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# On Paper: The Everything Of Its Two-Thousand-Year History



## Synopsis

A Best Book of the Year: Mother Jones, *Â* Bloomberg News, *Â* National Post, *Â* Kirkus *Â* In these pages, Nicholas Basbanes *”*the consummate bibliophile *”* shows how paper has been civilization *”*s constant companion. It preserves our history and gives record to our very finest literary, cultural, and scientific accomplishments. Since its invention in China nearly two millennia ago, the technology of paper has spread throughout the inhabited world. *Â* *Â* *Â* *Â* With deep knowledge and care, Basbanes traces paper *”*s trail from the earliest handmade sheets to the modern-day mills. Paper, yoked to politics, has played a crucial role in the unfolding of landmark events, from the American Revolution to Daniel Ellsberg *”*s Pentagon Papers to the aftermath of 9/11. Without paper, modern hygienic practice would be unimaginable; as currency, people will do almost anything to possess it; and, as a tool of expression, it is inextricable from human culture. Lavishly researched, compellingly written, this masterful guide illuminates paper *”*s endless possibilities. *Â*

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

You have to love an author whose favorite scene from a movie (Searching for Bobby Fischer) involves a chess prodigy and a piece of paper! Nicholas Basbanes' book about the history, uses and importance of paper includes plenty of bits of trivia like this, as well as indepth looks at the invention of paper, its uses down through the ages and its future going forward. It's all very interesting, although it took me awhile to figure out that the book's focus is somewhat split between the making

of paper and the usage of paper. Because the author is just as interested in the uses of paper, his possible subject matter was obviously limitless, which explains the wide-ranging nature of the book. "If there's a common thread to be discerned in this strategy," Mr. Basbanes writes of his book, "it is what Graham Greene sagely called, in one of his novels, "the human factor." Mr. Basbanes visits papermakers, interviews executives at successful paper companies such as Crane, Marcal and Avery, and describes the making of such specialty paper as that used for minting money, an increasingly complex job due to the sophistication of counterfeiters. He delves into the arts, examining the manuscripts of Beethoven, the canvases of Whistler, and the diaries of Da Vinci, and discusses the exacting art of architectural blueprints. He even devotes a chapter to origami and how the intricate folding of paper has advanced the science of launching space telescopes.

This is a splendid, expansive, and sometimes astonishing book. Basbanes looks at the medium that is paper and explores the ways that paper, the invisible surface, reveals our culture, influences our psychology, creates our art, comforts us, and remembers us. The subtitle of Nicholas Basbanes' new book, "The Everything of its Two-Thousand-Year History," may sound immodest, but it is more than that. It is difficult to summarize all that this book succeeds in doing. As a result of my interest in language and writing, I have read books on living languages (The Story of English), dead languages (Ad Infinitum), Alphabets (Letter Perfect), and Printing Fonts (Just My Type), but, until now, never focused on the medium that made all of these possible. Basbanes provides a wide-ranging examination of the earliest paper making in China then follows it geographically to Japan, Western Asia, the Middle East, Europe and North America (Latin America is oddly not included), and includes his own travels in search of paper as well. After reading about the process of paper making, which is always the same but varies endlessly by the ingredients and specialized techniques used, I find myself wanting to visit a paper museum just to see all the possibilities that Basbanes discusses. The author makes unusual and unexpected connections as he starts one chapter with the role that paper played in the Sepoy Rebellion in pre-Raj India and closes it with connections to cigarette papers and the economic and human costs of tobacco smoking. In another, he begins with the invention of the spinning wheel and explains why it made it worth Gutenberg's time to tinker with moveable metal type.

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