

Gutenberg's Printing Press and the Bible

Prior to the 1400s in Europe, any books that were reproduced, including the Bible, were copied by hand. (In Grade 4, students in Core Knowledge schools should have learned that monks copied manuscripts of the early Greeks and Romans and in this way helped preserve the knowledge of the ancients.) One problem with this system was that it was slow; it could take years to make one copy. There was also the possibility of introducing errors into works. A monk could make an error in copying a verse of the Bible in the year 600 and that same error would continue to be made in copies in the year 1400—if some other error had not taken its place by then.

The ability to make many exact copies of the same work quickly and at a reasonable cost did not appear in Europe until the 1400s. As early as the 700s, as students should have learned in Grade 4, the Chinese had developed a system of printing with blocks of type. They did not develop movable type until the 1040s. In the 1440s, Johann Gutenberg developed a system for making individual letters out of molten metal. Once the individual letters had been cast, they were arranged in rows on a wooden frame to spell the letters of the words on an entire page, or on several pages at once. The type was then inked and a sheet of paper pressed over the letters. Once enough copies had been printed in his way, letters could be removed from the frame, and a new page or set of pages could be set from the type and printed. In this way, the type could be reused, but it also meant that many sheets could be printed from the same frame of type. It only needed to be re-inked as the ink came off on the printed sheets. While the first books printed by this process were very expensive, in time the cost was greatly reduced, so that books became affordable for middle-class Europeans. The development of printing spurred the development of literacy.

Whereas in the Middle Ages the vast majority of people were illiterate, from 1500 on the percentage of people who could read and write began to grow. During the Middle Ages most important documents were written in Latin. Although the Bible was originally written in Hebrew and Aramaic (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament), it was generally read in Latin. During the age of printing, Latin continued to be an important language. Presses produced editions of classical works edited by humanist scholars, as well as new works written in Latin. However, printers also began to print works in the vernacular (the language

actually spoken in a particular place). In response to a growing demand for these books, English printers produced books in English, German printers produced books in German, etc.