

# The changing face of reading

At the beginning of April 2010, the computer giant Apple put their iPad on the market in the US. One of the features available on this new gadget is iBooks, an electronic book reader which allows customers to read books, and also to browse and buy through the iBookstore. Ebooks are not a new thing – Sony entered the market as long ago as 2004 and Amazon's Kindle has been available since 2007 – but it is predicted that the number of ereaders will now continue to grow at an even faster rate. Ereading is just the latest stage in the development of reading.

Reading and writing materials have already changed dramatically over history. Thousands of years ago, writing was not on paper but on tablets made of clay. Writing was carved into the clay before it was baked to become hard. Different civilisations also used other materials such as bone, tortoise shells or papyrus.

Papyrus was a plant which grew on the banks of the Nile, in Egypt. It was used by the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans for writing and also to make boats, mats, baskets and ropes even in the third millennium BC. Our word *paper* comes from the ancient Greek name for the plant, *papyros*. Later, animal skins became more popular. A type of paper, as we know it, was introduced in the 2nd century AD by the Chinese and arrived in Europe in the 11<sup>th</sup> century AD via the Arabs.

The use of paper and, very importantly, the invention of the printing press, gave birth to books as we know them today. The earliest evidence of printing comes from China, and dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century\*, when wooden blocks were used. However, the first mechanical printing press was invented in Germany by Gutenberg in 1440. News of this invention spread very quickly and by 1500 about 2,500 European cities had them, printing books in huge quantities at more affordable prices.

The printing press changed the way people communicated. By spreading knowledge and ideas, it also radically changed the power and shape of society. Reading was no longer in the hands of a few (the literary and religious, the rich and powerful); as the number of printed materials grew, education also developed. Over the centuries, the process of reading changed too, from being a mainly public, oral activity to a silent, private one. Even so, today literacy rates vary considerably: in some countries such as the UK and Japan it is 99%, yet in other countries it is still below 30%.

It remains to be seen what the impact of ereaders will be and whether they will replace printed books, or serve a different function. Paper books have, after all, been with us for almost a thousand years. Whatever happens, it looks as if ereaders are here to stay!

\* The *Diamond Sutra* text is a Chinese Buddhist document, written in 868 AD. This is the earliest dated printed book in the world (currently in the British Library).

**1** Before looking at the text, put these events in order:

- a Literacy rates grew and grew
- b Printing was done by hand using woodblocks
- c Thousands of books were produced
- d Animal skins were used for writing
- e The ebook was invented
- f The machine called 'the printing press' was invented
- g People wrote on material called 'papyrus'
- h People used clay tablets to write on
- i Paper was invented

**2** Now check if you were right by reading the text.

3 What does the text say about the following? Complete the sentences.

- 1 iBooks lets customers ... (paragraph 1)
- 2 More and more people ... (paragraph 1)
- 3 The different writing materials mentioned in the text are ... (paragraphs 2 & 3)
- 4 The first type of printing used ... (paragraph 4)
- 5 The huge growth in the number of printing presses meant that books ... (paragraph 4)
- 6 The printing press changed society because ... (paragraph 5)
- 7 The way of reading has developed over history, changing from ... (paragraph 5)

4 In what way do you think reading an ebook (or a specially formatted newspaper or magazine) might be different than a paper one? Write a list with your partner.

5 Look at the following statements about ereading. Which comments are 'for' and which are 'against'?

- a Reading from a screen will give you a headache, especially if you already spend lots of time in front of one.
- b You can order and then start reading a new book in just a few seconds.
- c It's private. You can sit on a train and no one else knows what you are reading.
- d Think of the dangers – credit card fraud, viruses, piracy.
- e It's much 'greener': it's kinder on our trees. Think about costs of production and disposal.
- f It might encourage the younger generation to read more, and maybe read more widely.
- g Being able to read and buy books, as well as have all the other normal things like emailing, sounds great. It's so convenient!
- h I'm tired of all these gadgets to get information. I want to hold something real.
- i I think it might help people who have poor eyesight, as you can change the size of the writing and also the lighting.
- j You can carry hundreds of books around with you, and you can take them anywhere.
- k If you drop it in the bath or knock it against a wall, you've lost your whole library.
- l In the end, prices of these books will fall and they'll be much cheaper as there are no printing or shipping costs.
- m It requires power of some sort, unlike a paper book.
- n It's great for studying as you can make notes, highlight, and so on.

6 Discuss the following in groups of three.

- What for you are the main arguments for and against ereading?
- Which points do you agree with and why?
- Are you/will you become an ereader? Why/why not?
- Do you think ereaders will replace books? Why/why not?

## Glossary

**clay** (*noun*) - a type of heavy, wet soil used for making cups, plates and other objects  
**dramatically** (*adverb*) - if something changes dramatically, it is surprising and sudden  
**invent** (*verb*) - to design or create something that did not exist before (*noun*) **invention**  
**literacy rate** (*noun*) - the number of people who can read and write  
**printing press** (*noun*) - the machine used to produce writing by pressing ink onto paper  
**spread** (*verb*) - if information spreads, it becomes known by more people than before  
**tablet** (*noun*) - a flat piece of stone with writing on it  
**tortoise** (*noun*) - an animal that walks slowly and can pull its head and legs into the hard shell on its back