When Johann Gutenberg (YOE-hahn GOOT-in-berg) was born in Germany around 1398, almost no one could read or write. There were no newspapers or magazines. Every copy of every book was written by hand. But all that would change, thanks to Gutenberg’s invention—the printing press.

When Johann Gutenberg was a boy, his family helped run a mint. This was where metal coins were made. Perhaps young Johann learned to work with metal there. When he grew up, Gutenberg was making things from gold. In his spare time, he started working on a printing press. We don’t know exactly when or how this began. That’s because he kept his work as secret as possible. He didn’t want anyone to steal his ideas.

There was printing before Gutenberg. Starting around A.D. 700, people in Japan and China printed with carved wooden blocks. Later, people in Korea invented metal type. They never invented an easy way to print large amounts of writing.

However, Gutenberg solved the problem by creating movable type. First he made metal pieces in the shapes of letters. Then he made lots of copies of each letter. Next he placed the letters in a frame so that they spelled out words, sentences, and paragraphs. Then the frame was put in a press. Ink was put on the letters, and a piece of paper was pressed against the type.

In 1454, he was ready to print his first book—a bible. His invention was an immediate success. Within a few years, print shops had opened all over Germany. Then printing spread around the world.

Gutenberg spent the rest of his life making his press better and showing others how to use it. He died in 1468. His press worked so well that the design stayed almost the same for nearly 400 years.

Today, books and newspapers are created with computers and giant electronic presses. It all started with Johann Gutenberg and his printing press.
Comprehension Connection

Before Reading
1. What do you know about how books are made?
2. What are some things that are made possible because of books, newspapers, and magazines?
3. Read the title of this text. You know it is a brief biography. What do you expect to learn?

During Reading
1. How was knowledge passed on before Gutenberg invented the printing press?
2. Gutenberg had experience making coins. How could this have helped him invent a printing press?
3. How was Gutenberg’s invention an improvement over the Asian invention of carved type?

After Reading
1. What do you think was probably most difficult for Gutenberg as he worked on his invention?
2. Describe the process Gutenberg used to print a book, as you imagine it.
3. What effect did the printing press have on people and ideas? Why?

Skill Focus

Imagine That!
The printed word is all around you—in books, in magazines, on signs, and on television. So, it is hard to imagine a time when there was nothing to read except what was written by hand. What did those handwritten books look like? Perhaps you have seen illustrations in a history book or an encyclopedia. If so, then when you read the first paragraph, you pictured this: careful lettering called calligraphy and beautiful little drawings on the pages.

While you might not have seen an old-fashioned printing press, you have seen or read about frames that hold pieces of things in place (puzzles, for example, or gears in a machine). This helped you imagine Gutenberg carefully placing the letters into a frame. You may not have seen a page of type inked, but you have probably used a stamp. You could picture the ink being swiped evenly over the letters and the paper being pressed against the wet surface to make the page of print. These images in your mind helped you to understand this text. It helps as you read to use what knowledge you already have to “see” what you are reading about.

Writing Extension
Before computers, it wasn’t so easy to send out the printed word in a very fast way. Write a paragraph explaining how computers have made it even easier for people to write stories and send them out for others to read.

Vocabulary
1. carved
2. type
3. frame
4. immediate
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During Reading

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