



## Findings: current reading patterns

**Ebooks are commonly used by VSC students, faculty and staff.** A majority of survey respondents - 75.6% - affirmed they have read all or part of an ebook. This figure is slightly lower for students (72.7%). Also, there is variation between the students of different colleges: at the high end, 80.6% of CCV students have read an ebook; at the other end, 60.2% of LSC students have done this.

**More than half of VSC students have used an ebook in an academic context (55.5%).**

One quarter of students (25.4%) have used an e-textbook, while a similar proportion has used an ebook for other class-required reading or for research.

**Readers use ebooks in various formats, but above all on computers.** Of the respondents who had experience of reading an ebook, 71.9% used a PC or laptop. Ereaders registered 37.5%, tablets 27.7% and smartphones 24.5%.

**The most common type of reading done on ebooks is chapters, articles or sections (66.5%). Extended reading is also common (57.5%\*).** Short entries, such as encyclopedia entries, or small sections around a keyword, were less common.

**Readers find it easy to use ebook technology.** There were several reports of eye fatigue, but learning to use a mobile reading device, locating a specific ebook, reading the page, moving between different points in the text, searching for keywords, annotating, highlighting and keeping the device's battery charged were all overwhelmingly rated as easy.

**The main reason why there has not been greater adoption of tablets and ereaders is cost.** This factor was by far the most common reason for not purchasing one of these devices (66.1%). Many of the students who own a device had received it as a gift.

*"I would have a tablet if I had the money."*

*"am planning to purchase soon; had other financial commitments"*

---

\* It was possible to select more than one option.

## Findings: format preferences

**Many people have strong attachments to reading formats.** This survey generated more than 700 comments about books, reading and technology, with many people identifying themselves unequivocally with one format or another.

**Ebooks' most popular features are instant purchasing (64.8%), portability (62.8%) and keyword searching (based on write-in comments).**

*"nothing beats the search capability of an eBook for research"*

*"If I could somehow "Ctrl+F" a print book, I would have absolutely no complaints about print."*

**Print's most popular features are familiarity, ease of navigation (skimming across pages, flipping back and forth) and basic physicality.** Some people dislike aspects of digital reading, such as eye fatigue, computer fatigue and the distractions of the web.

*"I am ""spacially-inclined"" when it comes to texts, often remembering content by its location and position relative to other visual material."*

*"I like books, the heft, the feel, the pages, the whole package!"*

Although many people professed attachment to one format or another, **there are also many readers who are open to using either or who have no preference.**

*"No reason! Just haven't gotten around to it!"*

*"If eBooks come down in price or I buy a reading device, I may switch over more and more as time goes by."*

Furthermore, VSC faculty, staff and students tend to prefer different formats for different types of reading. **For leisure reading and textbooks, most VSC readers prefer printed books (51.3% and 66.8%\*).** This suggests a preference for printed books for extended, linear reading and active study, when marginal notes, highlighting and frequent rereading are needed. However, some students emphasized ebooks' portability, which spares them from carrying heavy or bulky textbooks. **For research reading and reference texts, people tend to prefer ebooks (64.9% and 73.3%).**

*"I like getting reference info from ebooks when I only need bits and pieces of the source."*

---

\* These percentages are for "preferred". The percentages for "preferred or acceptable" are higher.

**This finding was reinforced by comments on the reading of different types of subject material.** For extended, immersive reading, such as leisure reading, most respondents favor printed books. Many people linked this to the effect of digital reading on the eyes. Printed books are also widely considered important for subjects that emphasize technical information, repeat reading and cross-referencing. Printed books are also rated important for subjects that value visual display or physical arrangement, such as art, photography and book arts. Ebooks appear suited to shorter linear reading, such as essays and articles, as well as search-focused reading such as reference texts.

*"I prefer eBooks for reading essays, historical texts...  
However, [with] a highly technical text such as for A & P,  
there's simply too much referencing between pages."*

Programs that expressed the strongest preferences for ebooks:

- Business and Accounting;
- Nursing;
- Psychology and Human Services;
- Social Sciences, especially History and Criminal Justice; and
- Education.

*"I enjoy printed books for any type of work that would be read sequentially...  
Considering anything where I will be skipping between parts of a chapter,  
reviewing previous chapters and viewing the index/glossary,  
I would prefer to use an eBook."*

**Students value the ability to highlight and annotate textbooks.** Several cited this as a reason for preferring printed textbooks, but this preference could be less common if more students were familiar with ebooks' functions for highlighting and annotating. Of those who have read an ebook, only 19.3% consider "Making notes or highlighting" difficult. However, one factor weighing against ebooks for annotating could be possible impacts on information retention and critical reading:

*"Handwriting can help a student move bits of information  
from short-term to long-term memory." (Faculty)*

*"I am able to recall the information better when I jot it down." (Student)*

*"eBooks make it difficult for students to contextualize reading  
-- they fail to note who wrote what they are reading, who published it...  
or what larger conversation it is part of." (Faculty)*

## Findings: other issues

**Many faculty and students see ebooks as a technology that needs to develop, in terms of functionality and publishers' content.** There is a need for simpler downloading procedures; pages that scale correctly on mobile devices; greater energy efficiency; and reduced screen glare. In addition, publishers need to produce adequate content for the academic market:

*"As an instructor I am very interested in ebooks but have found few that meet my needs."*

Several respondents noted that ebooks may not be suitable for all learning styles, especially those with **learning needs related to disabilities**.

