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ATG Special Report — ProQuest's 2016 Global Student and Researcher eBook Survey

by **Allen McKiel** (Dean of Library Services, Western Oregon University) <mckiel@wou.edu>

This year **ProQuest**, which includes **ebrary**, **EBL**, and **Ebook Central** platforms, initiated another global student and researcher survey on their use of eBooks. Over 2,000 students and researchers, from a reasonably representative sampling of subject disciplines, from over 600 colleges and universities took the survey. Undergraduates comprised 48%, graduates 23%, PhD candidates 10%, librarians 10%, and staff 5%. The survey contained similar questions contained in the first two global student surveys that **ebrary** conducted in 2008 and 2011 concerning the perceived strengths and weaknesses of eBooks as well as preferences and attitudes about them. The following article compares the responses from the three surveys.

Student Rating of Resource Usefulness

Questions 7 (1561 responses) and 8 (1533 responses) of the 2016 survey asked students how important electronic and print resources (respectively) were to completing research/class assignments. The ebrary surveys from 2008 and 2011, had similar questions for student use of resources for academic assignments and asked students to select those that they used from a list of nearly the same options. The values used in Table 1 for the 2008 and 2011 surveys are the percentages of students who selected the resources. The 2016 survey asked students to rate the resources extreme, very, moderately, slightly, not at all useful or no opinion. I have rank ordered the responses as a percentage of the students who rated the resource “extremely” or “very useful.” Although the questions report different types of responses, the percentages can be preference ordered by their rankings.

“Google and other search engines” has held the top rank all three years as the most useful resource for students. eBooks have fallen from second and third places for 2008 and 2011 respectively to sixth place in 2016. Conversely, e-journals have ascended from sixth and seventh place from 2008 and 2011 respectively to second place in 2016; and printed textbooks have ascended from seventh place in 2008 to third place in 2016. E-textbooks moved from eleventh and twelfth in 2008 and 2011 respectively to eighth in 2016. Print books moved from third (2008) to second (2011) and then to fourth place (2016). E-reference moved from fourth (2008) to fifth (2011 and 2016).

Table 1 – Student Resource Academic Usage Comparison between 2016, 2011 and 2008 Surveys

Rank	Research/Class Assignments Resource	% that Use 2008	% that Use 2011	% very or extremely useful 2016
1	Google / other search engines / websites	1st 81	1st 85	1st 75
2	Ebooks	2nd 78	3rd 74	6th 63
3	Print books	3rd 77	2nd 79	4th 65
4	E-reference (online dictionaries, encyclopedias, maps)	4th 68	5th 72	5th 64
5	Wikipedia	5th 67	10th 56	
6	E-journals	6th 65	7th 69	2nd 72
7	Print textbooks	7th 65	4th 73	3rd 71
8	Electronic databases (ProQuest LexisNexis, JStor, etc.)	8th 62	6th 69	7th 59
9	Print reference	9th 60	8th 60	11th 40
10	Print journals	10th 50	13th 49	9th 45
11	E-textbooks	11th 48	12th 54	8th 58
12	Google Scholar	12th 47	9th 56	
13	Course management systems	13th 43	11th 56	
14	Corporate websites	14th 37	15th 39	
15	E-newspapers	15th 36	16th 39	10th 41
16	Lecture recordings	16th 31	14th 47	
17	E-magazines	17th 31	17th 32	
18	Print newspapers	18th 26	18th 29	
19	Print magazines	19th 24	19th 26	
20	Blogs & wikis	20th 19	20th 25	
21	Podcasts	21st 16	21st 24	17th 19
22	Personal websites	22nd 13	23rd 15	
23	Social web apps (Facebook, etc.)	23rd 9	22nd 16	

Preference for eBook or Print Book

In the 2008 and 2011 surveys, students were asked if they had an option for print or online, would they choose eBooks. The options were “very often or often,” “sometimes,” “rarely or never.” Preferences for using eBook versions of a book were nearly the same in 2008 and 2011. Both surveys show (See Table 2) a skew toward eBooks with 51% and 48% (respectively) selecting “very often or often” and 32% selecting “sometimes” for both years. In 2016, the survey asked students a differently phrased question — to select a preference for eBooks, print, or no preference. The responses cannot be directly compared to the 2008 and 2011 survey questions but the responses suggest a similar preference for eBooks in 2016 with 44% of students who say they “prefer eBook.”

