

Building on the Past

In this Link-Up, you learned that documents that are properly cared for can last a very long time. It is important to save information from the past because this information helps us make decisions about our future. Without knowledge of the past, we are like people without memories. Imagine how difficult it would be to try to make a decision about even the simplest task without any memory of past experiences!

In the early Middle Ages, only a few people in Europe could read and write. Books were scarce and they were printed by hand. The book-making process changed with the development of the printing press. With this new technology, many more books could be printed in less time. The sudden availability of books led to more people learning how to read. The first printed books in Europe were copies of the Bible but books in other areas, such as science and literature, were soon printed. Today, people have access to information that people in the Middle Ages could only have dreamed of having.

Yet until recently, writers were a small group of experts who had the ability and skills to produce books we wanted to read, whether for knowledge or pleasure. Today, anyone with access to a computer can write information on any topic and post it on the Internet. Web pages, chat rooms, bulletin boards, and e-mail make it easy for us to share our ideas and information with friends and strangers. In a world so full of information, it is important to learn how to read and write critically. As a reader, you need to analyse other people's writing for accuracy and bias. There is no magic formula for being a wise reader, but you will certainly become a better reader if you are informed about the past.

The invention of the printing press drastically changed people's lives in the Middle Ages. Can you imagine what the computer and information technology will do in the future?

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Many people who send e-mails ignore rules of grammar, such as correct capitalization, spelling, and punctuation. Make a list of the benefits and problems that could result for a person who continually communicates this way.
2. Make a list of the changes you think have occurred in visual arts (movie-making, for example), music, and in how people spend their free time. How do you think computers will change these areas in the future?
3. Books changed the way people thought because they no longer had to memorize information to preserve it. List some ways we may change our thinking as a result of our use of information technology.