**Awareness of the availability of ebooks from the VSC libraries is low.** Fewer than half of survey respondents stated correctly that ebooks are available from their library (45.6%). A small number believed incorrectly that they were not (1.7), while most did not know (52.7%). Awareness of the availability of library ebooks among students ranged from 31.9% at CSC to 67.3% at CCV. These low levels of awareness are particularly disappointing because, as could be expected for a survey focused on library resources, most respondents were frequent library users (64.0% had used their college library more than 10 times between August 2012 and March 2013).

Other points of interest specific to libraries are that **the survey recorded no concern about moving from the ownership model characterizing print collections to the licensing model associated with some ebook platforms;** and **negligible concern about ebook vendors' access to users' reading histories.** These points may indicate a lack of concern or a lack of awareness of these issues.

## Implications

The survey results confirm that in the VSC community there is significant interest in ebooks and comfort using this technology. Most VSC students, faculty and staff are using ebooks or open to adopting them as a new reading technology. Expanding library ebook collections would be responsive to the preference of many users for the convenience and functionality of digital texts.

Ebook readers particularly value instant access. Library ebooks provide this service by enabling 24/7 remote access. Depending on the acquisition model, they may also allow multiple simultaneous checkouts. The other leading advantage of ebooks is portability. Currently, most VSC students are reading ebooks on PCs and laptops, but ownership of tablets can be expected to rise and libraries need to provide efficient systems for delivery to mobile devices. One important aspect of ebook technology where greater efficiency is needed, is the procedure for downloading library ebooks, which could be simpler and more intuitive.

This is a transitional period, in which readers, libraries and publishers are moving from printed texts only, to a mix of print and ebook. The survey results show there may be a need for education in the use of ebooks, including how to access library ebooks. Other issues may be how to use ebook functions such as making notes and sharing; and how to engage critically with digital texts. There is also scope for the VSC libraries to promote awareness of their ebook holdings.

## Investment in ebooks

For some types of reading, and thus for some subjects more than others, ebooks are the predominantly preferred format. Any library reviewing its policy on ebook acquisitions may want to consider different default formats for different types of resource and different subject areas:

- Textbooks: textbooks involve close reading, cross-referencing and annotating. For these reasons, many students prefer printed textbooks. However, it is easy to conceive that the predominant preference for textbooks will shift from print to ebook in the near future. E-textbooks have annotation and highlighting functions, though many VSC students appear to be unfamiliar with these. Also, students value the portability of e-textbooks.
- Research: students' predominant preference for research texts – texts to be read in linear fashion but with critical engagement and for shorter periods of time than leisure reading – is the ebook. This is particularly applicable to texts that are less dense in technical content, such as humanities and social sciences texts.

- Reference: students want the convenience of searching by keyword. This, combined with the ability to integrate reference texts into students' online spaces, is a compelling reason for developing reference ebook collections.
- Leisure reading: the predominant preference for immersive, non-critical reading is the printed book. The implication is that libraries should continue to provide print collections of casual reading. However, this preference may also shift as more and more readers become accustomed to reading on a mobile device.

## **Investment in printed books**

Printed books remain an essential part of academic library collections. Many readers are strongly attached to the printed format and, for the most part, value it for qualities that ebooks cannot replicate. At the current time, ebooks are inappropriate for some readers, some subjects and some types of information.

At some point in the future, a technology such as print on demand (POD) may make it possible to use ebooks to accommodate preferences for both digital and printed texts. For now, libraries need to balance investments in ebooks and print as judiciously as possible, taking into account the different preferences associated with different types of reading. Also, libraries should expect situations where an individual reader's preference for one format conflicts with the library's default format for that item.

## **Methodology**

In Fall 2012, the VSC Library Council identified the need to review collection development policies based on data-driven assessment of users' reading preferences. Coordinated by LSC, the VSC libraries designed a 15-question survey and obtained IRB approval: <http://library.lyndonstate.edu/wp-content/uploads/Ebooks-survey-Spring-2013.pdf>

In Spring 2013, each library conducted the survey for a two-week period, offering it to students, faculty and staff as an online form (hosted on CCV's SurveyMonkey account) and as a print-out to accommodate different information-processing needs. Library staff promoted the survey with cross-campus emails, Portal notices, Facebook pages and word of mouth. At LSC, an English Composition section studying survey design completed our survey en masse.

As an incentive, each library invited its respondents to participate in a prize draw for a \$50 Amazon gift card.

A total of 683 students, faculty and staff from all five colleges took part in this survey (74.6% students, 13.6% faculty, 11.8% staff).

## **Acknowledgements**

This survey was conceived, designed and implemented by VSC Library Directors Joe Farara (JSC), Sandy Duling (CSC), Garet Nelson (LSC) and David Sturges (VTC); and LSC Public Services Librarian Graham Sherriff. CCV Public Services Librarian Rebecca Cochran arranged the web hosting.

Graham Sherriff  
Lyndon State College Public Services Librarian  
July 2013