



# **The SAGE Encyclopedia of Online Education**

## **E-Readers**

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E-readers are intended to serve as devices on which to read electronic books (e-books) and historically have only a single function. The main advantages of e-book readers over previous devices has been portability, the ability to read off-line, longer battery life, and easier-to-read screens, especially in bright sunlight. This is achieved by using electronic paper technology, which drastically reduces screen glare, making it easier to read text. Electronic paper is available only in black and white. However, newer e-readers are now being marketed that offer color, use a backlit screen, and have touch screen capabilities that function more like a tablet, ever blurring the line between e-reader and tablet. A Pew Research Center 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. At the time of the survey, half of American adults had a tablet computer, an e-reader, or both.

A tablet typically has a faster screen than an e-reader, making it more suitable for interactivity. Tablets are also more versatile, allowing users to access all types of content including streaming media, Web pages, and music. At one time, e-readers were the only device one could use to read a book off-line, that is, without an Internet connection. However, increasingly, there are device-specific applications, or apps, such as the Kindle reading app and Bluefire Reader, that allow users to download an e-book and then read it off-line on various mobile devices.

E-readers can connect to the Web through Wi-Fi and often come with built-in software that provides a link to a proprietary e-book seller, allowing the user to buy, borrow, and receive digital e-books through the seller. In this way, the books owned by the user are managed in the cloud, and the e-reader is able to download material from any location.

### **Commercial Success**

The Kindle e-reader, first introduced in 2007, is usually seen as leading to readers' acceptance of e-reader technology. The Kindle e-reader used electronic paper technology to create the first commercially successful e-reader. There were a number of marginally successful e-readers before that, but the Kindle revolutionized the e-reader market. 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, which have each developed and marketed their own e-readers—the Nook and the Kindle, respectively. It is important to note that Kindle e-books cannot be read on Nooks and vice versa. Both the Kindle and the Nook use a proprietary format that does not conform to the industry-standard EPUB file format, and that locks the user into only buying books from the proprietor's website.

### **E-Readers and Academic E-Book Platforms**

The adoption of e-readers by academic institutions was slow due to the more limited availability of titles and publishers as well as restrictions by academic publishers offering e-books, which led to low use of e-readers in academia. Only about 18% of academic library users utilized any e-reader device as of 2011. Net Library and ebrary were the first e-book providers to begin selling e-books to the academic library market. Net Library was founded in 1998 and launched in 2000. There were weaknesses in its model such as restricting the use of their e-books to one user at a time, limited or no printing, and limitations for downloading. OCLC (Online Computer Library Center) purchased the assets of Net Library in 2002 from

bankruptcy to protect libraries' investments in e-book content purchases. It was not until OCLC members sold Net Library to EBSCO that new purchase and licensing models evolved that would ensure greater access to the important e-book resources of libraries, resulting in more liberal downloading and printing policies as well as the ability to download e-books to e-readers and other mobile devices.

Another issue relevant to the use of e-readers in the academic environment has to do with accessibility. In 2009, Arizona State University (ASU), Case Western Reserve University, the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia, Pace University, Princeton University, and Reed College were among the schools that announced their participation in a pilot project using Amazon Kindle DX e-readers. ASU was sued by the National Federation of the Blind, the American Council of the Blind, and a visually challenged ASU student, who charged that the program would be inaccessible to blind students in violation of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Complaints were also filed with the U.S. Department of Justice and the U.S. Education Department against other universities in the Kindle DX pilot program.

In January 2010, ASU reached a settlement with the Justice Department and advocates for the blind in which it agreed to discontinue using the Kindle DX in classes. Shortly afterward, the Justice Department announced settlements with Case Western Reserve University, Pace University, and Reed College under which the universities agreed not to "purchase, recommend or promote use of the Kindle DX, or any other dedicated electronic book reader, unless the devices are fully accessible to students who are blind and have low vision" (U.S. Department of Justice, 2010, n.p.).

In the current environment of e-readers, downloading academic published e-books to devices requires the downloading and use of special software to transfer e-books to the device. The software currently being used is Adobe Digital Editions. Users must download this software and sign up for an Adobe ID account. In addition, for many Android and iOS devices, users must also download the Bluefire Reader to allow off-line reading on mobile devices, so the process is still somewhat cumbersome. Even today, some publishers still do not allow downloading of their e-books. Though reading on portable devices is on the rise, accessibility, downloading, and nonconformance to EPUB standards continue to challenge the use of e-readers in distance education and academic environments.

**See also** [Digital Divide](#); [E-Books](#); [E-Journals](#); [iTunes U](#)

## Websites

George Mason University InfoGuides: <http://infoguides.gmu.edu/ereaders>

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## Further Readings

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