

# [The writing. in the middle ages it was](https://assignbuster.com/the-writing-in-the-middle-ages-it-was/)

The name of the European inventor of this great advance in the art of printing, if indeed he was an original inven­tor and did not derive the idea from the East, is unknown.

All that is certain is that the use of movable types was introduced into Europe about the middle of the fifteenth century, and in the course of fifty years was commonly practiced in Italy, Germany, France and England. The influence that the invention of these little types of sepa­rate letters has had upon the history of the world is so great as to be almost incalculable. The chief direct effect of the invention was the cheapening of all kinds of literature. Before the middle of the fifteenth century, books could only be multiplied by the laborious process of copying one manuscript from another. As writing was rare accomplishment, and the copying of a book then, as now, took a long time, the manuscripts of literary works were few and very expensive. We must also remember that the clergy, as is indicated by the etymological connection between the words “ clergy” and “ clerk,” almost had a monopoly of the art of writing.

In the Middle Ages it was by the labour of the monks that books were copied and preserved for posterity, and naturally the monks devoted their labours chiefly to the preservation of reli­gious works, and especially of such religious works as were in accordance with the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. Thus it happened that books were few and dear, and of the few books available the majority were orthodox theological treatises. Until printed books took the place of manuscripts, there was little prospect of the dissemination of general knowledge among the multitude. But as soon as the Printing-Press became an established institution, a great impulse was given to the progress of knowledge, one of the first and greatest results of which was the Reformation. When books were multiplied, people began to read for themselves, and as a consequence to think for themselves with the help of the new knowledge they derived from their reading. The result of this was that many refused to accept the interpretation of the Bible given by the Roman Catholic Church, and interpreted it by the light of their own knowledge, instead of entirely submitting their intellects to priestly guidance.

In this way, through the art of printing, was brought about that religious revolution which broke up Europe into two great hostile camps, ad produced such momentous consequences in the history of mankind. But of course the spirit of inquiry due to the printing-press was not confined to religion. Since the fifteenth century every branch of knowledge has made wonderful progress. Old sciences have been developed to results before undreamt of, and a large number of new sciences have been invented. The literature of modern Europe has expanded to such immense proportions that the largest buildings in the world can hardly contain the number of books in the French, German, Italian, English, Spanish, and Russian languages that have been published during the last four hundred years. In the middle Ages the principal libraries at the greatest literary centers of the world could scarcely muster a thousand volumes.

Now there are more than a million and a half books in the library of the British Museum alone. Many of the books there collected have been multiplied by the printing-press into many thousands of copies. If we add to these millions of books the millions of newspapers printed every day, we may be able to form some faint idea of the powerful influence the print­ing-press has had in spreading knowledge all over the world.