The preference for using eBooks makes sense in an academic environment that relies heavily on online resources. As reported in an earlier question, search engines and e-journals are their primary information resources. Students are using online resources and tools. They use at least email, MS Word, and PowerPoint as authoring and communicating tools. They also use search terms within text for navigation. The fact that the preference is marginal is more unexpected. The reasons for using or not using eBooks are addressed next.

Table 2 – Preferences for eBooks over Print Books

2008	2011	2016
51% very often or often	48% very often or often	44% prefer e-book
32% sometimes	32% sometimes	42% prefer print
17% rarely or never	20% rarely or never	14% no preference

Using eBooks

Questions 10 and 19 are very similar. Question 10 reads, “What are the situations where you find eBooks particularly useful for research/class assignments?” And Question 19 asks, “What are some of the features you like most about eBooks?” They are both open ended questions and as you would expect, the questions and responses were very similar so I have combined examples in order of descending frequency of the most used terms. The top words in question 10 responses were library, find, search, access, research, carry, and useful. Those for question 19 were search, carry, find, access, easier, and anywhere. Posting comments from the responses under the most common terms provides an impression of the breadth of responses.

Desirable Features of and Fortuitous Situations for eBook Use

Library

When the library does not have a print copy
When I’m too lazy to go to the library
Don’t have time to go to the library
Grouped in subjects on the library shelves
Can access everything and there are more options than compared to our library
When the library is closed

Find, search

When I conduct theme-related assignments
When I am trying to find a particular phrase or key term

Access, easier, and useful

Google Scholar
When I don’t have time to go to the library
Mobility, on the go, away from home

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Lighter than a book
Doesn't take up space
Always and immediately available
Costs less than the print
Copy paste
Collaboration online
Researching public domain in older texts

eBook Features

Table 3 contains the comparative results of the 2008, 2011, and 2016 survey questions concerning eBook features. The 2008 and 2011 feature lists were the same. The 2016 list had eight features in common with them. The top 10 features from 2016 are included in the comparison even though two of the features do not have 2008 and 2011 counterparts. The percentage scores can't be directly compared between the earlier surveys and the 2016 survey, though they are similar. The question in the earlier surveys asked students to choose between three options very, somewhat, and not important. The question in 2016 provided six options extremely, very, moderately, slightly, not at all important, and no opinion. In both cases the rank was calculated as the percentage of responses that indicated it was very or extremely important. For example in the 2016 question, 1201 of the 1330 responses selected "Extremely Important" or "Very Important" (respectively) for a percentage of 90 for the search feature as compared to 87 and 88 percent that selected "very" in the earlier surveys.

With those caveats, there is rough percentage alignment for most of the features between the earlier and current responses with respect to the percentages selecting extremely or very important. A notable discrepancy was the increased ranking in 2016 for "Annotating" — 24 points higher than in 2008 (45 to 69).

Table 3 – Change of Feature Ranking over 2008, 2011, and 2016 Surveys

Characteristic	2008 %	2011 %	2016 % Q20 & Q 21
Anytime access	1st 86	1st 91	
Search	2nd 87	2nd 88	1st 90
Off-campus access	3rd 82	3rd 88	
Multiple user access	4th 81	5th 83	
Ability to download to workstation	5th 80	4th 86	
Copy and paste	6th 75	7th 73	2nd 78
Printing	7th 75	9th 69	
Zoom and Scale	8th 65	6th 75	6th 62
Highlighting	9th 62	8th 70	3rd 76
Automatic citations	10th 56	10th 63	5th 65
Ability to email text	11th 55	11th 60	
Annotating	12th 45	13th 49	4th 69
Book reviews	13th 45	16th 45	
Multimedia	14th 44	14th 47	
Ability to share notes	15th 44	15th 46	8th 48
Download to handheld device	16th 42	12th 58	
Collaborative tools	17th 40	17th 44	10th 43
Personal bookshelves	18th 38	19th 44	
Shared bookshelves	19th 30	18th 30	
Built in dictionary			7th 62
Email sharing			9th 47
Average	60	64	64

