E Ink, Internal Storage, Batteries, etc… What you Need to Read a Book: A Review of Seven eReaders

By Robert Martel

With worldwide e-reader sales in 2011 projected to surpass 11 million units (up 68% from 2010) it is obvious that the eReader market has grown significantly over the past three years ("Gartner Says Worldwide Sales," 2010). For now North America is the dominant region for eReader sales, with sales of over 4 million units in 2010, the majority of those in the U.S. ("Gartner Says Worldwide Sales," 2010). Neither is it surprising that many people received eReaders as gifts this past Christmas, prompting Amazon to announce in late December that their third-generation Kindle was now the company's best-selling product, eclipsing Rowling's *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* ("Third-Generation Kindle Now the Bestselling," 2010).

With so many eReaders in the hands of adults, teens, and even children, what approach are some libraries taking to promote the eReader to first-time users and those patrons unfamiliar with the technology? The Columbus In a March 2011 *School Library Journal* article titled "The Kindles Are Coming: Ereaders and Tablets are Springing up in Schools—and Librarians are Leading the way," Buffy

Metropolitan Library in Ohio launched an eReader "petting zoo," of sorts, with a display of seven different eReaders that patrons could "play with, as they would in an electronics store" (Kelly, 2011).

Another approach, one geared directly toward teens, is the creation of a Kindle Document Library for students. Media specialist/teacher-librarian Buffy Hamilton at Creekview High School in Canton, Georgia, created the *Kindles at The Unquiet Library* (2011) libguide to help students learn which books are loaded on the school's Kindles, get the latest news on eBook titles and the Kindle itself, and make requests for Kindle eBooks. The "Students Voices and Thoughts on Kindles" section of the libguide showcases short video interviews with sophomore and senior students at Creekview High School who have signed out a Kindle loaded with their favorite eBooks.

Hamilton expressed her excitement at seeing her students enthusiastic about reading. She stated that using an eReader, "gives us another way to fuel the love of reading, while creating another
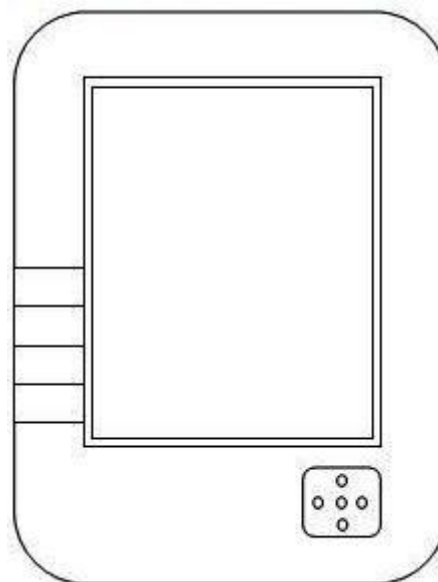
way to learn and have fun. And that's well worth the investment" (Barack, 2011). Although happy with student use of the eReader, Hamilton had a few "little things" about the Kindle she would like to see changed (Barack). Marcia Mardis, associate director of Florida State University's Partnerships Advancing Library Media Center, understands that eReader users like Hamilton and her students will have issues with whichever brand of device they choose, and recommends that teens become familiar with more than one model of eReader (Barack).

This is sound advice for everyone, but with over 60 eReader models currently available, knowing which ones are best for your library can give you an eHeadache. Just what device do you need to read an eBook? A non-comparative review of six eReaders available at Canada's big-box electronics stores, and the Kindle (available exclusively from Amazon.com), can orient you before you make that purchase. Of course, as with any rapidly changing technological market, be sure you know exactly what you are buying and whether it will serve your needs today as well as six months down the road.[1] In no particular order, we begin with:

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[1] Only Sony Canada responded to our requests for permission to use a product image. Instead of product images, line drawings of the seven eReaders have been created to show the approximate placement of each device's screen and buttons. For a more precise graphical representation of each eReader, please visit its corresponding manufacturer website.

1. Kobo 6" Wireless eReader

Retailing for $149.99, the Kobo 6" Wireless eReader is perfect for travel, allowing you to download eBooks from the public library, kobobooks.com, or purchase them online from compatible online retailers.

