

Frequently Asked E-book Questions from Public Librarians

Prepared by the OITP E-book Task Force

June 2011

The OITP E-book Task Force is responding to FAQs sent to us by public librarians. (Future FAQs will focus on questions from the school library community). We anticipate that additional questions will be added over time.

1. *What are e-books?*

An e-book is a digitally expressed narrative containing text and other media. Many e-books are electronic versions of printed books; increasingly authors and content creators are creating e-books with no print analogues. Most current e-books exist as packages that can be read on computing devices using a browser-based application or on a dedicated e-reader device. Some e-books are enhanced and include indexes, dictionaries, maps, video, and geolocational or interactive elements such as simulations as an integral part of the book. Most e-book distribution platforms permit bookmarking and annotations. At this time, the majority of trade digital books that public libraries typically acquire do not presently have many of these features.

2. *How many libraries provide e-books?*

In 2011 two-thirds of U.S. public libraries offered e-books, up from 38 percent only two years before. According to *Library Journal*, 60 percent of libraries that do not currently offer e-books expect to within two years. (Source: *LJ/SLJ Virtual Summit: eBooks at the Tipping Point, October 2010.*)

3. *Why do libraries offer e-books?*

Public libraries have established relationships with their communities that begin when parents bring their very young children to the library to read books, and these relationships continue through adulthood. Many readers have purchased dedicated reading devices or multipurpose computer tablets and expect the public library to offer e-book downloads as an extension of print library lending. As people age and eyesight diminishes, e-books offer users the ability to enhance the reading experience by adjusting font size and screen background. Print disabled users have an opportunity to gain access to millions of works previously unavailable to them. Library users want books in regular print, large print, audiobook and e-book formats. Libraries want to offer the user the right book, in the right format at the right time. E-books are now part of that service.

4. *What advantages do e-books offer over traditional print books?*

- E-book readers are compact; a single e-book reader can hold thousands of traditional text based e-books.
- E-book readers are lightweight and portable

- Using the most common lending technologies, users do not incur overdue fines because e-books “time out” on a patron’s reader at the end of the loan period.
- Patrons do not have to come to the library to access and download e-books.
- E-book readers and browsers are more effective in meeting the accessibility needs of library users with print disabilities. Many have built-in screen readers, screen enlargement options and text-to-speech functionality.
- E-books do not require shipping and physical processing like traditional print books, saving staff time and money.
- When an e-book is returned, it goes back into circulation immediately with no time spent waiting for the user to return it. E-books spend no time in a book drop waiting to be checked in and no time waiting to be shelved. And there is no staff time or cost required for check in, check out, or shelving -- not to mention shelf reading!
- E-books do not require shelving like traditional print and at some point this may reduce library capital costs.
- There is a definite “cool factor” associated with e-books.

5. *What are the disadvantages of e-books?*

- Not all titles are available in digital format.
- Not all publishers are releasing digital versions simultaneously with print books. Libraries cannot easily select which titles they would rather have in digital format at the time of publication.
- Libraries often pay a premium (hosting fees) for e-books rather than getting a discount from vendors for quantity purchases of print books.
- E-book readers may not be affordable for everyone.
- Most current e-book retailers and distributors use proprietary digital rights management (DRM) software to control access to the e-book, which limits what libraries and users can do with e-books as compared to print books.
- A standardized file format for e-books is still evolving, although EPUB dominates, with EPUB3 likely to see widespread adoption.
- E-book use statistics usually cannot be tracked within the library ILS system.
- Licensing terms of use for e-books usually restricts user rights under the copyright law, such as library lending and fair use.
- There are significant reader privacy concerns.

6. *How do libraries acquire e-book service?*

Some libraries provide the service as individual libraries, while others participate in a consortium which leases the books. Most libraries use a vendor that hosts a site to manage the e-books and the portal that library patrons use to borrow the e-book. There are also several sites online that offer free e-books directly from authors, publishers or genre based interest groups.

7. *What impact does a vendor’s platform have on e-books?*

The procedures for downloading vary, which makes it more difficult for libraries to offer and support e-book service to the public. A library user may be unable to

access and download e-books that are offered only in a propriety format that requires the use of a particular e-reader.

8. *Do libraries loan e-book readers?*

Some libraries do, but this lending model might not be sustainable in the long term, and the legal issues remain unclear. Readers can be broken or stolen and their replacement adds financial burden to libraries. As reader technology evolves, libraries have to purchase new readers supporting new features and formats. Traditionally, public libraries have focused more on providing the content rather than the appliance; readers are likely to fall in price, making it less necessary for the library to provide readers.

9. *Which e-book reader is best?*

It all depends on what the reader is seeking and what the customer is willing to pay. E-book readers vary in weight, screen size, resolution and digital rights management controls. Library patrons are reading e-books on a variety of other electronic devices (phones, computers, and other handheld devices.) The types of books a reader likes will also have bearing on the device they choose. Novels and nonfiction that are primarily text are well suited to black & white e-readers; while full-color or graphics-intensive books, such as children's and lifestyle books, are best presented on multi-function tablet-style devices and computers.

