



2023 History Essay Contest

Homeschool 7/8th Grade Winner

Words for the World

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In the 1400s, books were rare. Books had to be handwritten, which often resulted in mistakes. Monks, known as scribes, would spend up to six hours a day in scriptoriums, copying down religious works such as the Bible. Making just one copy of the Bible could take up to a year. Scribes would use quill pens, which had to be dipped in ink, and parchment paper, made from animal skins, to copy down texts. Before the printing press, books could also be made using block printing. It was still very time-consuming, requiring the printer to carve out every word onto a block of wood. The wood block was then coated in ink, and a piece of paper was pressed onto it, and the words would remain printed. The only advantage to block printing was that once the block was carved, many more copies of the page could be made. Books were difficult to make without the printing press.

Because it took so much work and money to produce a book, books were costly. Many peasants lived their whole lives without even seeing a book, and the few who did, most likely could not read. Only the nobles could afford to buy them, and many castles had their own

libraries. So, for the most part, learning and education were cut off for the common people. Books were expensive and cumbersome to make and access to learning was limited, until Gutenberg invented his printing press.

Johannes Gutenberg was born around 1394 A.D. in Mainz, Germany. His parents were wealthy and could afford to teach him to read and write. Gutenberg knew how rare books were and wanted to come up with some way to print books quicker and more cheaply. He began drawing designs for a movable type printing press. Movable type is individual letter blocks that can be arranged to form sentences. The movable type had been developed several hundred years before by the Chinese, but this knowledge was not widely known in Europe. Besides, the Chinese had not developed a reliable system, and there were very few presses. One of the reasons there were so few movable type presses in the orient is that the languages of China and Korea contain so many characters that it is impractical to carve each of the 300 or so designs onto wooden blocks.

Gutenberg's first design was just a simple frame with wooden movable type blocks inside. The letters were then coated in water-based ink, and a paper was pressed onto it. The only difference between his first design and block printing is that the letters could be rearranged. This was a significant improvement, but there were still several problems with the design. For one, the wooden type soaked up the ink and made them crack. Another problem was that the water-based ink did not show up very well on the paper. Above all, it was still very time consuming.

Gutenberg was a goldsmith, so he knew how to work with metals. He made molds of the wooden type and then cast them in metal. Now that the type was metal, they would not

crack, and he could run the same ink for several prints. Next, he changed the water-based ink to oil-based ink. The oil-based ink would appear much darker and more apparent on the paper. The last big change he made was to the press itself. He re-designed the type box to a mechanical press based on the ones used to crush apples. This one had a lever that pressed the ink-coated type, down onto the paper, instead of the paper onto the type. This design was a big breakthrough. It made books quickly and efficiently. The first book Gutenberg printed was the Bible. Because of the efficiency of the press, he could make many copies a week. This was known as a print run.

Now that Gutenberg could produce so many books at a time, the cost of books decreased dramatically. Peasants could now easily afford to buy books. It became possible for the common people to gain knowledge and learning. Scientists could share ideas and discoveries. All this learning would eventually lead to the renaissance. After his death around 1468, Gutenberg's printing press spread all over Europe. For the first time, magazines began to appear cheaply to tell ordinary people the world news.

Gutenberg's work had a major impact on Western civilization. His printing press was so effective that it changed little for hundreds of years. It was only improved upon until the invention of the laser printer. We owe much of the learning and advancement in technology we have today to Gutenberg. Gutenberg's press truly changed the world.

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