Key Features and Functions

- Screen Technology: E Ink
- Touchscreen: No
- Colour Screen: No
- Screen Rotation: No
- Document Formats: DRM ePUB; PDF; Adobe DRM
- Image Formats: PDF ePUB
- Audio Formats: No
- Video Formats: No
- Image Formats: PDF ePUB
- Built-In Speaker: No

- Wi-Fi: Yes
- Text Highlighting: No
- Text Size Adjustment: Yes
- Text Search: No
- Text-to-Speech: No
- Bookmarking: Yes
- Built-in Dictionary: Yes
- Note-taking: No
- Internal Storage Capacity: 1GB
- Included Memory Card: 1GB SD Card
- Battery Life: 14 Days
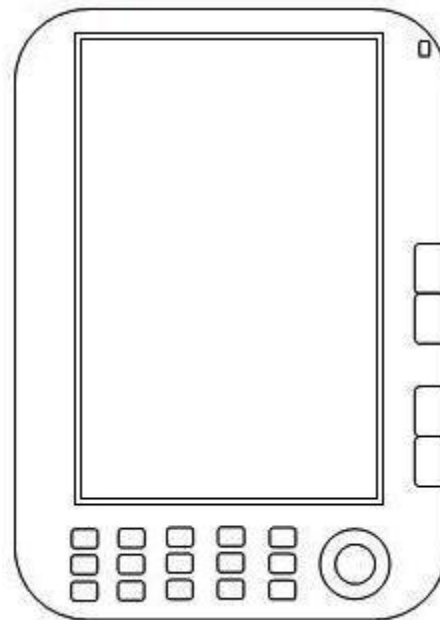- Operating System Requirements: Windows XP or Later; Mac OS X or Later

Verdict

While the Kobo 6" Wireless eReader lacks the note-taking and highlighting functions of the Kindle or Sony eReaders, or even the use of the touchscreen technology used by some of its competitors, the Kobo is easy to use and comfortable to hold. Thin, sleek, and lightweight, the Kobo feels like what I imagined an eReader would, but without more conveniently placed page turning buttons, the Kobo may work best as a two-handed device when it comes time to flip to the next page. Overall, the Kobo 6" Wireless eReader is affordable, and the wireless function provides easy online access to your favorite titles and it comes preloaded with 100 free public domain eBooks.

Favorite Feature

The Kobo Wireless eReader is a smart looking device, and cutting back on button clutter with the navigational D-pad enhances its clean look.

2. Skytex Primer 7" eBook Reader and Media Player

Retailing for $119.99, the Skytex Primer 7" eBook Reader and Media Player offers a colour screen, ideal for e-books, videos, and other digital media. Access eBooks from Google, or purchase them online from compatible retailers.

Key Features and Functions

- Screen Technology: LCD
- Touchscreen: No
- Colour Screen: Yes
- Screen Rotation: Yes

- Document Formats: PDF; TXT; Mobi; ePub; HTML; FB2

- Image Formats: JPEG; BMP; GIF

- Audio Formats: MP3; WMA; APE; FLAC; AAC

- Video Formats: AVI; RMVB; VOB; DAT; MP4; FLV; 3GP

- Built-In Speaker: Yes

- Wi-Fi: No

- Text Highlighting: No

- Text Size Adjustment: Yes

- Text Search: No

- Text-to-Speech: No

- Bookmarking: Yes

- Built-in Dictionary: No

- Note-taking: No

- Internal Storage Capacity: 2 GB

- Included Memory Card: No

- Battery Life: 8,000 Page Turns

- Operating System Requirements: Windows XP or Later; Mac OS X or Later
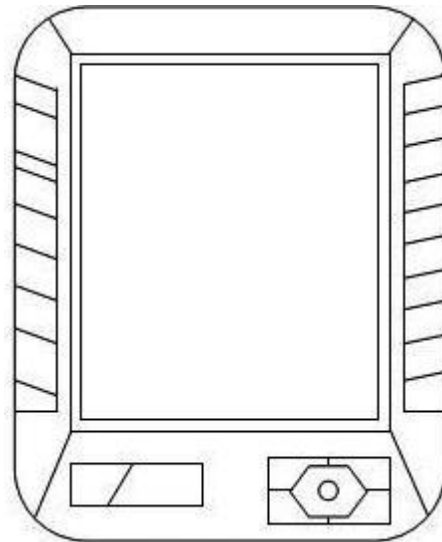
Verdict

The Skytex Primer 7" eBook Reader and Media Player shines as a multimedia device—this is where the colour, screen rotation, and multiple file format support would be needed most. As an eReader, the Skytex Primer falls a little short of what the Kobo offers. Yet, even without the text highlighting function and built in dictionary, the Skytex Primer still provides a decent reading experience. I liked the feel of the Skytex Primer 7" eBook Reader and Media Player, but for those who want an eReader first and a media tablet second, they may be disappointed—or at the very least, distracted—by this device.