10. *How are libraries responding to patrons' questions regarding e-book readers?*

Libraries are working hard with the public to help them understand the new technology and how to use it. Staff help the public make sense of the complicated e-book and e-book reader market place by offering instructional classes and tip sheets that provide information on how to make various e-book formats work on the patron's particular reader. Libraries also provide public access computers with Internet connections that facilitate access to digital books.

11. *What would libraries offering e-books like to see happen in the future?*

- Interoperability of e-book readers and platforms so that all library e-books could be downloaded to any device.
- Standard e-book format that is widely used.
- The option to purchase rather than to lease e-books, in much the same way libraries purchase print books, audiovisual, and other materials.
- Full integration of e-books into library catalogs so that the vendor's site is transparent to the user.
- Integration of e-book usage data into the ILS circulation module so that there can be a single place to generate circulation statistics for both print and digital material.

- Integrated acquisitions workflow so that e-books can be selected and made available to patrons through the established materials ordering process.
- Vendor collection development programs for digital materials that mirror programs now used for physical materials acquisitions, such as new title notifications plans and standing order programs.
- Reasonable pricing models comparable to those given on traditional print books.
- [For a nice desiderata see: <http://www.openbookmarks.org/checklist/>

12. *Where do libraries acquire e-books?*

Libraries have a number of vendors that can provide e-book service such as OverDrive, 3M, B&T, and Ebsco. Libraries need to select the company that best meets their needs in terms of scope, support, price and size. Not all vendors provide e-books from all publishers. Many e-books are also available free online. For more information on this subject go to:

<http://www.publiclibrariesonline.org/content/e-books-and-libraries-whats-available-free>

13. *What privacy issues are there related to e-books?*

New reader privacy issues emerge with digital book services. Reading history can be collected and analyzed and wind up in the hands of governments or third parties without the reader's knowledge or consent. This information may be used for targeted advertising. Libraries have strict reader privacy policies supported by state privacy law. The need for an updated federal privacy law in wake of the new digital environment is currently being considered by Congress.

14. *How long will they be allowed to be on your shelf without re-buying?*

This varies by vendor and publisher. In some cases there is a cap on the number of circulations. In others there is no limit. The supply chain is still in the process of establishing viable models.

15. *Can you use bookmarks?*

In most cases, yes.

16. *Is the cover image available?*

Almost always.

17. *What is the difference between Overdrive and vendors like Follett?*

OverDrive allows library patrons to select and download e-books. The patron can transfer downloaded books to his personal e-reader. The downloaded books expire (or, if you prefer, return themselves to the library) when due. Follett's focus is the educational market, offering books in bundles like "easy fiction." Follett books can be read via a browser. Many of their titles are delivered content via TITLEWAVE®, TitleWise®, and TitleCheck™ - their own proprietary, independent online products published and owned by Follett Library Resources. There is a license associated with the purchase similar to licenses for online journal databases. When you stop paying your annual subscription fee, you lose access to the books.

18. *I am interested in know about length of time these e-books can be downloaded and do they just disappear after so many days?*
If a library uses Adobe Content Server and Adobe Digital Editions (as OverDrive does) the loan period is up to the library. The patron can even choose from among multiple loan periods. When the loan period is up, the e-book “expires” on the patron’s PC or e-reader and can no longer be read.
19. *How many licenses are required if you have 6 to 10 people reading the same book at the same time? This has always stumped me. Once a library has purchased a license, must the library purchase more than one to allow access by its users?*
This varies by vendor and licensing model. The default OverDrive model treats an e-book like a hard copy book. If you want 6 people to be able to read it at once, you buy six copies. EBSCO has stated that they will offer plans that allow the library to pay more per “book,” but be able to loan that “book” to multiple users at once.
20. *Are there vendors for Spanish language or other language e-books?*
Yes, you can find a selection of offering on the web. Currently, Barnes & Noble’s Nook has the largest collection of Spanish language books on the market.
21. *How burdensome are the technical support questions posed by library patrons? And is it worth the commitment, given the extent of time it takes for librarians to resolve some of the connectivity/downloading problems and other technical questions posed by our patrons?*
Tampa Bay Library Consortium, for example, has a digital book collection of over 11,000 titles and serves patrons from seven library systems. Questions that are not easily answered by public service staff go to the TBLC IT shop. Questions they cannot resolve are forwarded to the OverDrive Support team. About three questions per week come in on average. Each library will be unique here, and your mileage may vary. OverDrive is developing a (paid) service that will enable patrons to get help directly from OverDrive Support. *Counter-question:* Is it worth the commitment to allow patrons to request hard copy books from home, select their own pickup location, and force the library to find the first available copy, pull it from the shelves, ship it to the patron’s chosen site, notify the patron, and then return the book to its home branch and re-shelve it when the patron finishes reading it?
22. *Why isn’t this book available as an e-book? This is one we get all the time is.*
The short answer is that not all publishers play along. As e-book usage in libraries and in the overall culture increases, it will make more sense to release the e-book first and sell it to anyone who has money.
23. *Does the library own the e-books we purchase?*
With OverDrive and probably most other vendors, the library does not own the book. It may have a perpetual lease, but it cannot resell the book, give it away, or lend it via ILL. It cannot even lend it to its own patrons without going through the vendor’s site. There are exceptions. For example, Douglas County Libraries are

working with the Colorado Independent Publishers Association and will own e-books they purchase for lending to their community. The Internet Archive has a “Publishers Program” where they are seeking to purchase titles that are then made available through lending.

