

E-readers do less, but no distractions

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CHARLOTTE,
North Carolina – Until I tried one, I never understood the appeal of e-book readers, given that tablets can do much more.

The e-reader's ease and comfort became apparent as I raced to finish the second Hunger Games book before the movie came out. I blew through several pages on a Kobo Aura while waiting for a sandwich in Cupertino, California, and a connecting flight in Charlotte, North Carolina.

The Aura, like the Kindle Paperwhite and the Nook GlowLight, was just the right size to hold while waiting in the aisle for passengers in front of me to stow their luggage.

Back home in New York, I can slip an e-reader in my coat pocket after getting off the subway or continue reading while walking those final few blocks to work. These readers are so convenient that I've read more books in just four months than the past few years combined.

What I like most: all three devices minimize distractions.

There's no notification about a new Facebook post, no temptation to check email. Surfing on their rudimentary Web browsers is so frustrating that you quickly return to reading. Battery life is good because you're not taxing the device with images and video on pristine, colorful screens.

The e-readers' black-and-white displays are good for reading—and just that. E-readers are cheaper than full-fledged tablets.

Amazon.com Inc.'s Kindle Paperwhite (\$119, or \$139 without ads on screensaver; \$70 more for 3G cellular access):

The online bookseller has done for e-readers what Apple did for tablets – make the devices something regular people want and buy. Since releasing the first Kindle in 2007, Amazon has expanded into tablets with the Kindle Fire line. But it still makes excellent e-readers.

Of the three I tested, the Paperwhite is the best in terms of comfort and ease of use, but it's also the worst for locking you in to Amazon's book system.

For the most part, you're limited to reading books you buy through Amazon, and those books can be read only on Kindle devices and apps. Most other e-readers support a system called EPub, which allows for transfers from device to device.

That said, Amazon typically has the best prices, and you can return e-books within seven days. With a \$79-a-year Amazon Prime membership for free shipping, you also can borrow one e-book from a selected list each month.

The device is small, yet sturdy.

Books are easy to read using the default font, though you can change it. You can change the size of text and illustrations by pinching in or out with two fingers. A screen-within-a-screen feature lets you jump to another part of the book without losing your place.

Where the Paperwhite stands out is in its supplemental materials. You can see which passages other Kindle readers have collectively highlighted. An X-Ray feature gives you more information on characters, places and terms. You can use that to jump to every mention of the Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland*, for instance.

The Paperwhite has a built-in dictionary like other e-readers, but you can also look up concepts such as "credit default swaps" rather than just individual words.

The Paperwhite's light isn't as bright as the others, and it can be turned on and off only from an on-screen menu. The other two have physical buttons that are easier to access.

Kobo Aura (\$150):

All three readers have 6-inch (15.24-centimeter) screens, measured diagonally, yet the Aura is the smallest and lightest of them all.

The Aura feels boxy, though, without curved edges found in the Paperwhite or the Nook.

Unlike the Paperwhite, the Aura's power switch requires sliding, which reduces the chances of accidentally turning on in your bag. The Nook has a similar safeguard, but requires an awkward two-step process involving a physical button and a slide on the screen.

You can resize text and images on the Aura by adjusting an on-screen slider, but there's no pinching fingers.

The Aura's supplemental materials aren't as extensive as the Paperwhite's, but it offers more than the Nook, which has nothing. With a book by Nate Silver on the faulty world of predictions, for instance, you can delve into key concepts such as the industrial revolution, forecasting and the Bayes estimator.

The Aura is also the most extensive in offering reading stats.

It estimates how long it'll take to finish the book, the current chapter and the next. It also tracks the number of books finished, the total time spent reading, the average number of pages read per minute and much more. The Paperwhite offers only a subset of that. With the Nook, you just get the page number.

Barnes & Noble Inc.'s Nook GlowLight (\$119):

Some readers may prefer the Nook's white frame, as it's a better match to the color of the screen than the black frame on the others. It is lighter than the Paperwhite and has a soft back with a rubber-like silicone edge.

The Nook also gets rid of a small annoyance in other devices: a tendency for the screen to go black and refresh itself after several pages.

Personally, the Paperwhite feels the most comfortable and durable, and the black frame helps my eyes focus on the text. But see for yourself. Unlike the other e-readers, you can go to any Barnes & Noble retail store and hold one. You can also go back if you need help using the device.

Unfortunately, the Nook doesn't offer much more than reading. There's no library of supplemental materials. There's no official Web browser.

I had to search online for a hack to reach a hidden one.

There's no sliding or pinching to change text size, but rather a series of taps to maneuver. I couldn't find a way to enlarge illustrations.

The Nook also gave me trouble in the snow; flakes were enough to turn pages and launch menus.

The Nook does win on price. You pay \$20 more for an ad-free version of the Paperwhite. However, you more than make that up after buying enough books at lower prices on Amazon.