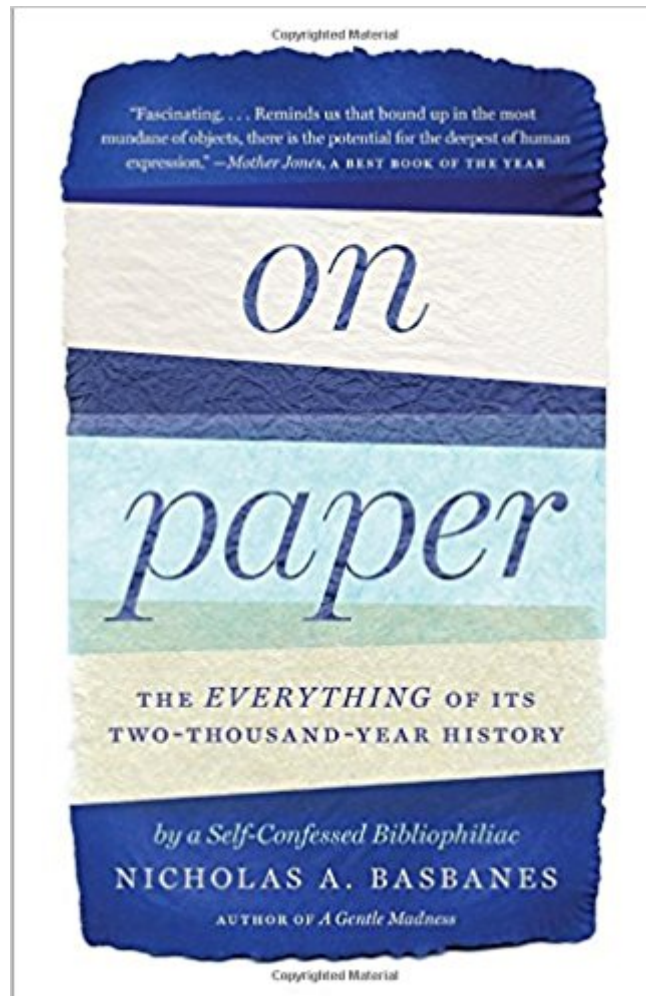




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# On Paper: The Everything Of Its Two-Thousand-Year History



## Synopsis

A Best Book of the Year: Mother Jones [Amazon](#) [Bloomberg News](#) [National Post](#) [Kirkus](#) In these pages, Nicholas Basbanes—the consummate bibliophile—shows how paper has been civilization’s constant companion. It preserves our history and gives record to our very finest literary, cultural, and scientific accomplishments. Since its invention in China nearly two millennia ago, the technology of paper has spread throughout the inhabited world. With deep knowledge and care, Basbanes traces paper’s trail from the earliest handmade sheets to the modern-day mills. Paper, yoked to politics, has played a crucial role in the unfolding of landmark events, from the American Revolution to Daniel Ellsberg’s Pentagon Papers to the aftermath of 9/11. Without paper, modern hygienic practice would be unimaginable; as currency, people will do almost anything to possess it; and, as a tool of expression, it is inextricable from human culture. Lavishly researched, compellingly written, this masterful guide illuminates paper’s endless possibilities.

## Book Information

Paperback: 448 pages

Publisher: Vintage; Reprint edition (July 1, 2014)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0307279642

ISBN-13: 978-0307279644

Product Dimensions: 5.2 x 0.9 x 8 inches

Shipping Weight: 1 pounds (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.3 out of 5 stars 57 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #73,588 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #6 in [Books > Crafts, Hobbies & Home > Antiques & Collectibles > Books](#) #10 in [Books > Crafts, Hobbies & Home > Antiques & Collectibles > Paper Ephemera & Cards > Paper Ephemera](#) #101 in [Books > Engineering & Transportation > Engineering > Reference > History](#)

## Customer Reviews

Q&A with Nicholas A. Basbanes Q. What inspired you to write *On Paper*? A. After writing eight books about every conceivable aspect of books and book culture, it seemed logical that I turn to the stuff of transmission itself, and for more than five hundred years in the West—and much longer than that in Asia and the Middle East—the medium of choice has been paper. The actual idea to write a book about paper, though, was suggested to me in 2002 by MacArthur Fellow

Timothy Barrett, during a speaking visit I made to the Iowa Center for the Book at the University of Iowa. I spent several days there with Tim — a world-renowned authority in the field of hand papermaking — and he regaled me with stories about its history that I found irresistible. The best part about it, from my standpoint, was that no book quite like the decidedly eclectic one I ultimately envisioned had ever been done before. This is not a formal chronology by any means, but a cultural history that takes in the full sweep of this remarkably versatile material, and discusses the impact it has had on the shaping of history.