Favorite Feature

When viewing newspapers or PDFs, the colour display greatly enhanced the reading experience.

3. Aluratek Libre 5" eBook Reader Pro

At $99.99, the Aluratek Libre 5" eBook Reader Pro is an affordable and compact option for carrying around your own personal library. Access eBooks from Google, your public library, or purchase them online from compatible retailers.

Key Features and Functions

- Screen Technology: LCD
- Touchscreen: No
- Colour Screen: No
- Screen Rotation: Yes
- Document Formats: ePUB; PDF; TXT; Mobi (non-DRM); PRC (non-DRM); RTF; FB2
- Image Formats: BMP; JPG; GIF; Animated GIF
- Audio Formats: MP3
- Video Formats: No
- Built-In Speaker: No
- Wi-Fi: No
- Text Highlighting: No
- Text Size Adjustment: Yes
- Text Search: Yes
- Text-to-Speech: No
- Bookmarking: Yes
- Built-in Dictionary: No
- Note-taking: No
- Internal Storage Capacity: None
- Included Memory Card: Yes
- Battery Life: 24 Hours Continuous Use
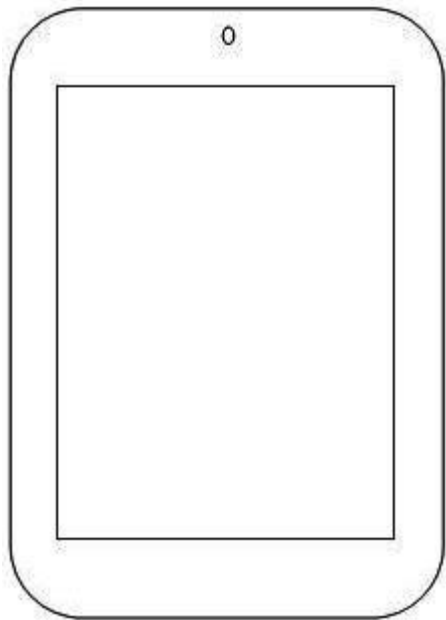- Operating System Requirements: Windows XP or Later; Mac OS X 10.4.9 or Later

Verdict

The Aluratek Libre 5" eBook Reader Pro is small but functional. I prefer a physically smoother, less chunky design in an eReader, but the size of the Aluratek makes it easy to handle. For turning pages, the device offers buttons on the front as well as an odd sliding bar on the far left. I thought the sliding bar superfluous and defaulted to using the page turning buttons on the front. Additionally, for those who like listening to music while reading, the Aluratek plays MP3 files. Overall, the Aluratek Libre 5" eBook Reader Pro is an affordable and no-frills option for someone who simply wants to read books while listening to music.

Favorite Feature

The Aluratek Libre eBook Reader Pro comes with 100 free public domain eBooks, which saves you a lot of time manually loading your favorite classics.

4. Pandigital Novel 7" Color Multimedia eReader

Retailing at $179.99, the Pandigital Novel 7" Color Multimedia eReader offers touchscreen technology, wireless access, and full colour graphics. Download eBooks from Google, your public library, or purchase them online at kobobooks.com or from other compatible retailers.

Key Features and Functions

- Screen Technology: LCD
- Touchscreen: Yes
- Colour Screen: Yes
- Screen Rotation: Yes
- Document Formats: ePUB; PDF
- Image Formats: JPG; GIF; PNG; BMP
- Audio Formats: MP3; AAC; WAV
- Video Formats: MPEG4
- Built-In Speaker: Yes
- Wi-Fi: Yes
- Text Highlighting: Yes
- Text Size Adjustment: Yes
- Text Search: Yes
- Text-to-Speech: No
- Bookmarking: Yes
- Built-in Dictionary: No
- Note-taking: Yes
- Internal Storage Capacity: 2 GB
- Included Memory Card: No
- Battery Life: 6 Hours
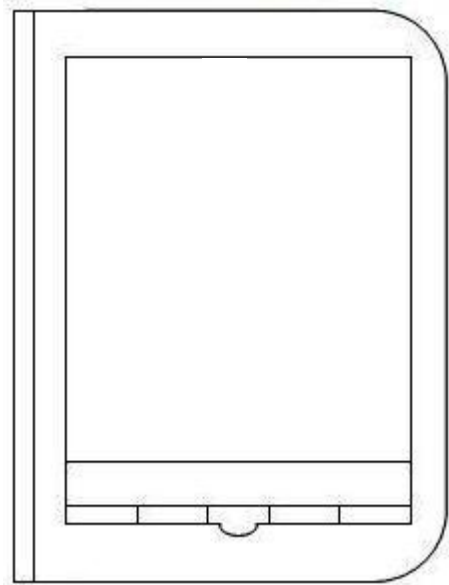- Operating System Requirements: Windows XP or Later, Mac OS X

