

***eBooks 101* demystifies electronic book design and production**

by Cheryl Landes

STC Fellow and founder of Tabby Cat Communications, Seattle, WA

Electronic books (eBooks) have grown in popularity during the past five years. With the explosion of mobile device and tablet use, the demand will continue to grow. Despite the growth, there's a lot of confusion and unanswered questions about how to produce and deliver eBooks. Now, single-sourcing documentation guru Ann Rockley has provided some answers in her latest book, *eBooks 101: The Digital Content Strategy for Reaching Customers Anywhere, Anytime, on Any Device*.

Rockley's book is definitely a crash course in the medium. Although her target audiences are traditional publishing houses and companies that produce or distribute large volumes of content, but have little or no experience delivering content electronically, her book is well suited for anyone interested in a high-level introduction to eBook publishing.

She begins by defining an eBook ("an electronic book") and describing the three primary types of eBooks:

- A *basic eBook* with text, images, a table of contents, but no additional functionality
- The *enhanced eBook*, the same as a basic eBook but contains audio, video, and internal and external links. Internal links lead readers to another location in the book, while external links go to a source such as a website that provides further information about a topic in the book.
- An *eBook app*, which is software resembling and behaving like a bound book but is interactive.

From there, Rockley jumps into the types of eBook formats available today, the text elements each format supports—including languages with special characters like Chinese and Arabic, accessibility standards, and multimedia support. Of all of the formats mentioned, the new EPUB 3.0 standard appears to be the most flexible and promising in supporting all of these factors.

Rockley then moves into describing how eReaders work: "eReaders display books," she writes. "eReaders are a lot like browsers. If you look at a web page in Firefox, Internet Explorer, and Safari, chances are that page won't appear the same in each browser. However, unlike browsers, eReaders have their own built-in hardware." She also compares each of the popular eReading devices, along with the software available. Her definition of eReaders goes beyond the usual Kindle and Nook varieties; she includes smartphones and tablets. That's because the target audiences of her book are likely to be publishing to all of these devices.

The rest of the book, approximately 60%, is dedicated to designing and producing eBooks. Rockley begins by describing the eBook process, which she says is more similar to designing web pages than a print book. "If you've been designing print books, you'll likely find designing eBooks frustrating; nothing seems fixed," she writes. "And if you've been designing websites, you may well also find designing eBooks frustrating; not even the page seems sacred. Yet just as designing web pages took some adjusting from designing print materials, designing for an eBook environment requires some changes in design perspective." In other words, eBook design and production require a mental shift the traditional print and electronic methods.

Designers also need to be aware of these issues in creating eBooks:

- Not all fonts work well on eReaders. While the EPUB specification allows font embedding, not all eReaders can display embedded fonts.
- Image sizes are limited and need to be scalable to accommodate different sizes of eReader screens. The Scalable Vector Graphics (SVG) format is the best option, but support for this image format is not consistent across eReaders.
- Resolution should be kept lower to avoid display issues with eReaders that cannot accommodate higher levels.
- When captions are included in images, they can't be searched.
- Tables, especially large, complex versions, are hard to view and read. It's better to include a link to the table on an external website.
- Tables of contents should be kept to two levels and have links to the sections in the text for easy navigation.
- There are no current eBook standards for indexes, and indexes typically aren't interactive (linked). Search doesn't always point readers to the information they're seeking. Rockley suggests looking at the best practices of technical writers who create online help files for creating indexes that are interactive and user-friendly.
- Although eBooks are not covered in the 508 standards, they should be designed with accessibility in mind.

The remainder of the book returns to Rockley's single-sourcing roots, where she stresses the importance of reusing content—creating multiple outputs from a master. Reusing content streamlines eBook design and production. Content updates are quicker and easier, because only one source needs to be touched. She recommends using XML for publishing content, because it accommodates existing publishing formats and is flexible enough to handle future formats.

If you're interested in eBook publishing, a bird's-eye view of single sourcing, or simply want a basic understanding about how the eReaders function, *eBooks 101* is an excellent way to immerse yourself.

Author's Bio

Cheryl Landes, an award-winning technical writer and STC Fellow, is the founder and owner of Tabby Cat Communications in Seattle. She writes technical documentation, marketing materials, and training presentations for several industries: software development, Internet and networking technologies, HVAC and energy savings, marine transportation, and retail. She is also the author of *Beautiful America's Idaho*, *Those Wild Northwest Days*, and *Beautiful America's Seattle* (now in its second edition). Her personal passions include hiking, paddling in canoes and kayaks, photography, and listening to jazz and classical music.