Words on the Move

How printing and translation changed the reach of ideas

MWH.C.2.3.B "Explain new ways of disseminating information, such as Gutenberg's invention of the printing press and the translation of the Bible into the vernacular."

NAME _____ DATE _____

1 READ AND MARK

Read it twice

YOUR JOB Underline two details that show how copies of a text could spread, circle two details that show how language affected who understood a text, and number one barrier that remained.

From One Copy to Many

1. In a European town around 1400, a student who wanted a book could not visit a shop filled with cheap copies. Scribes copied many books by hand, a slow and costly process. Some texts circulated in Latin, which most people in the town could not read. A priest might explain a Bible passage aloud, but listeners depended on someone else to select and interpret it. Books still traveled between towns, and some people translated religious texts into local languages before printing spread. Yet making another copy took time, so a new idea could reach only a limited audience.

2. About 1450 in Mainz, Johannes Gutenberg developed a European printing system using reusable metal letters, oil-based ink, and a press. A printer arranged letters to make a page, printed many sheets, and reused the letters for another page. Printing had existed earlier in East Asia, so Gutenberg did not invent printing itself. His method made it faster and less expensive to produce many nearly identical copies than to copy them by hand. Merchants and printers carried books and pamphlets between cities. A person still needed money to buy a copy, access to a reader, or the ability to read it.

3. In the 1520s, Martin Luther translated the New Testament into German, a language many of his neighbors used in daily life. Printers produced copies, and readers could compare the words with what religious leaders taught. People who could not read might hear a German text read aloud. Printing helped vernacular translations circulate farther, while translation made those printed words understandable to more people. Luther's was not the first Bible translation into a local language, and disagreements about its meaning did not disappear. Instead, access to the text helped fuel debate about religious authority across parts of Europe.

2 ANSWER WITH EVIDENCE

Use the passage

1. Why did copying books by hand limit how widely a new idea could spread around 1400?

2. How did Gutenberg's system help the same message reach people in different cities?

3. Why could printed copies of Luther's German New Testament reach a wider audience than the same number of copies printed in Latin?

4. How could a printed German New Testament influence someone who could not read?

3 YOUR TURN

Your own words

Imagine a town council in a German-speaking area around 1525 wants people in nearby towns to learn new market rules. In four or five sentences, propose how to spread the rules to readers and nonreaders, and explain one limit your plan cannot remove.

ANSWER KEY

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HIGH SCHOOL · MWH.C.2.3.B

PART 1 · READ AND MARK

Underline two details that show how copies of a text could spread, circle two details that show how language affected who understood a text, and number one barrier that remained. Accept any marking that follows this job and points at the right text.

PART 2 · ANSWERS

#	QUESTION	ANSWER
1	Why did copying books by hand limit how widely a new idea could spread around 1400?	**Hand copying was slow and costly, so few copies could be made and sent to readers.**
2	How did Gutenberg's system help the same message reach people in different cities?	**Printers could reuse metal letters to make many copies faster and at lower cost than hand copying. Merchants and printers carried the copies between cities.**
3	Why could printed copies of Luther's German New Testament reach a wider audience than the same number of copies printed in Latin?	**More people in Luther's region understood German than Latin, so more could understand the text by reading it or hearing it read aloud.**
4	How could a printed German New Testament influence someone who could not read?	**Someone could read the German text aloud, allowing a person who could not read to hear its words and take part in discussions about them.**

PART 3 · YOUR TURN (SAMPLE ANSWER)

I would ask a printer to make many copies of the market rules in German rather than Latin. Traders could carry the sheets to nearby towns, where residents who read German could learn the rules. At each market, someone could read a sheet aloud to people who could not read. Printing would speed distribution, but the council would still need money for paper and printing.

Accept explanations that connect faster copying and wider distribution to printing, and broader understanding to familiar language or reading aloud. For Part 3, accept another historically plausible distribution plan if it reaches both readers and nonreaders and identifies a realistic limit.