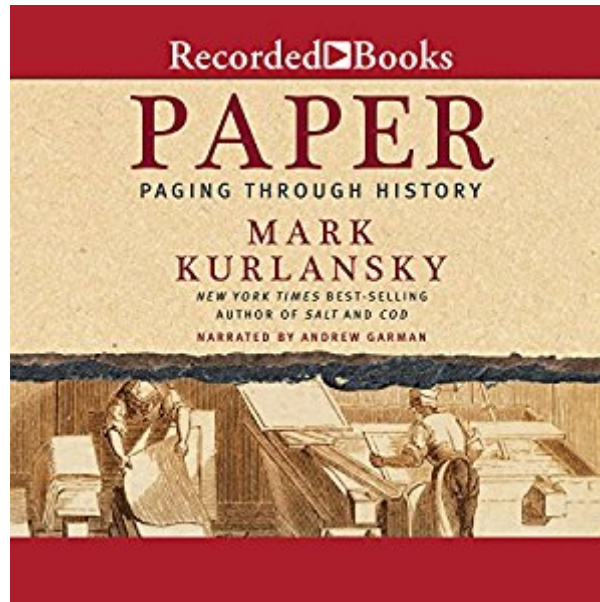




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# Paper: Paging Through History



## Synopsis

From the New York Times best-selling author of *Cod and Salt*, a definitive history of paper and the astonishing ways it has shaped today's world. Paper is one of the simplest and most essential pieces of human technology. For the past two millennia, the ability to produce it in ever more efficient ways has supported the proliferation of literacy, media, religion, education, commerce, and art; it has formed the foundation of civilizations, promoting revolutions and restoring stability. One has only to look at history's greatest press run, which produced 6.5 billion copies of *Mao zhuxi yulu*, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-tung* (Zedong), which doesn't include editions in 37 foreign languages and in braille to appreciate the range and influence of a single publication, in paper. Or take the fact that one of history's most revered artists, Leonardo da Vinci, left behind only 15 paintings but 4,000 works on paper. And though the colonies were at the time calling for a boycott of all British goods, the one exception they made speaks to the essentiality of the material; they penned the Declaration of Independence on British paper. Now, amid discussion of "going paperless" and as speculation about the effects of a digitally dependent society grows rampant, we've come to a world-historic juncture. Thousands of years ago, Socrates and Plato warned that written language would be the end of "true knowledge", replacing the need to excise memory and think through complex questions. Similar arguments were made about the switch from handwritten to printed books, and today about the role of computer technology. By tracing paper's evolution from antiquity to the present, with an emphasis on the contributions made in Asia and the Middle East, Mark Kurlansky challenges common assumptions about technology's influence, affirming that paper is here to stay. Paper will be the commodity history that guides us forward in the 21st century and illuminates our times.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

While I have loved other Mark Kurlansky books, this one comes closer to fields I have studied and I was horrified to discover that neither he nor his editors bother to fact check before publishing. I further discovered there is no way to contact the author directly to let him know of his errors. He claims that "linguists regard Greek...to be...the grandparent of all modern European languages." (page 64 of 897 ebook version) My degree from UC Berkeley in linguistics disagrees with him. Modern European languages come from a number of different language families, most NOT descended from Greek. He claims that silk contains cellulose. (page 91 of 897 ebook version). This is a gross misstatement. Cellulose is a polysaccharide: silk is a protein. These are distinctly different polymers. The idea that you can make something paper-like out of either does not make them the same thing. At that point, I had to stop reading.

I read 'Salt' and 'Cod' by MK and I enjoyed and recommend them both. But I was put off by 'Paper'. Other reviewers found many discrepancies with what they say are established facts. I wouldn't know about those things, nor would I be able to judge. I didn't enjoy the book; so much of it is just open-ended chattering about what he thinks about 'paper'. MK tells an interesting story of how paper came to be invented, developed and used in different ages across the world. Well and good; those stories are told in detail and quite worth reading. But his chatter is just that. Paper is and should be an engrossing subject, like 'Salt', or 'Cod'. Unfortunately, 'Paper' is not nearly as interesting.

As Mark Kurlansky did with previous books like "Cod" and "Salt", he has done so again in "Paper"....taking one subject and going into it in great detail. Not surprisingly, the author has come up with another winner this time, as paper is one of those subjects that is rife with so many different angles in its long history. Beginning with China and moving westward, Kurlansky takes us on a journey over centuries, finding new developments in paper making at almost every step. What enlightened me most, I think, was how rags were so integral in making paper for years on end and that paper made from wood was not common until the mid-nineteenth century. And a revealing fact...the United States "Declaration of Independence" was not printed on American paper, though it

most likely could have been. What I love about "Paper" are those many angles I alluded to earlier. Through this book, we experience facets not only of how paper is made and its many sources but the usage of paper and how it is changing in the modern world. Will we ever not have paper around? As Kurlansky quotes, "diapers and paper bags are recession-proof", so I guess we have an answer to that. This is a terrific read and a great addition to our knowledge of paper and I highly recommend it. One final thought...I wonder how many people read this book on their kindle? Not this reader...paper for me!

I have read and enjoyed several of Mark Kurlansky's earlier books especially *Salt*. However, I am somewhat disappointed with *Paper*. The writing and organization is just not up to par when compared with his earlier works. The book appears to be well researched but the way the research was presented was often confusing. Though superficially this is a book about the history of paper, it's more a history of written language and technology. Mr. Kurlansky spoke more in-depth about language and the development of various systems of writing than he did on the methods of paper making. Throughout the book Mr. Kurlansky kept wandering off to talk about related subjects, such as the invention of the printing press. He would eventually wander back to disclose how the subject matter was related to paper. This writing style gave the book a slap-dash feeling to it. It's almost like he had made a list of all the things he wanted to research and then somehow worked out a way of including those things in the book. Although the history is presented in more or less chronological order, there were instances that were baffling. For example, when he was discussing the beginning of the Reconquista of Spain in the thirteenth century, he pops in Isabella of Castile of the fifteenth century as an example of Christian fanatics that were expelling Muslims and Jews from the Iberian peninsula. Granted she may have fit the bill, but it would have been far more fitting to have given an example of a Christian leader that actually lived during the time period he was currently discussing. Another thing that I found disconcerting was his apparent confusion over geography. For instance, in his discussion about Muslim paper mills he cites at location 1028 of the e-book that "A third Muslim mill was built in Tihamah, the southeast coast of the Arabian Peninsula along the Red Sea. . . . The last time (which was quite recently) I looked at a map of the Arabian Peninsula the Red Sea was on the Arabian Peninsula's west coast. Even if you were to allow that Tihamah is on the east coast of the Red Sea, the way Mr. Kurlansky worded the above sentence leads one to believe he seriously believed that the region of Tihamah was on the Peninsula's southeast coast. Was he really that confused or was he holding his map upside down? The more I read, the

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