptop to read. At that time, e-books were often consulted only if the print book was inaccessible or unavailable, such as by distance education students. Increasingly, reference materials such as the *Encyclopedia Britannica* and the *Oxford English Dictionary* were adopted online. These materials are especially suited to online usability since users do not read a reference book in its entirety but rather look up information on a particular subject and read only a portion of it. Unlike traditional books, reference books quickly became popular as e-books.

E-Readers and E-Books

The launch of the Kindle e-reader in 2007 is often regarded as the beginning of the acceptance by consumers of e-reader technology. It revolutionized the e-reader market, sparking a boom in the trade of e-book publishing. Much of the commercial success of individual e-readers has been linked to the ability to purchase and download books directly from large e-book vendors such as Barnes & Noble and Amazon, who have each developed and marketed their own readers, the Nook and the Kindle, respectively. Hence, different e-readers support different formats, and this has fragmented the e-book market. Even so, Amazon has now become the largest retailer of e-books in the United States and announced in 2011 that its e-book sales have now outpaced its print book sales. A Pew Research Center study confirms that e-reading is on the rise; in January 2014, Pew reported that 28% of Americans surveyed had read an e-book in the previous year, up from 23% in 2012.

E-Books and Google Books

In 2004, Google entered the e-books field when it unveiled Google Books, which digitized book content acquired from publishers and displayed the content. Some publishers saw Google Books as a way to gain publicity for their books and drive up sales, since only a portion of the book was made available for free. Far more controversial was the Google Print Library Project, where Google digitized book content, mostly nonfiction and out-of-print titles, from major research libraries. The Google Print Library Project does not put entire books online for free. If a book is still protected by copyright, the user's search results will show only the brief section of the book that includes the word or phrase searched and the page number it appears on, along with details about the book.

In 2005, the Association of American Publishers and the Authors Guild of America launched a class action lawsuit against Google claiming copyright infringement. A settlement was originally reached in 2008 that would require Google to compensate authors and publishers, but in 2011, a New York federal judge rejected the legal settlement. In 2013, the judge issued a ruling saying that Google's use of the works was "fair use" under copyright law. "Fair use" is an exception to copyright law that allows portions of the copyrighted work to be used in certain instances, usually by altering or using the original work in a new "transformative" way. The judge deemed that providing snippets of book text facilitated book searching in a way similar to a library catalog and constitutes a transformative use and so dismissed the case.

E-Book Use in Academic Libraries

NetLibrary was one of the first e-book providers to begin selling e-books from scholarly book publishers to the academic library market. NetLibrary was founded in 1998, launched in 2000, and followed a traditional purchasing model. It sold e-books on a title-by-title basis at the hardcover edition price plus an annual maintenance fee or a one-time perpetual access fee of 50% of the cost of the book price. In addition to the somewhat cumbersome pricing model, there were weaknesses in its delivery model that did not take advantage of the electronic environment and restricted the use of its e-books to one user at a time to mirror traditional lending practices, as well as limiting or prohibiting printing and downloading. OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) purchased the assets of NetLibrary from bankruptcy in 2002 to protect libraries' investments in e-book content purchases. It was not until OCLC sold NetLibrary to EBSCO that new purchase and licensing models evolved that would ensure greater access to the important e-book resources in which many libraries had already invested.

Another key academic e-book provider was ebrary. Founded in 1999, ebrary has been largely successful in the academic market and was acquired by ProQuest in 2011. Both EBSCO (NetLibrary) and ebrary as well as most other e-book providers now are served on platforms that add online functionality such as dictionary lookup, annotation tools, highlighting tools, in-text search capabilities, and the ability to download and read off-line on mobile or portable devices. In addition, many vendors such as ebrary and EBSCO have a solution that allows the e-books to be read with screen reader technology such as JAWS (Job Access With Speech).

