

Ebook Readers—A Tool for Writers

by Vanessa Kier

Even though I love the feel of a mass market paperback in my hands, I recently bought an ebook reader. Why? Because I felt that it was a good tool to have as a writer.

Here's why.

Market Awareness

The primary reason I bought the e-reader was to allow me to read all the ebooks being published by my writer friends without having to read their stories on my computer. Many published authors are putting out short “between” stories in electronic format between the release of two print books. I want to see what kinds of stories they come up with. Are they prequels? Stories about minor characters in the books? Quirky anecdotes about the main characters to tease my interest in the next book? I hope someday to be in the position to produce similar short pieces, so I want to know what others have written before me and how successful they've been. I also want to see what the self-published among my friends are writing. What genres are experiencing strong sales for these writers? What themes are popular? Are the successful writers similar in style to what I write? If I ever decide to self-publish, this is information I need to know. Having an e-reader lets me keep up with the latest trends.

Making Notes

Most e-readers have a notes or comments feature. This allows a writer to make notes to herself about why a certain passage she's reading works so well or falls utterly flat. I transferred my own manuscript over to my e-reader and can now add editing notes to myself. Also, while I haven't tried this yet, several of my fellow judges in a recent writing contest said that they scored their .rtf formatted entries on their e-reader using the notes feature. This allowed them to score their entries while on the go. However, not all e-readers will accept .rtf or .doc files, so if this is of interest to you, ask whether the device you're interested in can read the file format you need.

Research

You can download magazines, newspapers, even non-fiction books to help with research for your current story, creating a portable research library without the weight and bulk of a thick book. You can bookmark favorite pages to return to time and time again, highlight key text, and even add a helpful note to remind you of how to use the information in your story.

Testing

If you're self-publishing your work, having one or more of the most popular e-readers allows you to see exactly how your book will look on the device. I recently told a friend of mine that her book had several blank pages and other small formatting issues when I read it on my e-reader. Yet the book had looked fine when she'd used the self-publishing site's ebook reader preview tool. For writers who can afford the expense, testing the manuscript on an actual device can eliminate some of those pesky formatting errors.

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How to Choose

Here are some features a writer might want to look for when shopping for an e-reader.

Purpose

First, look at the categories above and determine what your primary goal is for using your e-reader. For me, it's reading ebooks.

Color vs Black and White

There are two issues here. First, under what lighting conditions do you most frequently read? Most color screens get washed out and are difficult to read in direct sunlight. On the other hand, the black and white e-ink readers don't have backlighting, so they need an external light source in dim light. Second, do you plan to read a lot of magazines or non-fiction books where you want to see color photos?

Ebook Formats

Not all e-readers can read the same type of file. Amazon's Kindle has its own proprietary format, AZW. Barnes and Noble's Nook doesn't read AZW, but can read .epub. Both the Kindle and the Nook can read PDFs. Check the individual product specs to see what other formats are acceptable. Most authors offer their works in multiple formats. However, if there are specific authors you want to follow, make certain to check that their work is available for your preferred e-reader. Additionally, if you want to look at your own manuscript and transfer it back and forth from your e-reader to your computer you'll need a device that accepts the format you use for your manuscript.

Next time you think about ebook readers, remember that while they might not seem like an obvious tool for a writer, in the increasingly electronic world we live in, they can be a valuable tool for a writer to have.

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