

Product Review: Will the Amazon Kindle replace book reading?

Ready to read everything you read on an Amazon Kindle? Read this first:

Recently I tested out the first version of the Amazon Kindle. I've never used a digital reader before. I can't compare it to the Sony Reader's, an Ectaco jeBook, the Bebook, the iRex iLiad, the Cybook, the Hanlin V2, the Foxit eSlick, or any other type of digital reader lesser known to us everyday people. But I could determine some commonalities I would expect apply to all readers that came before the Amazon Kindle and any that will come after. I will focus on these common comparisons to draw conclusions between advocating use of a digital reader and just reading a book.

I was pleased by some things about the Amazon Kindle, while not convinced by many other reasons for the marketing behind it, or other like products, with the overzealous claim that digital will eventually overtake books entirely. While most people choose to vie for one side or the other of this debate, I was not convinced that digital is necessarily a competing entity with books at all. Both formats have different positives and negatives and purposes for each, and interestingly seem to buoy one another from what I've seen. While it is true that the electronic format has steadily been replacing the print format in some areas, such as with newspapers and magazines, books have actually experienced exponential growth during the Information Age. Libraries have actually observed this anomaly for years: that as Internet use of gathering knowledge increases; ironically overall book readership has gone up not only despite electronic trends, but also perhaps because of them—and exponentially. The formats seem to go hand in hand with not only expanding knowledge, but also validating it.

Being a librarian, my love of books extends at least as deep as the average reader. And so I expected with my bias that I might take a hard stance against electronic readers, but then I really enjoyed my experience with reading the Amazon Kindle. That isn't to say that I will replace all my books and all of my reading habits with a digital reader, because it didn't surpass certain advantages to having a hard copy, but for the avid reader like me, you might just enjoy reading certain things—such as an article like this—in the digital format. I can see how reading articles, journals, blogs, and e-books may be just as well digitally viewed. Some would argue that they have no need for a digital reader, like the Kindle, when they can just purchase and read the material, like an e-book, on their personal computer. I would argue that reading from the computer for too long effects your eyes. The last thing a person wants to do after sitting in front of their computer all day at work is to come home to read from a computer screen. The computer isn't exactly easy to curl up with in bed, either. Surprisingly, like a book, the Kindle is easy on the eyes to read from, and of paperback size and weight. You might think that you don't want to have to charge something before you can use it, but batteries are lasting a longtime these days and the Kindle remains charged plenty long. But if you thought that reading the Amazon Kindle by its own light in bed, you are wrong. It doesn't yet include a feature with light enough for this, but neither do books.

The Amazon Kindle for the most part makes itself out to be a good book—in fact, many books all in one. But that is where the biggest flaw lies. The library lends me books, whereas, the Kindle requires you to buy books through Amazon. They have lots of titles but not all the titles you might want. And even if everything were monopolized through one company like an Amazon or a Google, is that what we really want? Personally, as much as I like the Digital Age, I get tired of updating my electronic equipment depending on the latest and greatest and then having to repurchase everything I own in the new format. I dread the day that all of my DVDs will become obsolete, for example. The truth is, as much as I liked the Amazon Kindle, I like books just as much.

While the Kindle provides a navigable interface, it depends on the material input as to whether it is navigable. Some e-books do not have a great table of contents and to get from one end of the book to the other requires going through a lot of pages. You kind of get lost in it, but not in the good way you want to get lost in a book. To make things worse, pages aren't identified as they would be found in hard copy, but rather are converted to a range listing a location (without any reference to that range in the table of contents or anywhere else). Taking notes within the electronic format is all right, but just as computers didn't replace printers, for the moments when you want a hard copy of your thoughts before your eyes, the Kindle (and other electronic readers) will not replace the printed pages on books (at least not in the life I lead).

In short, the Amazon Kindle should be marketed as a novelty but it is not a replacement to the classic that is books. The Kindle branding is still worthy of its place as a reading provider, as it may come in handy to access—in one portable place—much of the reading you normally would access online while you go on vacation or something. For the avid reader who plunges through many books at a time, it may even become your sole travel companion, rather than throwing a good book into your suitcase. Although, personally I only need to read one book at a time, and vacation or a business trip would not provide me enough time to read a whole book, let alone more. But even I might find reason to add a few good book reads to an electronic reader, be it e-books on my computer or a portable electronic reader. But the point remains: I can't see the Kindle or any other electronic reading device replacing books entirely in my life, let alone everyone else's lives. It would be like eliminating paper just because I can type, print, and/or send e-mails. Computers have found a great efficiency in speeding up our work processes, but when I get done with the day I don't mind slowing down and personalizing my own life's projects, such as making an old-fashioned homemade card to go with the perfect gift as opposed to sending a text message, or talking directly with friends instead of chatting through Facebook, and yes curling up with a good book where people may ask me what book I'm reading instead of first asking about what I am reading it with.