



By the Book!

 **beanstack** originals



By the Book!

Discover the history of books from ancient times to the far-off future.



Calling all bookworms: Have you ever wondered about the history behind your favorite page turner? Get ready to read about the evolution of books, from historic scrolls to high-tech gadgets.

Before Books

It might be strange to think of a world without books, but for much of human history, stories weren't written down. Instead, people told stories out loud to one another or sang them in the form of chants and songs. (Imagine: Instead of a book report, you might have had to memorize the whole "book" itself!) However, with the invention of writing about 5,000 years ago, people began to record information in a variety of ways.

But you might not recognize these ancient books as, well, books. That's because these first volumes weren't written on sheets of paper and bound between covers, like many are today.

Instead, many records and tales were written on flat sheets of metal, leather, stone, clay, or even bone. In about 3000 BCE, the ancient Egyptians came up with a new type of material known as papyrus. Made from the papyrus plant, papyrus could be turned into flat sheets and rolled into scrolls, which functioned as early books. Papyrus was so popular that it was used around the Mediterranean and Europe for the next 3,000 years!

FUN FACT

The first known printed book was made in China in approximately 868 CE.



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People in other places around the world were also developing writing materials. Across western Asia and the Mediterranean, people started to write on animal skins, which they stretched and dried to form smooth surfaces. Paper didn't appear until about 2,000 years ago in ancient China, where people created an early version from hemp plants. According to legend, the invention was accidental, when someone left hemp in the pockets of the clothes they were washing! However, it wasn't until about a thousand years later (sometime between the second and fourth centuries) when the modern book finally appeared. During that time, ancient Romans began folding sheets of animal skins or papyrus together, and then sewing them between wooden boards. They called this the codex.



A page of colorful illustrations and handwritten lettering in an ancient manuscript.

Pressing Ahead

For much of history, books took a very long time to make, as they had to be written out by hand. But thanks to inventors in ancient China, the process started to get easier about 1,000 years ago. Historians aren't sure who exactly first invented the printing press, but they know that people in China used seals, which are similar to stamps, to print images and characters as far back as 2,000 years ago. By the ninth century, people in China figured out a way to create some of the first-ever printed books. To do this, they used moveable wooden blocks, which could be coated in ink and arranged to print text on paper.



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With the invention of the printing press, people in China were able to make many more books than before. This led to more and more people learning how to read! However, it would still be centuries before this invention became popular in Europe. In the 1450s, a German printer named Johannes Gutenberg announced that he invented a machine that printed books using moveable parts. Historians aren't sure if Gutenberg invented his version independently, or if he made changes to an existing version from eastern Asia. Either way, the Gutenberg printing press changed the history of Europe forever by making books available to almost everyone.

To the Future

As printing presses spread across the world, people were able to read more than ever before. But the changes didn't stop there; inventors kept improving printing presses, creating more and more books. As technology changed, so did the way people made books. In the 1800s, an American inventor created a steam-powered printing press that cranked out more printed pages than ever before. Then, in the 1950s, people found a way to use photography to help them print text so that they didn't have to move around blocks or sheets of text, which were known as plates. And in the 1980s, computer printing became popular, letting people print text directly from a machine onto a page.

But that's not all—in the 20th century, books themselves began to change. As recording technology became popular in the 1930s, people began creating audiobooks. These books didn't exist on paper, but instead were sound recordings of stories that could be played on various devices. And with the rise of the internet in the 1990s, more and more people became interested in ebooks.

DID YOU KNOW?

The largest library in the world, the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., has more than 173 million items.



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Backwards letters on old metal printing blocks, which were arranged into words on a printing press.

Like audiobooks, ebooks don't exist on any kind of paper. Instead, they are digital copies stored and read on electronic tablets, phones, and computers.

So, does this mean that future books will be unrecognizable as technology continues to change? Probably not! Scientists think that the next step in the world of books won't be to change books themselves, but rather to change how they're made. This means that future books might be made from recycled materials instead of from paper. Write on!