



# 7 Things You Need To Know About Sony Readers in a Higher Ed Environment

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## The Situation

Mass-market publications and textbooks continue to move to digital formats, and there is currently no single, ideal device for reading them. As the primary content provider and information resource for all disciplines and user populations at Penn State, the University Libraries were the natural place to introduce and test the electronic book reader within the University community. The Libraries partnered with Sony Electronics with the goal of influencing changes in e-book technologies for the academic setting. The Sony Reader was tested in several different user settings and scenarios that are unique to the higher education environment.

## Lending

The library lending program was promoted in conjunction with the campus's new leisure reading collection.

## In The Classroom

The Readers were used in a Libraries First Year Seminar Class as well as multiple English classes. All students were issued readers preloaded with the content for the course. The aim of the study was to determine how the students learned to adapt to using the Reader as their primary text and how the instructor managed the Reader as a teaching tool.

## Disability Services

The hope in using the Sony Readers in the Office of Disability Services was that some of the functions of the Reader would assist patrons of this office - specifically those with low vision and difficulties with dexterity.

## 1. What Is It?

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The Sony Reader is a digital reading device that uses an electronic paper display. The Penn State Sony Project used the Sony PRS-505 which supported the Sony bookstore's proprietary .lrf file format, as well as .jpg image files, MP3 and AAC audio files. A recent upgrade added support for the EPUB format, automatic reflow of PDF files, and support for high capacity memory cards. With the help of a free-download software called Calibre, the Sony Reader can also handle blog and newsfeed text. The Sony eBook store interface for purchasing content is similar to Apple's iTunes store. Sony has recently announced three new readers: the budget PRS-300 Pocket Edition, the more advanced PRS-600 Touch Edition, and the Reader PRS-2121 "Daily Edition" which features a 7" diagonal screen, free 3G wireless, and an increased grayscale level to compete directly with the Amazon Kindle DX.

## 2. Who's Doing It?

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A handful of academic institutions are experimenting with both Sony Readers and Amazon Kindles. Northwest Missouri State University conducted trials of e-textbooks on Sony Readers. Case Western Reserve University tested the large-screen Kindles with textbooks for chemistry, computer science and a freshman seminar already downloaded. Other schools piloting Kindles are Pace, Princeton, Reed, Darden School at the University of Virginia, and Arizona State. The reviews so far have been mixed.

## 3. How Does It Work?

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The competition in the e-reader market place is forcing the content loading model to evolve rapidly. The Sony Reader's technical model is still designed specifically for the individual home-consumer market and not the academic environment. During our study, Sony's Reader and the Sony eBook library allowed for a single computer to hold one Sony library with no more than five associated Readers. Any content purchased for this library could be downloaded to any or all of the five associated Readers. Sony has recently adopted the EPUB open format, removing their DRM and allowing users to purchase content from their the Sony eBook store to be used on other devices as well as content from other e-book stores to be read on the Sony Reader. Sony's upcoming wireless device will allow wireless download of books on demand.

## On the Web:

### Sony

<http://www.sonystyle.com>

### Penn State University Libraries Sony Project

[http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/lls/sony\\_reader.html](http://www.libraries.psu.edu/psul/lls/sony_reader.html)

### Penn State Sony Project Feed

<http://feeds.delicious.com/v2/rss/tag/psulsony?count=15>

## Who to Contact:

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## 4. Why Is It Significant?

More content providers are moving to digital format. E-readers provide optimized ways to access, read and organize that e-content. These devices provide an enhanced, “booklike” experience with access to materials that otherwise may not be available or are limited through traditional print text. Though many textbooks are currently available in digital format, students typically read them on their laptops or personal computers. As the electronic readers evolve to optimize these texts, the way students interact with them is likely to significantly change as well.

## 5. What Are the Downsides?

Most students in our study expressed that e-readers still have a way to go before they could take the place of textbooks or traditional books in the academic environment. Students were frustrated by the inability to interact with the text, make in-text notes or highlight. They also noted that the pages are not easily navigable and take too long to refresh. Other downsides include a glare when using the Reader in bright light, no backlight for using the reader in low light, and the clunky drag-drop content loading system. The new releases of the Sony Reader address many of these problems, however they do not address the problem of the high cost, lack of color e-ink and the desire for more multi-media functionality that students also identified as high-priority issues.

## 6. Where Is It Going?

With the advent of touchscreen capabilities, and color e-ink on the horizon, e-readers are getting closer to a device that may serve as a replacement for textbooks and other traditional codex books. Will e-readers replace conventional textbooks and will e-readers be a relevant device for Faculty and students? The jury is still out as to whether the devices will adequately fulfill the needs of the academic community. In response to feedback gathered from patrons, the Penn State Sony Project Team would like to experiment with the logistics for offering on-demand lending service. In addition, we plan to distribute Readers to different subject units of the Libraries to explore how we can optimize locally created and open third-party content for the Reader.

## 7. What Are the Implications for Teaching and Learning?

As students and faculty become increasingly mobile, we must ensure that we are purchasing content and licenses that meet users’ ever-changing needs, particularly portability. It is important that we consider the ways our licensed and locally created digital content may be repurposed for use on portable reading devices. Provision of downloadable open-format content can bring new life to digital content, and provide a new way for the library to market its collections. Textbooks are moving to digital formats at an increasing rate, potentially changing the way our students read and interact with their assigned coursework. Students will continue to desire the interactive capabilities that paper format provides, including highlighting and notetaking. Instructors will need to take into consideration the format of texts they are asking their students to purchase for class, and whether the format is well-suited to the subject they are teaching and their students are studying. Additional issues in the area of textbooks include accessibility for students with disabilities to the text - regardless of format, portability, and cost. Developments in the area of digital texts and e-reading have yet to dictate whether the e-reader as we know it will remain as the predominant device in this arena. What will remain is the need to constantly evaluate new devices, modes of reading, and formats for their place in the academic environment.

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