Historically, e-books were print books that were converted to digital format and had little, if any, of this functionality. Now, some titles are "born digital," meaning that they have never been published in print and are only available as e-books, though this is still much rarer than born-digital journals. More commonly, books are published in print first and then published as an e-book several months later. However, some books are still not available as e-books; for

example, books with the potential for course adoption, especially textbooks, are rarely available for institutional purchase. However, a trend is developing where booksellers such as Amazon, Barnes & Noble, and eCampus are offering, for rent or purchase, textbooks as e-books as a more convenient and often more affordable option for students.

Unfortunately, there is still inconsistency in the e-books lending model concerning institutional purchase or subscription, as individual titles may vary with regard to the number of users, or “seats,” that can be purchased for a given title. Some titles can be purchased with unlimited users, some with multiusers (usually three simultaneous users), and some only allow single users (only one user may access the book at a time). Titles can also be offered either as “nonlinear lending” titles, which allow an unlimited amount of concurrent loans for a maximum of 325 loan days per year, or as “textbook” loans, which limit the title to three users at a time for downloading, with a limit of 325 loan days per year. And almost all models make the book unavailable to other users for the loan period (usually 7 to 14 days) if the book is downloaded rather than just read online, again mimicking the traditional print book checkout model. However, if the title has been purchased with multiusers (three users), then only one seat is used when the book is downloaded. The other two users/seats can still be used to view the e-book online.

E-Book Usage

A snapshot of academic libraries shows that e-book use is on the rise at most institutions. Not so long ago, e-book usage was very low at academic institutions mainly due to limited scholarly publishing of e-books, restrictive reading and download environments set by publishers, and low adoption of e-reader and other mobile devices. Most publishers now offer e-book options for their titles, and data from a 2006 study showed that though print circulation at academic libraries has gone down, e-book circulation at some academic libraries has risen to account for about 23% of the total circulation, reaching nearly the level of print book circulation. Format is becoming less of a constraint, and content is the most important factor as evidenced by a 2011 survey reported by Allen McKiel, which showed 54% of students using e-books. Of that number, 74% reported using e-books for research or assignments, while 79% reported using print books for research or assignments. Other studies confirm that users choose e-books because they are convenient to use when working from home and are searchable.

Many studies have shown that e-books are especially popular in education, medicine, psychology, computing, and the science, technology, engineering, and math fields. Not surprisingly, computer science books are by far the most popular e-books in academic libraries. This is most likely due to the importance of currency in this field as well as the likelihood that computer scientists value e-books as the information is delivered online at their point of need. In the social sciences, business, and literature, a single title was equally likely to be used in print and e-book format. Humanities scholars remain somewhat more reluctant to embrace the use of e-books, with a survey at the University of Denver showing 68% of all humanities researchers (comprising art and art history, English, history, religion, languages and literature, music, philosophy, and theater) reporting that they would always prefer the print version over an e-book. However, as publishing of quality e-book collections continues to grow in the humanities—for example, Books at JSTOR’s collections including *Manuscript of Women’s Letters and Diaries* and *Oxford Scholarship Online*—humanities researchers may find e-books beneficial and become less averse to using them.

Ownership of devices on which to read e-book content is also widespread. A Pew survey

found that, as of January 2014, 42% of adults owned tablet computers and 32% of adults owned an e-book reading device such as a Kindle or Nook reader. As of the time of the survey, 50% of American adults had a dedicated handheld device—a tablet, an e-reader, or both—for reading electronic content, and with the continued popularity of these devices, that number will likely continue to grow. This is a critical turning point as portability is crucial to the future viability of e-books.

Functionality of e-books offered to academic libraries continues to improve. As more publishers increase functionality, such as instituting more liberal downloading and printing policies and the ability to download e-books to e-readers and other mobile devices, student use will likely continue to increase. However, interoperability is still a concern in a publishing world where most publishers are not adhering to the EPUB standard and downloading academic e-books is still a cumbersome process. Inconsistent lending models also make for a confusing e-book environment.

See also[E-Readers](#)

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Further Readings

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