



Global *e-learning*.

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DEF.-

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1. INTRODUCTION

E-books are still a recent tool both as teaching / learning material as well as simple reading. In the past few years, with the evolution of technology –portable computers, easy access to internet, mobile internet, i-phones and lately the i-pads– many authors and editors have decided that making books available for download in one of the above mentioned devices would be the ideal way not only to promote their books, increasing their sales, as well as, we hope, give an incentive for people to read more.

Well before the outcome of e-books there were already in the market, with a lot of success among a very specific audience, the «talking books». These started by being recorded in the old recording tapes by an excellent reader, sometimes an actor, with a very good intonation and excellent language quality. They were, and still are, excellent company during long journeys when driving makes impossible to do anything else. Naturally, today the old tape recording has been replaced by the modern CDs. These books are also an excellent working tool, if they are of such a kind, for people with specific physical disabilities. They were never considered e-books first of all because *e* (something) only appeared with the advent of the internet and to mimic the e-mails (*e-* stan-

ding for electronics). So e-books are electronic books or also called digital books. They are now on the market and they came to stay. E-books are extremely useful, helpful and some of them quite friendly. They can be black and white, colourful, they may have pictures, drawings, graphs, and they can be used by people of all ages as long as they are acquainted with the e-technology. Some e-books even have sound and they can be not only read but also listened to.

Most of the present chapter is fruit of my 19 years of open distance teaching at Universidade Aberta (Portugal). I have started by writing books in paper for my students and with time have changed to write e-books for them.

2. TYPES OF E-BOOKS

The Oxford Dictionary of English defines the e-book as «an electronic version of a printed book». One may say that in fact this may have been the first form of the early e-books, but since then they have evolved very much and today e-books are mainly written for e-readers without having any printed version.

The first e-book was written by Michael Stern Hart [1] and it was nothing less than the old «United States Declaration of Independence». This happened in 1971 and Hart may be considered the inventor of e-books¹. So, the first e-books were just copies of books that were already written and published in paper. This type of e-book is still in use –it is just the electronic version of a book that has been published on paper or even if it has never been published on paper it is written just as an author would write it directly on paper. It is the most simple or basic e-book the only difference being that the pages, instead of being made of paper are pages on a screen and can be rolled down to pass to the next one. (Let's call it **type 1** e-book). This type of e-book can always be printed and one gets in paper exactly what one has on the computer screen.

The second type of e-book one may have (**type 2**) is the version that opens an interactive index when the book is open on the computer. The index has links to several sections that are included in the book so that by reading the index the reader may choose exactly what chapter or section he wants to read and «jump» with a «click» to the exact page. This type of e-book may be used both for entertaining books (like romances, mystery books, etc.), so that the reader doesn't have to pass all the electronic pages to get to the

¹ For those interested in the history of e-books see reference [4].

chapter where he or she had stopped before, or it can also be used in all sort of technical or study books, so that the reader may access the chapter of its interest quickly. This type of e-book can also be printed and one gets exactly what is given on the screen. The only difference is that the possibility of «jumping» to a certain section is lost.

The third type of e-book that may be written (**type 3**) is a little more sophisticated and includes links that direct the reader to subjects of interest directly related to what he or she is reading but that are in some other part of the same e-book. This means the reader may «jump» from one word that has a link to a point in the book where that specific subject is explained in more detail ignoring all that is in between those two points in the reading process. Naturally this is not used in romances (at least not often) but it is used in books that deal with technical matters, or history books, science books or even in an electronic newspaper that deals with the same piece of news under different approaches or points of view. The truth is that this type of e-book doesn't encourage the reader to make a vertical reading of the whole story or description. On the contrary, the fact that the links are signalled encourages the reader to «jump» and to peep on what is written some pages in advance.

Finally, we may have an even more sophisticated e-book (**type 4**). Once again this type of e-book is mainly useful for technical, scientific or historical subjects. This is the type of e-book that uses hyper-links which direct the reader to articles, graphs, images or even videos located in internet pages or located in a platform that can only be accessed via the e-book. This type of e-books contains much more information than the other mentioned above. They are more difficult to write and, again, discourage vertical reading in favour of exploring subjects in depth according to the interests of the reader. Naturally, when printing such an e-book, if allowed, one loses all the interaction capabilities and much of the information the book is able to offer in its electronic version.

It may be said that these are the four main types of e-books currently found and, as usual, all of them present advantages and disadvantages that need to be considered when deciding which type of e-book one wants to write.

3. WHICH TYPE OF E-BOOK?

Before deciding which type of e-book to write (from type 1 to 4) the first thing to do is to think about (i) the target public and (ii) the type of content.

As for the type of content I would say that type 1 or 2 should be the elected ones if the book is a romance, an adventure book, a journey description, a self-experience

description or even a scientific book as long as the author's intention is to encourage the reader to make a vertical reading of the subject in question. As for the target public it is worth only mentioning those related with technical, scientific, historical or in any other way related to learning or acquiring new knowledge. It is obvious that whichever the target public is, a romance is more enjoyable if read in a vertical way.

For students that are too young, even if we are referring to university students, books that encourage vertical reading are more suitable. It is known from Rowlands *et al* [2] that the majority of academic e-readers are in the age groups of 17-21 and 26-35 years. In addition these books can be printed as a whole or parts of it so that students may write their own side pages' notes at specific points of their reading. It is also useful to be able to print bits and pieces of a book if they want to take them to discuss with friends (books in paper do not require electricity or batteries, they are bug's free, the light is always good and does not reflect in a vicious way, as sometimes it happens, on computer screens). In addition, young students need to focus their readings and learn the basics before they start wondering among too much information. They need to concentrate in what is asked from them and only afterwards can they walk alone and explore sites and interactive knowledge.

