



How did Gutenberg's printing process work?

This engraving of the printing process, by Theodor Galle, is based on an earlier work - *Nova Reperta* ("New Discoveries") by Stradanus (also known as Jan van der Straet) - and illustrates the various steps of printing.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art [explains the movable-metal-type processes](#) shown in this engraving:

- On the left side of the image are three compositors who, using the page of text pinned to the wall above them as a guide, assemble the pieces of type stored in their wooden cases (each compartment contains a different character) into lines of text on the small composing stick held in one hand. These lines will then be locked into a framework called a chase; the completed body of text, comprising all the pages that are to be printed together onto one sheet of paper, is known as a forme. If the text were to include woodcut initials, tailpieces, or even large illustrations, the blocks could be fitted into the chase alongside the metal type.
- Along the right side of the shop, in the background, we see a pressman who applies ink to the raised surfaces of the letters (and possibly woodblocks) within the forme, using two leather-covered inking balls. In the foreground, an inked forme having been moved into position beneath the platen, another pressman pulls a lever to turn the screw that increases pressure on the platen, pressing the forme against the dampened paper that has been aligned on top of it - the press shown here, however, is in some respects rather archaic for the end of the sixteenth century. Since the type, as well as any woodblocks that are included, stand up in relief, not as much pressure is required as with intaglio printing. After printing, the damp sheets are hung to dry, here between the two presses.
- The proofreader, wearing glasses, checks a printed proof for errors. If errors are found, the type can be reset before printing continues. A young apprentice in the central foreground assembles the printed pages in the correct order. On the table behind the proofreader we see either bundles of blank paper or books in their assembled form, before the pages are folded, bound, and cut. Books in this period were normally bound only after purchase and to order.

Click on the image for a better view.

Credits:

This image is entitled *Impressio Librorum* ("Book Printing"). It is [Plate 4 of the *Nova Reperta*](#) ("New Discoveries") by Theodor Galle (1571 - 1633), after Johannes Stradanus (also known as Jan van der Straet and Giovanni Stradano, 1523 -1605). The engraving was printed in Antwerp, by Philips Galle, in the late 16th century.

Image online, courtesy Library of Congress.

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Gutenberg Printing Press in Operation

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