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## [E-Books. The Next Step In The Evolution Of Books](#)

### *From Gutenberg to the e-Reader*

Writing has been one of the most important discoveries in the history of mankind. Practically, without writing, our world would have been a completely different place. Starting with the clay tablets from Sumer, and up to the modern-day text editing programs, writing has been the most important form of communication used to spread ideas, concepts, theories, namely - the human culture. And when we think of writing, one of the first words that come to mind is "book". Books have been, for hundreds of years, the only means of transmitting various information (religious, scientific, laic, etc), their evolution mirroring mankind's technological evolution. Thus, for quite a long time, books have been written by hand and copied by persons specially trained and qualified just for this particular job. Then, with the discovery of the printing press (around 1450 in Europe, a lot earlier in China and Korea), things simplified, and books have become much more accessible to the general public than ever before. However, the development of the concept of "book" has taken a break since that time, and remained practically unchanged, for hundreds of years. Up until now, that is, because books have made the next step in their evolution - the electronic book, or e-book, has been developed. The e-book is the digital version of a classical book (either already printed, or distributed just in a digital format), a version which can be viewed on a computer or on other compatible devices. Although books are a great leap forward in the evolution of culture, they do have quite a lot of problems, both internal (a large number of formats and, thus, a large number of programs required for reading them), as well as external, represented, among other things, by piracy, which affects the only person that should benefit from a book - it's author. Let's start with the problem of formats. E-books can be encountered in a large number of variants, starting from the already "classical" .txt or .doc formats and ending with the scanned images of actual printed books. Each format has its own pluses and minuses, the most popular being those which allow the search of a certain term or phrase within the text. It's quite difficult to say which is the best format, considering how young this particular field is, but here is the list of the most important such formats: .rtf (rich text format), .pdf (portable document format, from Adobe), .pdb (the eReader, former Palm Digital Media format), HTML, CHM, TEX, and many others. Quite obviously, such a huge number of alternative formats require the readers to install quite a large number of programs in order to handle (almost) all of them, which is not quite to most user's predilection. Another major problem is that of piracy. The e-books are circulating almost for free on the Internet, and can be very easily found by using the most common file-sharing programs. It's also true that people are not so interested in them, as they want to get the latest movies, for example (which says a lot about the people's reading habits), but this doesn't really change the fact that, after all, because of this situation, authors are losing money. This is probably the reason why most writers oppose to the idea of transferring into a digital format all of their works, since that would strongly diminish the sales of common paperbacks. However, this is one of the most important problems of paperbacks nowadays. They are generally too expensive (as their amount is generally low, the production costs are higher), and that's why people prefer waiting for the movie based on that particular book or for the moment someone will decide to turn it into an e-book, and share it on the Internet. This situation offers a great boost to e-books, since the costs of publishing book of this type are practically close to zero. A third problem is that of viewing such materials. Reading such a book on the computer's screen for hours is not exactly the healthiest thing in the world. However, there are some solutions even to this issue, two of the most important being text-to-speech programs (the "voices", however, are not always

quite intelligible) and devices designed especially for reading e-books, like those developed by Philips or Sony, which are less harmful for the eyes. Moreover, as the desktop display's technology advances, they're becoming less and less stressful for the eyes, and it's quite possible that, at some point, the eye won't detect any differences between reading a page from a "traditional book", and reading a page from an e-book. I've talked quite enough about the problems and the disadvantages of e-books, and it's now time to say something about their pluses. First and foremost, the storage space they occupy is very small, and all the books in the history of the world could actually be stored on one big hard disk (of course, depending on the format chosen for the e-book). Also, the books in this format are much more accessible and portable, which is quite an important factor nowadays. The third important advantage is the very low cost of publishing, another critical factor in the evolution of e-books. It's quite possible that e-books are really the future, and that, at some point, classical, paperbacks will be considered just collectors' items. This moment is still far away, but the signs of its arrival are already visible. However, this future is conditioned by 2 major factors: the development of technologies that allow an e-book to be read just as easy as a normal one, and the establishment of a channel of distribution that will eliminate all the "middlemen" (agents, publishing houses, etc.), between an author and its public. Whether these 2 factors will be attained or not, only time will tell.