

The History of Publishing - A VERY Short Dissertation

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How did we get here? While not a philosophical discussion on the meaning of life, you might be interested in understanding a little more about the history of publishing when considering with whom you'll publish your book. What technology do they use? How do they actually print the book? Why do some dogs drool more than others? These and other questions are answered in this article.

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This will in no way be an exhaustive study on the history of publishing. In fact, my primary purpose for this article is to lay the groundwork for helping you understand the difference between offset and digital printing, and why even the biggest publishers are moving to greater use of digital printing.

First, there was the alphabet. After all, nobody will understand what you publish if they don't understand the written language.

The earliest writing, dating to the end of the 4th millennium BCE, has been found in Mesopotamia and Egypt. Writing involves the use of a system of signs or symbols to represent the spoken language. In Mesopotamia, scribes recorded commercial transactions on clay tablets. In Egypt, hieroglyphics were inscribed in stone and written on papyrus. The earliest writing took the form of pictographic signs in which pictures were used to represent words and objects.

I guess you can say that even cave wall paintings, which date back before the invention of cell phones, were a form of publishing. At least they endured, which is more than we can say for many books published today.

But publishing really started with the Egyptians, who used reeds as the raw material and glued the finished sheets of paper together to make long rolls of paper on which they wrote their books, which are called scrolls. It was kind of like reading a painfully long one-page sales letter on the Internet, only with prettier pictures.

From what I could gather, modern reproduction of the movable type was invented by Pi Sheng in China between 1041 and 1048, and not by Johann Gutenberg, as is universally believed in the West. But, like many inventions, he or she who does the best marketing job wins. Thus, we have the "printing press", which is essentially a form of the original movable type invented about a thousand years ago.

And, until the advent of laser (digital) printers, this technology didn't change a whole lot over the years - a few tweaks here and there, but essentially the same technology.

In 1450 Gutenberg printed his 42-line Bible in Mainz on a quality of handmade paper which remains unsurpassed to this day. 26 Years later William Caxton brought the art of printing to England, and in 1486 the first English colored illustrated book was printed in St. Albans.

Various other improvements in color and binding came slowly, but consistently. In about 1832, we saw a huge improvement in bookbinding with the invention of sewing machine by Philip Watt of London. And, in 1838, a method of color printing in which four relief blocks of wood or metal rotated and impressed in turn on to a sheet of paper (the four-color print process).

Throughout the next hundred or so years, we saw a proliferation of publishing companies (press companies) who published books, magazines, and whatever else could be pressed onto paper.

In 1944, Xerography (Xerox copies) was invented. In 1976, Ink-jet printing was announced by IBM (not HP). And now, ladies and gentlemen (drum roll, please), we are in the age of digital (laser) printing.

Digital printing is important, first because the technology has improved enough to ensure a high standard of quality, and second because the cost per book is dropping steadily every month.

In fact, traditional publishers are using digital printing for short runs (fewer copies of the book) and for reprints of books, where they're not printing several thousand copies of a book. My prediction is that as the technology continues to improve, you'll see many more publishers using digital printing as a method of choice.

What this means for you, the writer, is greater accessibility to even traditional publishers, as they realize they don't have to print and sell 10,000 copies of a book to make a profit. Hooray for the little guy.

For a good description of the difference between "offset" printing (traditionally used to print hundreds, or thousands of copies of a book cheaply and quickly), and digital printing, be sure to read the third article in this series: [Print on Demand versus Offset Printing](#).