24. *What format should we get?*

That will depend on the devices your patrons have and the uses they intend for the e-books. EPUB is an open standard supported and endorsed by the overwhelming majority of publishers, distributors, and trade associations, including the American Association of Publishers.

25. *Is there an industry standard for e-books?*

There is a standard format adopted by the International Digital Publishing Forum. It is EPUB. In practice, differing DRM systems prevent device interoperability, and the quality of digital books differs across publishers. However, there are a growing number of validation suites for EPUB which supports their standardization. A new version of EPUB, EPUB3, has been released for final comment before publication as a standard. See <http://idpf.org/epub/30/spec/epub30-overview.html>.

26. *What is DRM?*

DRM is digital rights management. It is a way of securing an e-book (or music or other digital file) so that only someone with the correct key can open it and use it.

27. *How does DRM work?*

There are many different forms of DRM, just as there are many types of physical locks. One simple form uses time and date and takes advantage of the fact that computers have built in clock calendars. The e-reading software on the PC checks the current date and time whenever the e-book is opened. When the current date and time are later than the e-book’s due date (which the e-reading software knows), it refuses to open the book. Some DRM systems rely on the credit card of the purchaser. Some use a complex encryption of the text and build the decryption key into their proprietary e-reader.

28. *Can all e-books be loaded onto a device, or does it depend on the vendor and the device?*

It depends on the vendor and the device. An EPUB book with no DRM could be loaded and read on any of several devices. An AZW book from Amazon can be read only on a Kindle.

29. *Why can't I open my new e-book on my device/computer?*

There are over two dozen e-book formats and probably at least that many DRM schemes. E-books are available from many sources. There are multiple computer operating systems (Windows, iOS, the Linux family, etc). If you want to open a Word document without having to fight with your HP PC, get Microsoft Word. If you have a Mac, use products that Apple supports. If you have a specific e-reader brand, and you get books only from that e-readers’ vendor (e.g., Nook and Barnes & Noble), it

will probably work easily. If you try to read an e-book with an unknown format and DRM on the first e-reader that comes by, you are likely to run into problems. Getting comfortable in this is not rocket science, but it goes beyond what an FAQ can offer.

30. *Can I convert one e-book format into another that I can read?*

You can convert almost any format into any other format. You can do this on the Web at <http://convert.com> and you can download the “calibre” software free from <http://calibre-ebook.com>. If the book is protected by DRM, you may not be able to convert it. A search engine will let you find sites that claim to have software that will strip DRM from e-books and allow you to convert them. Their claims may or may not be true. If they are true, using the software may or may not be legal.

31. *What publishers will not sell e-books to libraries? (It would be helpful if the answer included the subsidiaries as well as the main publisher name.)*

MacMillan and Simon & Shuster. Some of their subsidiaries, however, do sell e-books to libraries.

32. *What publisher will only sell e-books to libraries for a limited number of checkouts? It would be helpful if this included subsidiaries as well.*

Only HarperCollins at this time. Some subsidiaries of HarperCollins do not limit checkouts.

33. *How can I interlibrary loan an e-book?*

OCLC has developed software that will enable some ILL of e-books.

34. *One of the issues creates a dilemma for me at work. One of our missions is to serve the public libraries around the state. The big, urban centers are doing fine, but some of the small rural libraries are way behind...*

Small libraries may have trouble filling a patron’s needs for best sellers. But, if helping students with assigned reading is one of their roles, the existence of so many of the required reading classics as freely downloadable files is a slam dunk. You can get the book for the student even at the last moment after all the hard copies are out. And he can keep it. You can provide one for every person in the class. All for free. You can add a bib record to your online catalog with an 856 tag that links out to the file at Project Gutenberg or Open Library and “own” the book for all intents and purposes. E-books are great for poor and/or remote libraries.

35. *What are the advantages and disadvantages of e-books for people with disabilities?*

Advantages might include text-to-speech capabilities and font enlargement. Disadvantages might be DRM employed by publisher to prevent text-to-speech functionality. On the newer dedicated e-readers, on iPads, on smart phones and on laptops, it is easier to turn a page than it is with a hard copy book. You often have multiple ways on the same reader to turn a page: a screen tap, a key press, a mouse click, or a ‘flick’ of the finger.