Frequency of eBook Usage

Question 11 (1,484 respondents) asks how many times per week the students use eBooks for research/class assignments. Almost half, 46%, say they use eBooks 1-5 times per week, 29% say 6-15 times, and 10% say over 15 times. At first glance, these numbers seem rather high when looking at eBook usage statistics. **Western Oregon University** has average eBooks usage compared to similar sized institutions (2-5k students) in the **Orbis Cascade Alliance** cooperative eBook demand drive acquisition program. So **WOU's** usage of eBooks is probably on par for our size and type of institution in general. **WOU's** total student and faculty usage of eBooks from the **Alliance** and its other eBook holdings in FY16 was 6,263 uses. We have about 4,500 FTE, which

produces a student usage ratio of 1.39 eBooks per annum per student. This is significantly at variance from the stated usage of the students in the survey. Possible explanations include the usage by students of eBooks that are textbooks, which they would be using nearly daily, and the usage of eBooks found through open internet searches, which do not show up in our statistics.

To put this in a broader usage frame, the annual usage of print books at **WOU** was 39,557 for an average of approximately 8.79 for the year. The full text e-journal usage was 148,420 or 32.98 per annum.

Just over 11% of students in this survey question indicated that they did not use eBooks at all. Of those, 66% selected "prefer to use print" as their reason, 25% said they were not available, and 18% said they did not think to use them. The students could select more than one reason.

eBook Providers

Question 13 asked students (1,157 respondents) what eBook providers came to mind with respect to eBooks. **Amazon** led the responses with 314 references followed by **ProQuest** with 195, **Google** with 178, the library with 129, **EBSCO** with 102. **Springer** led the publishers with 46. Table 4 shows the results down to 10 mentions. Although no single publisher was as well-known as the vendors, it is worth noting that collectively they had 187 mentions in the publisher group with at least 10 mentions.

Table 4 – Count of eBook Providers

Count	Source	Count	Source
314	Amazon (222) + Kindle (92)	16	Gutenberg
195	ProQuest (101) + ebrary (76) + EBL (18)	16	Oxford
178	Google (142) + online (36)	16	Overdrive
139	Library (105) + University (34)	15	Sage
102	EBSCO	15	Gale
49	Springer	14	Barnes & Noble
26	Elsevier	13	Nook
23	Pearson	12	Safari
21	Wiley	12	Cambridge
18	JSTOR	10	Taylor & Francis

How Students Learned About Providers of eBooks

Question 14 asked students (1,448 respondents) how they learned about the providers of online library resources. The majority, 63%, found them by searching online. Librarians ranked second with 42%, instructors 39%, peers 23%, social media 18%, and marketing materials 11%.

Table 5 compares the 2016 survey with a similar question in the 2008 and 2011 surveys where students were asked how they learned about eBooks. Google and other search engines were fourth in the earlier surveys and first in the 2016 survey. In the earlier survey, students reported librarians, instructors, and peers as their primary, secondary, and tertiary introduction to eBooks. They were second, third, and fourth behind search engines in 2016.

Table 5 – Source of eBook Awareness

Source	2008 %	2011 %	2016 Q 14 %
Searching online			63
Librarians	53	56	42
Instructors	47	50	39
Peers	32	41	23
Google or other search engines	38	41	63
Library catalog	39	36	
Library website or blog	43	35	
Library orientations	22	20	
Social Media			18
Email notifications from library	12	13	
Training sessions	15	13	
Departmental web pages	16	11	
Marketing materials			11
Posters and other promotional materials	8	9	

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Preference for Sites/Methods for Finding eBooks

Table 6 presents the ranking from questions 15 and 16 from the 2016 survey and similar questions from the 2008 and 2011 surveys. Question 16 (1,394 respondents) asks how important particular sites/methods are for finding eBooks for research/class assignments. The rankings are the percentage of students that selected “extremely important” for the option. The library catalog or Website garnered 58% of the students’ responses for the top position, “Google or other search engines” was second with 47%, and Google Scholar was third with 35%. Question 15 from the 2016 survey (1,435 respondents) asks about the most frequent starting point for finding eBooks. The question permits only one answer so the result set has a dramatically narrowing set of responses. All of the questions, including those from 2008 and 2011 that asked about finding eBooks, had the same first, second, and third ranking order for the top three options: the library catalog, Google, and Google Scholar respectively. Google Scholar is now taught by many librarians as an alternative to an open Google search. Some instructors may also be aware of its utility, which could account for its third place ranking.

