

# Words on the Page

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## [Elevators and Ebooks – Guest post by David Burnett](#)



Thanks so much to author David Burnett for stopping by and discussing the eBook vs print book war!

It was once said that elevators would replace stairs.

Why would they not? After all, elevators provide faster access than do stairs, are more efficient than are stairs, and cause less stress to the human body than do stairs. Why would one choose to tromp up a long flight of stairs instead of stepping into an elevator and being whisked away to one's destination?

Of course, it didn't happen. We have elevators, we have stairs, and we have escalators –moving stairs. They co-exist, each serving the same purpose, that of moving people and things from one floor, one level, to another.

We have all read the speculation that eReaders – Kindles, and Nooks, and iPads – will ultimately replace books. Indeed, sales of eReaders soared while bookstores closed.

The writer who reported the early speculation about elevators, however, asserted that the demise of the printed book is as unlikely as the demise of stairs.

Now, argument by analogy is a tricky business. No analogy is perfect, and it may well be that the suggested link between the future of books and the future of stairs will not hold up. Modern inventions have, in fact, replaced many of the things we formerly used. For most of us, cars have

replaced carriages, digital has replaced film, clocks have replaced sun dials, and my wife maintains that cell phones are replacing wrist watches.

However, I tend to agree that eReaders will not completely replace books.

I take this position as one whose wife gave him a Kindle Fire earlier this month as an anniversary present. Amazon identifies it as “David’s Fifth Kindle,” although two of the five actually have belonged to my wife. I have used a Kindle since shortly after I first read about them in the *New York Times*. I love my Kindle and the ability it gave me to take a single volume on vacation, rather than having to choose between three or four thick, heavy books and the second pair of shoes that I really would need for river rafting.

Ereaders are terrific for straight reading, when you start on page one and read directly to the end. When I read Jennings’s book IXEOS, I sped through it on my Kindle. It was great.

Yet, there are situations in which I prefer a book, a printed book.

Some texts are complicated. *Financial Intelligence*, a book I’m currently reading, describes how to understand and use various financial documents. For the chapter on how to read a balance sheet, there is a sample balance sheet – in the appendix. When the text discusses “cash on hand,” for example, I must turn to the appendix to see how this entry actually appears.

With a book, I’d stick a piece of paper – or my right index finger – at the appendix and flip back and forth as needed. With my Kindle, I bookmark the page in the appendix. To consult it, I tap the top of my screen to access a menu. I choose “Bookmarks,” locate the correct bookmark, and touch it. To return to the text, I touch the arrow at the bottom. In the next paragraph, the text discusses “depreciation,” and I repeat the process. It is as complicated in practice as it is in my description. Thumbs and sheets of paper work much better!

Have you ever looked at images, charts, or tables in an eReader? My Kindle Fire produces beautiful color images. But they are small. Have you ever tried to follow the flow of a line graph across a screen? When I find the balance sheet in the appendix, can I even read the entries? Give me a book any day!

When I read IXEOS, I read it straight through, as I said. I recall, I think, one occasion on which I had forgotten the significance of a particular character and had to page back to discover who he was. It was not fun! Imagine if you are reading a technical work, something you have difficulty understanding – Steven Hawkins’s book, *A Brief History of Time* comes to mind – and you are having to frequently page back to find a previous reference. *Lost* is an understatement. Ereaders are not optimized for this activity.

Finally, if the book is something that I want to keep, I want it printed on paper. I have the *Book of Common Prayer* on my Kindle, and I pretty much read in it six days a week (I hear it read on Sunday). My *prayer book*, though, is on a table beside my chair in the den; the copy on my Kindle is simply for convenience.

I have published two books, both of which are available on eReaders (*The Reunion* and, recently, *The Handfasting*). I have copies of them both on my Kindle, but I assure you, printed copies can be found on the desk in my office. I love Greek icons, and I have books with reproductions of numerous images. I want these on paper where I can page through them slowly, enjoying their beauty, finding meaning in the details that would likely be lost on my Kindle.

We know that technological innovations can be fleeting. In a decade, will .mobi files be readable on any device? Have you heard an eight-track tape recently? How about TRS-DOS, the operating system once used by Radio Shack computers? Paper survives. Today's digital files? Maybe.

Elevators will replace stairs. It never happened. Ereaders will replace books. It could happen, I suppose.

But I'm thinking not.