Q. Can anyone date the first appearance of an actual book? A. By “actual book,” I assume you mean a “book on paper,” in which case the earliest known printed book to have an actual date on it is the The Diamond Sutra, from 868 A.D., printed on paper from carved wooden blocks, and produced more than five hundred years before Johannes Gutenberg introduced moveable metal type in Europe. It was found in a cave in the Gobi Desert early in the twentieth century by the explorer Sir Aurel Stein, and is now in the British Library. But books have taken many shapes and forms over the centuries, the earliest ones written on clay tablets in Mesopotamia dating to about 3000 B.C. Others have been written on cured animal skins known as parchment and vellum, on laminated strips of a marsh reed known as papyrus, others have been incised on bamboo, silk, metal sheets, pottery, stone — whatever material was available at the time. But once introduced as a viable medium — and once the rudiments for making it from the pulverized fibers of a vegetative source were understood — paper transformed everything. It was cheap to make, it was light, pliable, resilient, portable, foldable — truly a miracle invention with a multitude of applications.

Q. This is a big question, I know, but what do you think have been paper’s greatest contributions to history? A. I think the fact that paper has been the medium upon which so much of our history, our literature, and our cultural heritage have been recorded for close to a thousand years, and the medium upon which each generation over that span has been able to communicate with those that follow, has to come first. Of the eighteen chapters in my book, the one I chose to be the title chapter is devoted to this concept. Another deals with the role paper has played as a tool of the creative process, with generous attention given to the notebooks of Leonard da Vinci, Beethoven, and Thomas Edison. But paper has done so many other remarkable things, it is almost impossible to single out one function as being stronger than all the others. Architecture as we know it today, for instance, or engineering in which plans must be drawn precisely to scale, the making of photographic images, the emergence in Ottoman times of the modern bureaucracy, are unthinkable without the availability of this remarkable material.

Q. You write that “the paperless society we hear being bandied about so much today may not be as imminent as some people

suggest. • How so? A. There's a wonderful quote I use as an epigraph to one of the chapters, an observation made in the 1980s by a historian of libraries named Jesse Shera. • "The paperless society," he said, "is about as probable as the paperless bathroom." • Many functions of paper definitely are on the wane, and we all know what they are, books, newspapers, correspondence, record-keeping and the like. But those account for just a fraction of the functions that paper facilitates, currency, toilet paper, photographic prints, wrapping paper, cardboard packaging, labels, food containers • it's all paper • and I don't see many substitutes for those products immediately on the horizon. Q. What role do you see paper playing in the future? A. There's a company based in Pennsylvania, P. H. Glatfelter, that has more than tripled its business in barely a decade, and is now a \$1.6 billion-a-year company, and they did it by diversifying to the point that they make paper for more than a thousand different commercial uses • paper for tea bags, postage stamps, greeting cards, candy wrappers, copying machines, while also supplying high-quality paper for use in the publishing industry. The companies that are going to survive and prosper, I believe, are the companies that have the will and the perception to seek out and serve a variety of niche markets such as these. Q. The smart phone has become our generation's diary, newspaper, novel, notepad, planner and so much more. What do you see as the benefits and drawbacks to this transition? A. I think future generations may regret the absence of hard-copy diaries, journals, correspondence and the like from people living an exclusively electronic kind of life. These are artifacts that give us so much information about the way people think and how they live at a particular point in time, and to eliminate them as a resource for future scholars is a palpable loss. Think of what we would have missed if John and Abigail Adams had texted each other digitally during the years of the Revolution, and not written the kind of letters that truly span the centuries, or if their son, John Quincy Adams, had not kept a daily diary from the time he was twelve to a few days before he died in 1848 at the age of eighty. I write in my chapter on governmental red tape how the National Archives is working to develop reliable ways to insure that electronic records are stored in ways that they will be preserved permanently in standard formats, and • "readable" • to future researchers. In fact that's the biggest challenge professional archivists face today, the long-term conservation of • "born digital" • materials. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

**\*Starred Review\*** Basbanes's renowned books about books, from *A Gentle Madness: Bibliophiles, Bibliomanes, and the Eternal Passions for Books* (1995) to *Every Book Its Reader: The*

