

## History of the Title Page

Gutenberg's invention of the printing press revolutionized book culture in Europe. With the advent of the printing press, as well as the adoption of paper, books became affordable and prolific. Scholars don't agree on exactly how many books were printed, but estimates range from between eight and twenty-four million new books in the hands of Europeans in the first fifty years after Gutenberg's invention.

Books were originally published without a title page. Authors typically did not give their text a title; that was the job of the publisher. The beginning of the text was marked with color and/or a larger size print, often beautifully decorated. Information about the publisher was in the *colophon*, at the back of the book. So where did title pages come from?



This image shows printers at work in an early printshop.

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Many printers began to leave a blank page at the front of the book in the 1470s. While there is no definitive proof, one commonly held theory is that this page was added to protect the printed text from the dirt and grime of the print shop. What is known is that the evolution of the printing press meant that printers had multiple unbound copies of books lying around their shops ready to be sold. No one is exactly sure how these books were stored until sale. They could have been stored flat, without being folded into a book. However, if books were stored folded by copy or quire (four sheets of paper folded together to make eight pages) then the first page of text would be exposed to dirt and dust. Including a blank page at the beginning of the book was an intentional decision by the printer.

Whatever the reason, print shops now found themselves with piles of blank covered books. Finding a particular text for a customer could be quite challenging, since they all looked the same. Printers started adding a *title label* to the beginning of a book in the late 1480s.

This made it much easier to find the books they were looking for.

This front page had marketing potential. Sure, the title was helpful, but there was all that wasted blank space. What if this page was used to showcase the publisher and the printer? The information from the colophon was moved from the back of the book to the front of the book. But that wasn't quite enough. The title page still looked a little bare. So the printer's mark, or printer's device, was added. The printer's mark typically began as an image of the sign above the printer's shop, but soon evolved into its own piece of artwork. Printers' marks often contained references to mythology, mottoes or sometimes played with the printer's names. Customers would be able to associate that image with the printer, and ideally, with the known quality of that printer's work.

The title page didn't stop there. In France, printers added the address of the bookseller. Other printers started describing the benefits of buying the book, by describing the author, or the "elegant" "clear" text. The marketing applications of the title page were endless. But there was still some blank space on that page. By 1510 printers started adding the woodcut borders that were originally found on the first page of the book to the title page. Title pages became true works of art.