Table 6 – Finding eBooks

Characteristic	2008 %	2011 %	2016 Q16 %	2016 Q15 % Choose One Answer
Library catalog	55	56	58	43
Google and other search engines	48	50	47	19
Google Scholar	25	33	35	10
Course management systems	15	21	19	1
Vendor or publisher website	11	17		
ebrary, EBL, or MyiLibrary (ProQuest)			24	4
Librarian, peer			23	3
Instructor			23	3
EBSCO eBooks			21	6
JSTOR			17	2
Peers			16	2
Publisher Website			12	1
Gale eBooks			7	2
Online Bookseller (Amazon)			19	4

Instructor Recommendations

Question 17 (1,393 respondents) asked students if their instructors “assign or recommend eBooks.” Nearly two thirds (62%) said yes and 30% said they did not. Question 18 asks students (426 respondents) where instructors recommend that they get eBooks. Students could select multiple answers. The library catalog tops the list with 47% selecting it. “They don’t tell me” was selected by a near equal amount — 42%. Small portions of the students selected “Online Booksellers (i.e., Amazon)” — 15%; “Free eBook collections (Project Gutenberg)” — 13%; “ebrary, EBL, MyiLibrary (ProQuest eBooks)” — 9%; “EBSCO eBooks” — 9%; and “JSTOR” — 8%. Google or Google Scholar was not one of the options provided in question 18.

Table 7 – Where instructors recommend getting eBooks

Answer Options	Response %
College/university library catalog or website	47
They don’t tell me where to get it	42
Online booksellers (i.e. Amazon)	15
Free ebook collections (i.e. Project Gutenberg)	13
ebrary, EBL, or MyiLibrary (ProQuest eBooks)	9
EBSCO eBooks	9
JSTOR	8
Other (please specify)	6
Gale eBook Collections	2

eBook Frustrations

Question 22 (1,089 respondents) was an open-ended question asking students “What frustrates you the most about using eBooks?” The

following outline provides sample responses categorized under words that most frequently occurred.

Downloading – 67

Not having access or slow internet times downloading eBooks.
Not be allowed to download to use offline.
Limitation to download too few books each turn from an eLibrary.
Slow internet times downloading eBooks

Eyes – 50

Reading fatigue
Harmful for eye sight
My eyes get tired faster when using eBooks.

Notes – 42

The automatic citing when making notes. It makes them difficult to organize.
I can’t draw notes, only type them out or highlight.
I miss the touch of paper notes

Restricted – 35

The term “copy” appeared 74 times generally referring to it being restricted.
Often, eBooks are restricted access.
Overall restrictions
Restricted copying
Restrictions on downloads
Territorial restrictions
Restrictions on copy/print/download,
Some of them restrict you to read it page by page.

Format – 21

Sometimes it isn’t as easy to get to where you need to be, unlike flipping pages
Only some formats can be used on some devices.
Now the operation of eBook is difficult to read
Un-customizable formats like pdf.
No single reader to manage all reading lists from different eBook platforms
No unified annotating/note taking, record reading history.
Dependence on a device.
Not a physical book so can’t read outside in the sun.
Can’t just flick through as easily when not looking for specific information
Find it harder to skim read and pick out useful info.
They do not smell like the print.
I like the feel of paper.
Not all books are available as eBooks.

eBook Barriers

Question 23 (1,314 respondents) asks, “To what extent, if at all, is each of the following a barrier when using eBooks from your library?” Table 8 provides a ranking of the percentage of students who selected “Extreme Barrier” from the options extreme, moderate, somewhat, hardly ever, not at all, and no opinion.

Table 8 – Barriers to eBook use

Answer Options	Extreme Barrier Response %
Ability to download the entire book	33
Restrictions on copy and paste	31
Ability to download an individual chapter	29
Restrictions on printing	26
Limit on duration of title “check-out” period	24
Using a separate login and password to sign on	21
Using your university provided login and password to sign on	12

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Improving eBooks

The focus of question 24 (1,302 respondents) was improving the usability of eBooks. It is similar to questions asked in 2008 and 2011 (see Table 9); however, the 2016 question included three options that were not in the earlier questions — “Fewer restrictions on downloading,” “Improved accessibility,” and “Better search.” Apart from these three additions, which ranked second, third, and fourth in 2016, the rankings were almost identical for the features held in common among the surveys. The top rank in all three surveys was “More titles in my subject area.”