Verdict

I liked the Pandigital Novel 7" Color Multimedia eReader. Take the best of the Skytex Primer, add touchscreen technology and Wi-Fi connectivity, and you get a very functional and attractive device like the Pandigital. Once I got used to the touchscreen sensitivity (or lack thereof), I enjoyed navigating the Pandigital. I also liked having a web browser at my fingertips. A little distracting, but taking a break from reading a book to use email or update your Facebook profile without having to set-aside the device is convenient. Unlike the Skytex Primer, the Pandigital Novel functioned like an eReader first and a media tablet second. I enjoyed using the Pandigital, even if the touchscreen function was hit and miss at the start.

Favorite Feature

Web browsing on your eReader with a colour display—enough said!

5. Sony 6" Reader Touch Edition

At $249.99, the Sony 6" Reader Touch Edition aims to offer a unique reading experience. An anti-glare touchscreen with E Ink Pearl technology, this eReader displays text with excellent clarity. Access eBooks from Google, your public library, or purchase them online at ebookstore.sony.com or from other compatible retailers.

Key Features and Functions

- Screen Technology: E Ink Pearl
- Touchscreen: Yes
- Colour Screen: No
- Screen Rotation: Yes

- Document Formats: DRM Text; ePUB; PDF; BBeBook; TXT; RTF; Microsoft Word
- Image Formats: JPG; GIF; PNG; BMP
- Audio Formats: MP3; AAC
- Video Formats: No
- Built-In Speaker: No
- Wi-Fi: No
- Text Highlighting: Yes
- Text Size Adjustment: Yes
- Text Search: Yes
- Text-to-Speech: No
- Bookmarking: Yes
- Built-in Dictionary: Yes
- Note-taking: Yes
- Internal Storage Capacity: 2 GB
- Included Memory Card: No
- Battery Life: 14 Days
- Operating System Requirements: Windows XP or Later; Mac OS X 10.4.11 or Later

Verdict

I really liked the sleek and compact design of the Sony 6" Reader Touch Edition. I found the device intuitive to use and was impressed with the responsiveness of the touchscreen. In fact, I found the Sony touchscreen experience smoother and quicker to master than with Pandigital. I had fun with the freehand note-taking and highlighting features but was a little

disappointed in the quality of the audio player. Having said that, playing music is not the reason I would buy this particular eReader. My only wish is that the device had Wi-Fi connectivity. Overall, I liked the Sony 6" Reader Touch Edition and found it to be a smart looking and high quality eReader, even if it is priced a little on the high side.

Favorite Feature

The Sony Reader's touchscreen was a pleasure to use and the inclusion of a stylus (tucked away on the right side) added to the easy note-taking and navigational precision of the device.

6. Astak 5" EZ Reader Pocket Pro

Retailing for $279.99, the Astak 5" EZ Reader Pocket Pro is the more expensive but versatile option for storing your digital library. Access eBooks from Google, your public library, or purchase them online at compatible retailers.

