The word *book* has come to have many meanings, e.g., any collection of sheets of paper, wood, or other material sewn or bound together; a division of a written work (books of the Bible, books of Caesar’s *Gallic War*); and statements of financial accounting (bookkeeping). The primary meaning today is, however, a written work either in manuscript or in printed or electronic form that is of substantial length.

**Early Books**

Early in the history of bookmaking the printed book was distinguished in size by the number of times the original large sheet of paper on which the type was printed had been folded, i.e., folio, quarto, octavo, and duodecimo. With the advent of machine-made paper, these sizes were standardized. The standard octavo, according to the American Library Association, is between 20 cm and 25 cm in height.

Books apparently did not come into existence until long after writing, e.g., inscription, was widespread. Fragmentary early papyri represent literature in ancient Egypt and may possibly be considered as books, although it is customary to speak of the Book of the Dead as the first of the Egyptian papyrus books. The cuneiform tablets gathered into the great Assyrian library of Assurbanipal represented an enormous collection of works, but the book as we know it may be said to be derived from the Egyptian writings on papyrus.

The vast literature of the Greeks, collected in the greatest library of the ancient world, in Alexandria, was generally written on large sheets of papyrus, which were glued together and rolled up. The rolls varied greatly in size; many were about 1 ft (30 cm) wide and about 30 ft (9 m) long when unrolled. In the Hellenistic era large works were divided into tomes [Gr.,=cutting] that were stored together in cylinders and labeled.

The method of having the leaves held together in quires (24 or 25 sheets) in the fashion of the modern book seems not to have originated until about the 2d cent. A.D. From at least the early part of the 2d cent. B.C. the more permanent vellum (a type of fine parchment first used in the Middle East) was also used for writing books, and this grew to be very popular in the Middle Ages when books were copied by monks in the scriptoria of monasteries. In the scriptoria the art of illumination flourished, making artistic masterpieces of many medieval liturgical volumes.

**Book Printing**

The production of books in great quantity had to await the mechanical processes of printing from movable type. Printing was invented in China, where the first book printed by means of woodblocks is thought to date from the 9th cent. Korea developed movable metal type during the 13th cent. In the West movable metal type was developed by Johann Gutenberg of Mainz, and to a very large extent the history of the book is henceforth the history of printing.

Book production developed very rapidly, the craft becoming enormously sophisticated by the 16th cent. Italian printers set the standards of format and quality retained in Europe until the 19th cent. Great printing houses also arose in France and the Netherlands and, after a general decline in the 17th cent., in
England and the United States. The 19th cent. witnessed machine replacement of all the old manual processes. By the end of the century printing quality had been so debased that a revolution, led by William Morris during the arts and crafts movement in England, was necessary to restore the concept of beauty to bookmaking.

**Modern Book Production**

In recent years computer technology has revolutionized book production and the printing and distribution of comparatively inexpensive softcover books, or paperbacks, has expanded. Since the late 20th cent. the standing of the book as an information source has been challenged by other media including television, computers, and on-line databases. Also, the very definition of a book as a collection of printed sheets of paper is being challenged as books recorded in various audio formats have become increasingly common, and some works are being produced as audiobooks, appearing in audio form without ever being published in print. In addition, electronic book readers—small computers designed to display pages of digital books (e-books) on their screens as well as software that functions similarly on less specialized electronic devices—have been introduced.

**Related Entries**

See also book clubs; book collecting; book publishing; incunabula; library; manuscript; type; typography; writing.

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