The selection pattern in the smaller set of factors in the earlier questions separated into two groups with the top group garnering about two-thirds of the votes and the other group important to only about a third of the students. The top three factors in the 2008 and 2011 surveys lost an average of 4 points each by the 2011 survey. The decline in concern could be the result of advances in these areas — increased numbers of titles at academic libraries and improved access through collections like **Google Books** and **HathiTrust** as well as increased flexibility in printing and copying.

The 2016 survey had a gradual spread of selection percentage that was roughly 10 points on average below the results of the earlier surveys. The drop could indicate improvements in the areas. The only factors to switch positions in the 2016 survey were “Better training and instruction” and “multimedia capabilities.”

Table 9 – Preferences for improvements to eBooks

Characteristic	2008 %	2011 %	2016 %
More titles in my subject area	76	73	58
Fewer restrictions on downloading			54
Improved accessibility			51
Better search			49
Less restrictions on printing and copying	65	60	46
More current titles	59	56	42
Better e-book readers	35	39	31
Better training and instruction	32	34	21
Multimedia capabilities	30	31	26

Amount Read for an Assignment

Students (1,281 respondents) in question 25 selected one option from a listing of portions of an eBook that they typically read when doing research or completing assignments. Just over 59% reported (Table 10) reading a chapter or more. Only 5% selected the entire eBook. The question does not exclude e-textbooks. A fair percentage of students are now using e-textbooks, which generally require reading about a chapter a week. The question also does not specify a time frame, which implies a portion of an eBook for a given assignment. But, it can also be understood as one sitting or throughout a term.

Table 10 – Portion of eBook typically read

Answer Options	Response %
More than one chapter but less than the entire book	41
More than 5 pages but less than a chapter	16
One chapter	13
1-5 pages	12
The entire book	5
I don't read eBooks	5
Other (please specify)	4
Just the table of contents	4

Reading Devices

Question 26 asks students (1,295 respondents), “When you have to read an eBook for a longer period of time (i.e., more than 20 minutes) how do you usually read it? (Multiple Selections).” Nearly half the time (45%) students are reading on a desktop or laptop computer, tablets (18%), print outs (13%), a smartphone (12%), and an e-reader (8%). Nearly three quarters of the students (73%) in question 27 (1,292 respondents) report preferring to download and read rather than read online and 21% prefer online reading.

Table 11 – How do you read an eBook?

Answer Options	Response %	Response % of Total Selections
On a laptop computer	52	30
On a tablet	31	18
On a desktop computer	26	15
Printed out	22	13
On a smartphone	21	12
On an ereader, such as Kindle or Nook	13	8
I wouldn't read an eBook for longer than 20 minutes	7	4
Other (please specify)	1	1
Total	173	100

Instruction

In 2008, online tutorials ranked highest with 62% of students selecting them as “the most effective support and training tools for learning how to find and use eBooks.” Tutorials continued to rank number one with 65% of the vote in 2011. In-person instruction and online help pages continue in the 2nd and 3rd slots but they switched places and swapped 4 points. Training videos, paper guides, and online chat all received less than a third of the vote between the two earlier surveys with paper guides losing 3 points and training videos and online chat both gaining points.

In 2016 question 28 (1,282 respondents) found 56% of students selecting in-person instruction as “extremely or very effective” as the top selection. Online tutorials was in second place with 48%. The change was accompanied by an increase in the percentage of students selecting “training videos” from 2008 (22%) to 2016 (44%), which are now online in place of tutorials. Therefore, the training videos and online tutorials might best be understood together, which would then account for scores of 84% in 2008, 87% in 2011 and 88% in 2016.

Table 12 – Most Effective Instruction

Method	2008 %	2011 %	2016 %
Online tutorials	62	65	48
In-person instruction	51	55	56
Online help pages	56	52	44
Training videos	22	32	44
Paper guides (i.e. user guides)	30	27	35
Online chat	15	19	31

@Brunner: People & Technology from page 72

Still the “got it Google” bias or hyperbole lingers.

What we need is the right data. User data is the money machine for Web companies. We need to know where they are coming from. Good that they find our content through our search engines; great if they find our content from any search engine. Fundamental if we learn we've poured billions into the greatest open access repository the world has ever known.

Annals of the Reader's Advisor(y) Bookbub

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