Key Features and Functions

- Screen Technology: E Ink
- Touchscreen: No
- Colour Screen: No
- Screen Rotation: Yes
- Document Formats: PDF; ePUB; ADE; DOC; RTF; HTML; TXT; CHM; RAR; ZIP; FB2; PPT; PDB; LIT
- Image Formats: JPG; GIF; PNG; BMP; DJVU
- Audio Formats: MP3; WOL
- Video Formats: No
- Built-In Speaker: No
- Wi-Fi: No
- Text Highlighting: No
- Text Size Adjustment: Yes
- Text Search: Yes
- Text-to-Speech: Yes
- Bookmarking: Yes
- Built-in Dictionary: No
- Note-taking: No
- Internal Storage Capacity: 512 MB
- Included Memory Card: No
- Battery Life: 8000 Page Turns
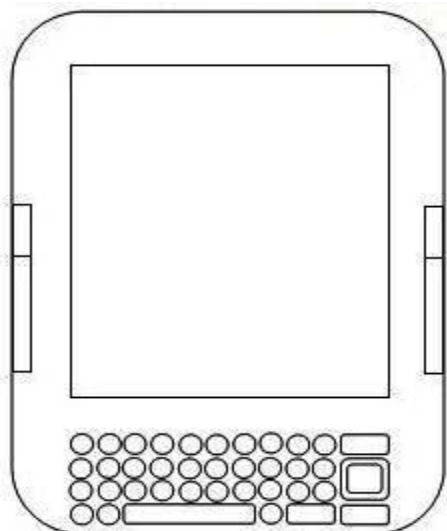- Operating System Requirements: Windows XP; Mac OS X or Later

Verdict

For its price, the Astak 5" EZ Reader Pocket Pro did not offer enough. As an eReader, the Astak functions well, even without touchscreen technology (which could have eliminated a few of those ten buttons) or a colour display. Still, for $279.99 I was at least expecting, technologically, a cross between a Pandigital and a Sony. On the plus side, the Astak is a thin and lightweight device that supports more than 20 file formats. Also, decent battery life, smooth page turning, and E Ink display clarity make up for an internal storage capacity that is a little on the stingy side. The Astak 5" EZ Reader Pocket Pro does the job but at too high a cost.

Favorite Feature

The Astak EZ Reader Pocket Pro supports more than 20 non-DRM file formats—wow.

7. Kindle 3G 6" Wireless Reading Device

Available for $189.99 (plus shipping!), and only through Amazon.com, the Kindle 3G 6" Wireless Reading Device is the most popular option on the eReader market today. Download eBooks from Project Guttenberg, or purchase Kindle books online from Amazon.com.

Key Features and Functions

- Screen Technology: E Ink Pearl
- Touchscreen: No
- Colour Screen: No
- Screen Rotation: Yes
- Document Formats: AZW; PRC; MOB; Microsoft Word; PDF; HTML; RTF
- Image Formats: JPEG; GIF; PNG; BMP
- Audio Formats: MP3; AA; AAX
- Video Formats: No
- Built-In Speaker: No
- Wi-Fi: Yes
- Text Highlighting: Yes
- Text Size Adjustment: Yes
- Text Search: Yes
- Text-to-Speech: No
- Bookmarking: Yes
- Built-in Dictionary: Yes
- Note-taking: Yes
- Internal Storage Capacity: 3 GB
- Included Memory Card: No
- Battery Life: 10 Days

- Operating System Requirements: Not Applicable

Verdict

The Kindle 3G 6" Wireless Reading Device is the first Kindle I have laid my hands on, and from what I have read it is the best generation of Kindles yet. I was surprised by the amount of buttons at the bottom of the device and thought I would have to navigate with two hands rather than one. I was wrong—the only buttons I used while reading were for turning pages, and I managed that with only my thumb. I liked the thin, lightweight design with just the right amount of plastic frame around the sides to ensure a good grip. Turning the pages went smoothly and the transition between pages of text was fluid. I liked the Kindle, but I do not think that this device is head and shoulders above the others, as its popularity might seems to indicate.

Favorite Features

My favourite feature is perhaps also the Kindle's worst: Amazon.com as the eReader's exclusive dedicated content service site. Granted, Amazon

has a great selection and low prices, but I imagine it can be frustrating to be corralled into buying your favorite title from one retailer only.

Some Advice on Selecting an eReader

The Columbus Metropolitan Library had the right idea launching an eReader "petting zoo," for its patrons. When shopping for an eReader, I recommend heading to the closest big-box electronics store and trying out every eReader model offered. Explore not only how it feels and how it functions, but look into available accessories. Cases, skins, and covers add comfort and personalization. Also, make sure you are getting exactly what you need: Will the eReader support DRM (Digital Rights Management) files? Will you be able to download titles from your local public library? Will you be satisfied buying from only one or two online eBook retailers? More importantly, investigate whether your model of eReader will survive the rapidly evolving technology of this growing market. Finally, have some fun and explore a piece of technology that all types of bibliophiles should try—at least once.

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