⋄ Contents ⋄

Johannes Gutenberg

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c.1400–1468

the man who invented the printing press
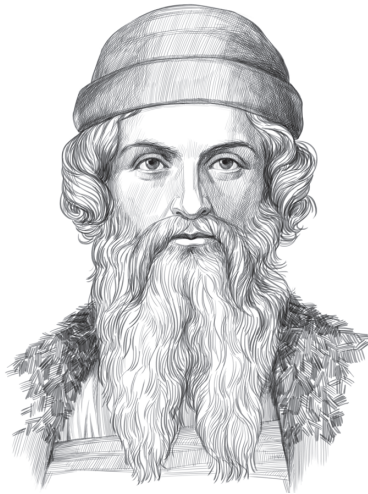
I invented a machine to print books – the printing press. After my invention, books were cheaper and easier to make. Books <u>spread</u> ideas around the world. I started the information age. But during my life, no one <u>valued</u> my work.

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I went to school in Mainz, Germany. When I was young, there were very few books because it took several weeks to make just one copy. Books were written by hand, usually by <u>priests</u>. They wrote with a quill – a pen made from a bird's <u>feather</u> – and it wasn't always easy to read their handwriting. I asked myself, 'Can I invent a machine to put words on paper?' A machine can make more books in less time.

My training as a goldsmith gave me good ideas for a printing press. I started my experiments in Strasbourg in 1436. I had a girlfriend and we were engaged, but I didn't have very much money. So I couldn't get married and do my experiments as well. I had to choose – should I get married or continue my work on my printing press? It was so hard to decide that I couldn't sleep at night. Finally, after a lot of thinking, I told my girlfriend, 'I'm really sorry, but I can't get married. I need the money for my experiments.'

It was a difficult time. In my town, people had a bad opinion of me. My girlfriend was so angry that she took me to court because I broke my promise. And I was so poor that I had to borrow money to buy materials for my experiments.

In 1440, after four years of hard work, I invented a printing press that worked. It was a wooden press with 'movable type'. To make it work, I made small metal letters and put them in a wooden block. I used the same block to make several copies of the same page. My system was called 'movable type' because you could move the letters from one place in the block to another.

I was very pleased with my invention, but businessmen weren't interested in it. In 1444, I decided to open my own workshop. I printed some poems and in 1448, I printed the calendar for the year. I earned some money, but I couldn't pay off my debts.
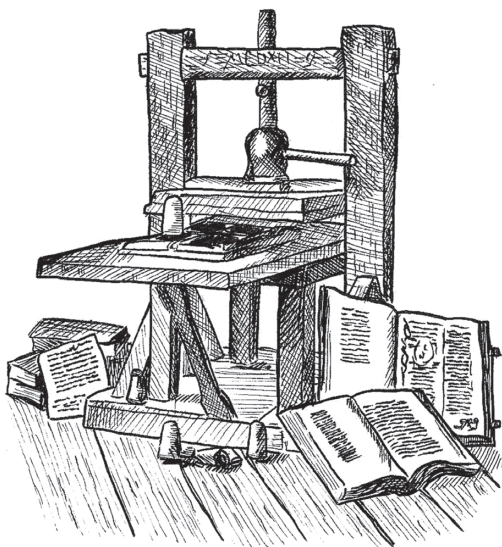
Johannes Gutenberg's printing press

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In 1450, I met Johann Fust, a rich man who gave me 8,000 <u>guilders</u>. His daughter's husband, Peter Schöffer, started to work with me in my business. Soon my printing press was working again. I did some small jobs – for example, I printed some poems.

Next, I wanted to do something big, so I borrowed more money from Fust and printed the *Gutenberg <u>Bible</u>*. It was a very beautiful book with 42 lines per page. But the cost of making each bible was much higher than the money I got for selling it. Soon my money problems were much bigger than before. My debt was very big now – 20,000 guilders.

My <u>situation</u> was very bad, but things got worse when, in 1455, Fust took me to court. He said, 'Gutenberg borrowed some money from me to print books and used it to pay for other things!' This was not true, but to my surprise, he won the <u>case</u>!

In one day, I lost everything – my workshop, my machine and all my materials! The court gave them all to Fust. He used my printing press to open a new printing company with Schöffer. Without my machine, I couldn't work or pay off my debts.

After several years, I started printing again, but there was a lot of competition then. There were more than 100 printing companies in Germany and there were printing companies in France and Spain, too. And they all used my idea – the movable type system.

My machine changed the world, but no one thought my work was useful during my life. The printing press was a very important invention. With books, people could read and learn. With books, people could <u>share political</u> ideas and ideas about technology. My printing press started the information age.

The Life of Johannes Gutenberg

*c.*1400   Johannes Gutenberg was born in Mainz, Germany. He was the youngest son of a businessman.

1407   He went to school and learnt how to read and write.

1411   His family moved to Strasbourg.

1418   He studied at the University of Erfurt.

1420   He had a number of jobs. He worked as a goldsmith.

1430   He moved from Mainz to Strasbourg.

1434   He became a member of the Goldsmith's Guild.

1436   He began work on his printing press.

1437   He decided that he wasn't going to get married. His girlfriend took him to court.

1438   He borrowed money from Andreas Dritzehn to continue his experiments in printing.

1440   He invented the wooden press with movable type.

1444   He returned to Mainz and started a printing shop at Hof Humbrecht.

1446   He printed the *Poem of the Last Judgment*.

1448   He printed the calendar for 1448. He
        borrowed money from Arnold Gelthus. He
        was his sister's husband.

1450   He borrowed 8,000 guilders from Johann
        Fust. Peter Schöffer started working with
        Gutenberg.

1452   He borrowed 800 guilders from Fust. He
        began printing the *Gutenberg Bible.*

1455   He had a debt of 20,000 guilders. Fust took
        him to court.

1456   Fust won the case in court. He was given
        Gutenberg's printing workshop by the court.
        Gutenberg lost everything.

1459   Gutenberg opened a small printing shop.

1468   He died in Mainz, Germany. He was
        70 years old. At the time, no one thought
        his invention was important.

◆ Glossary ◆

acid NOUN
a chemical, usually a liquid, that can burn your skin and cause damage to other substances

alive ADJECTIVE
continuing to exist or function

antenna (antennae or **antennas)** NOUN
a piece of equipment that sends and receives television or radio signals

army NOUN
a large group of soldiers who are trained to fight battles on land

basic ADJECTIVE
simple and not having many different functions or special features

battery NOUN
an object that provides electricity for things such as radios, or for computer systems if the main power system fails

beggar NOUN
someone who lives by asking people for money or food

benefit
for the benefit of someone in order to help someone improve their life

bible NOUN
the sacred book of the Christian religion

blind ADJECTIVE
unable to see
the blind people who are blind

block NOUN
a large, solid piece of a substance that has straight sides

career NOUN
a job that you do for a long time, or the years of your life that you spend working

case NOUN
a trial in a court at which people decide whether someone is guilty of a crime

chief NOUN
the leader of a group

church NOUN
a building where Christians go to pray