

Review: Library e-books easier, but still hassle

January 19 2011, By PETER SVENSSON , AP Technology Writer

(AP) -- Libraries have been lending e-books for longer than there's been a Kindle, but until recently only a few devices worked with them. That's changed in the past few months with the arrival of software for reading library e-books on some popular devices: iPhones, iPads and Android-powered smart phones.

However, I'm sad to report that reading library [e-books](#) is still more hassle than buying them. The whole process could be smoother, and there are questions about how libraries are going about the transition to the e-book world.

But let's focus first on the good news: You can now download library books straight to your Apple or Android device. Once you've figured out the system and are lucky enough to find a book you want, it takes only a few minutes to start reading.

- First, you need a library card. Visit a local branch if you don't have one.
- Second, download a free application called OverDrive Media Console to your Apple or Android device. OverDrive Inc. runs the lending system for the 5,400 U.S. public libraries that offer e-books - a bit more than half of all public libraries.
- Third, follow the app's instructions to get an "Adobe ID" and tie your device to it. It's an e-mail address and password registered with Adobe

Systems Inc. to prevent you from sharing borrowed books with the whole world. The books you borrow won't be readable on devices that aren't "authorized" with this ID.

- If you're still with me after dealing with three different parties just to get started, you can now tap "Get Books" in the app. That fires up the Web browser, where you can find your local library's website. Once there, you can search for e-books. You'll need to enter your library card number and usually a passcode that comes with it.

There's a particular lingo to learn. Your "shopping cart" of books that you want to check out is called "My eList." The books you have checked out already are "My eCheck Outs." Most libraries have entirely separate systems for physical books, and if you blunder into that part of the site, getting back to e-books can be challenging.

Each library has a limited number of copies of each e-book to lend out. If it has five electronic copies of "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo," then five patrons can have the book at once. Others have to place an "eHold" on it and wait till one of the five "return" the e-book, which happens automatically at the end of the borrowing period, usually three weeks, if the borrower didn't voluntarily return it earlier.

That's right: there's no more hunting around the house for overdue books, no more late fees. That alone should make up for some of the hassle of e-book borrowing.

But the selection of e-books is small, and the limited number of copies is frustrating. Right now, I'm No. 62 out of 98 people waiting to read Nassim Nicholas Taleb's "The Black Swan" at the New York [Public Library](#). It has 12 electronic copies, so I can expect one to free up in about four months.

The OverDrive Media Console has some limitations compared with other e-book software. You can't change page margins or the color of the page, and there's no iPad version.

Another e-book application deals with those shortcomings, but it can't load e-books straight from the Web. You need a Windows or Mac computer and Bluefire Reader, free software that works with the iPhone, iPod Touch and iPad, but not Android.

As with Overdrive, you need a library card and an Adobe ID. You also need Adobe Digital Editions, another free application. Instead of browsing for e-books on your Apple device, you do so on the computer. You download books to the computer and open them with Digital Editions.

Then, connect the Apple device to the computer with the usual cable. In iTunes click the name of the device and navigate to the Apps tab. Under "File Sharing," you'll find an icon for Bluefire. Click the "Add" button and find the e-book file on your hard drive. Click "Open" to transfer it to the iPad.

This is clunky, but Bluefire has the advantage of being able to load books from the many online bookstores that use Adobe ID, including Google Books. So one app can hold both your library books and commercial ones.

Using a similar process, you can load library books on to Barnes & Noble Inc.'s Nook e-book readers and Sony Readers. Instead of iTunes, you'll use computer's file system or Adobe Digital Editions. Sorry, you're out of luck if you have an Amazon Kindle, which doesn't accept books protected by Adobe ID.

For those willing to figure out the system, library e-books can be

rewarding. But many steps in the process are poorly thought out and unfriendly to the user. For instance, to download a book to an Android phone using OverDrive, you have to tap three different "Download" buttons on three different screens.

Another source of frustration is the way the nation's e-books are divided among thousands of libraries. Some branch out there might have a spare copy of "The Black Swan," yet I'm stuck in the long line of the local library. One national e-book library would be better.

But the current system, though unfriendly to users, probably serves the interests of local [libraries](#), which can point to e-book lending as one way they're staying current and relevant. And it's hard to see that publishers would have a big interest in streamlining e-book lending - they want people to buy e-books or even printed copies instead.

So we're probably stuck with what we have: a system where you can trade the time it takes to learn the system for free e-books. It's not great, but it's free.

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Citation: Review: Library e-books easier, but still hassle (2011, January 19) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-01-library-e-books-easier-hassle.html>

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