Type 3 of e-books may be recommended for university students that have already acquired basic knowledge and already feel at ease to «jump» parts of a book (only to come back later on) without losing their concentration. It is quite useful to find a link inside the same book that directs us to a subject that we want to explore deeper at a precise moment without having to look for it through a sea of electronic pages. It is also useful when one knows exactly what one wants to read about because all the rest has already been mentally processed.

Finally, type 4 of e-books should be dedicated to those that want to deepen their knowledge in relation to specific points of a subject. This type of e-book should be intended to people who already have a good general knowledge of a subject and are not too young which means that they generally know how to manage their time and their concentration capabilities and are at ease with the e-technologies. So they can navigate without getting lost in sites or information (sometimes people may get lost when facing an enormous amount of information).

4. ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF E-BOOKS

As with all things in life e-books have advantages and disadvantages. No matter how many times we write about them, the e-books came to stay. It is up to us all, to parents, to teachers, to make a choice of what is best at each moment in life.

From the stand point of an editor, e-books present a lot of advantages, namely:

- E-books are a lot easier to publish.
- It is much faster to publish an e-book.
- It is less expensive.
- It can use multimedia and use varying format options to adapt to different publics.
- It will be available internationally in the same moment it is published.

However, publishers will find also some limitations, the main one being the reluctance of consumers to read on-line owing to certain limitations (either physical or technological) [3].

For consumers one may also point out some positive and negative aspects. As main advantages one can mention (i) the multimedia format²; (ii) the absence of shipping costs³; (iii) they may be searchable⁴ and (iv) they have low update costs⁵. The main disadvantages will be (a) the printing cost (if one wants to print the book; some people don't mind reading on the screen but the majority has some problems with that); (b) piracy (friends mail books among each other after having done just one download); (c) not very convenient to read (unless one has one of the new and updated devices, which are expensive, such as the i-pads).

5. WRITING AN E-BOOK

If one is decided to be an author of an e-book there are some simple recommendations to keep in mind about what to do and not to do when going for the real job. From what was written above it is now clear that before deciding to write an e-book one needs to consider (i) the advantages and disadvantages of doing so, (ii) to think about the content of the book to be written in order to chose which type of e-book to elect (from type 1 to 4), (iii) the target public and (iv) the format that is most appropriate.

² E-books may contain not only text and images but also video and interactive functions.

³ Downloading an e-book avoids the costs of mailing it around the world.

⁴ Most times one can introduce a word in the search button and get to a page where it is mentioned that same word and find what one needs.

⁵ When authors update e-books usually they do so just by editing the old version and costumers usually pay nothing for the new parts or just a small amount for the updated parts or version.

Whichever the type of e-book or target public there are some basic points to have into consideration when writing an e-book:

- **Fonts.** Do not use too many different fonts in your e-book. In my opinion, two to three different fonts at the maximum are enough. If there is a need to introduce variety it is preferable to introduce some colours instead of multiple fonts.
- **Letter spacing and line spacing.** They are not the same thing. Letter spacing is done automatically by the computer but one can improve on this by trying different headings and getting a more appealing page than what the computer does by itself (machines aren't generally very artistic and this may be one of the reasons why reading on the screen may be so tiring). Line spacing refers to the space left between one line and the next that follows. From my experience, for a font of 12pt a gap that is 4 to 6 pts high is enough. This helps reading on the screen.
- **Line length.** It is not advisable to make lines too long. The longer the line the more difficult for the reader to get to the end of it. It is a good idea to think about the computer screen as a page that is going to be printed and made into a paper book: leave margin enough for binding like in a real paper book. If the whole screen of the PC is full with one line of letters after the other that is not a book –it is a screen full of letters. If one makes lines too short our eyes will be constantly back and forth to change line which is also very uncomfortable. So, the best thing is to choose the format of the e-book to be «printed» (even if it will never be printed) and chose appropriate margins for binding.
- **White spaces.** When writing an e-book it is necessary to use more white spaces than when writing a paper book. With an e-book one does not have to worry about saving paper and paragraphs, when too long, must be separated by a white space instead of just a full stop and changing line. If the writing is too packed up it will be very tiring to read. White spaces are good to rest the eyes. In teaching books it is a good idea to have coloured boxes for special topics. It will help to draw the attention for them and breaks screen monotony.
- **Vertical rhythm in vertical reading.** This is important if one wants the readers to feel comfortable in reading each page. To make vertical rhythm happen one has to try to have a consistent flow of content and white spaces. This is not very easy to achieve but if the book to be written has no interactive buttons and pictures it is a goal to aim at if the readers are to feel happy about reading on the screen.

- **Vertical hierarchy.** This comes together with the vertical rhythm although they are two different concepts. Without a vertical hierarchy it is not possible to achieve a vertical rhythm. Vertical hierarchy has to do with a subconscious plan of the reader. Since people do not read every single word of what is written on a page, this vertical hierarchy will help them to «scan» through the page smoothly, absorbing into their minds what is written without having to read every single word.

Naturally one has the title in a font with a bigger size, a bit smaller font for the sub-title and then the text in the chosen font size. It is also possible to play with bolds for the title and sub-title to enhance them. Also use bolds in the text to draw attention to something important. Colours and boxes with different backgrounds may also be used but not too much. Finally, the cover page: it should be interesting and related to what is inside.

In the end, leave the book to rest for two to three days. Then reopen it and scroll through your work. Look at the whole text as an outsider and see what it «feels like». If it «feels» good, then you have the e-book ready.

6. REFERENCES

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[4] MARIE LEBERT (2009): *A Short History of eBooks*; NEF, University of Toronto, 2009; Copyright © 2009 Marie Lebert; All rights reserved.