Power of the Printed Word to Stir the World (2005), are shaped by his investigative journalist's curiosity and skill as well as a penchant for the underappreciated. In his latest lassoing inquiry, he unfolds the two-thousand-year story of paper. Civilizations have been built on paper, from sacred texts to laws to business records to social documents to art and literature. Paper has also been used to make everything from gun cartridges to cigarettes, money to toilet paper. Basbanes begins in China, paper's birthplace, and follows paper's migration east to Japan, where it became integral to architecture, and along the Silk Road to the Arab world, then onto Europe, charting how radically it transformed each culture. In newly forged America, he tracks the rapid coalescence of newspapers and the forest-devouring paper industry. Combining crisp technical explanations with vivid historical and contemporary profiles, he visits traditional hand-papermakers and tours "tree-free" paper plants, including Crane and Company, which has been making the paper for American currency since 1879, and Marcal, which recycles junk mail. Basbanes also marvels over the historical significance of letters, diaries, and notebooks, takes mischievous pleasure in "paper capers," explores the National Archives, home of 80 billion pieces of paper and counting, and speaks with Harvard library director Robert Darnton about print's future. Every facet of this celebration of paper is engrossing and thought-provoking, leading up to the dramatic conclusion, in which Basbanes recounts deeply affecting stories about the "paper rain" that covered New York City on 9/11. Paper, Basbanes avers, is nothing less than an embodiment and conveyance of humanity.

--Donna Seaman --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Exactly what it says. The early chapters focus on the origins of paper and how it was made in the beginning and into today. Then it moves onto how paper had an effect on things like architecture and ideas. Another section deals with how it is used and how that has changed like newsprint into sanitary health products. Finally poignant moments that deal with paper as the line between a medium and the artifact itself are discussed. I did notice that the paper this book was made with was quite nice feeling substantial but not overly heavy. I really enjoyed this micro history and it encompasses so many interesting things

Basbanes always writes in a way that strolls through his topic, in this case paper. He manages to provide insights at every point, along with fascinating details on the processes and business of papermaking, as well on the value and mystique of paper itself. Like his other works, this volume deserves a leisurely read. It will deeply affect the reader's understanding of and appreciation for

something so easily taken for granted. Basbanes is unique in his writing--entertaining, confident, informative. It invites the reader to savor a topic, to relax and enjoy the world, and to be affected thereby. His beautiful language and deep knowledge of his subject reminds the reader that sometimes it is more important to read and digest rather than just gather information. No one issues this invitation better than Basbanes.

Perhaps we've all taken paper for-granted as it seems to be ubiquitous and to have been in existence forever. Nick Basbanes tells the story of paper from its beginnings in China to today by describing the people who made it and their stories. Each chapter has a different focus with compelling personal stories from his research. Consequently it is very readable and enjoyable.

The contradictory nature of paper is just one of the fascinating aspects of this book. Paper is the thing and not the thing, as its worth "relies almost entirely on what has been written, drawn, or printed on its surface." Nicholas Basbanes recounts dozens of the 20,000 documented uses for paper, and reminds us that bound up in the most mundane of objects, there is the potential for the deepest of human expression. This thorough exploration of one of our greatest inventions is worth reading. *Yes, on paper.*

Nicholas Basbanes is well known as the author of *A Gentle Madness*, *Patience and Fortitude*, *Every Book Its Reader*, and other works celebrating books and the fine arts of collecting and reading them. It is a natural progression, then, for his latest work to deal with the substance from which books are made. *On Paper* is a fascinating work, highly scholarly yet inviting, dealing with the many ways paper has contributed to and enhanced our world. *On Paper* is divided into three sections. The first deals with the history of papermaking, beginning like so much else of civilization in China, then carrying on through Asia, the Middle East, Europe and the Americas, helping us realize yet again how much human history has depended on paper. Part II covers some of the myriad ways paper has been used over the centuries: as currency, means of identification, to record legal and historic events, and to serve as witnesses to the past. In Part III Basbanes describes the uses creative people have made of paper, including the notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci, the compositions of Beethoven, and John Quincy Adams' diaries among many other examples. In each section Basbanes introduces us to some amazing people, including librarians, archivists, traditional paper makers and origamists, who manufacture, use, and preserve paper. Reading *On Paper* is like having a long and enjoyable conversation. So many different topics come up, each one fascinating and

leading to new avenues of investigation. I think I enjoyed the sections on early paper making and the chapters dealing with historical documents and with paper currency the most, but it's difficult to say because every page has so much that interested and intrigued me. Nicholas Basbanes is rightly celebrated as the staunchest of advocates for books and reading. On Paper will enhance that status immeasurably and ensure that he will continue to be known as a friend to all that is literate among us.

I am very glad I ordered this book. Information abounds in the pages. Interesting stories related to the subject. It has a wonderful index at the end. So when you want to point out something to a friend or fellow reader, you can find it again. This book is also printed on quality stock. A joy to hold.

What a detailed account of paper, in all its guises and uses.

The book is very easy and interesting well-documented reading with complete thorough history about "Paper". I am not finished reading the whole book yet but am enjoying every chapter I have read so far. It has really held my attention from the beginning.

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