Centers of Progress, Pt. 15: Mainz

In this lesson, students will learn about the city of Mainz, Germany and the man responsible for Europe's rapid adoption of the printing press, Johannes Gutenberg.

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In this lesson, students will learn about the city of Mainz, Germany and the man responsible for Europe's rapid adoption of the printing press, Johannes Gutenberg. The story is surprising because, as Follett writes, "almost all of the Centers of Progress have contributed to progress during ages of relative peace and prosperity, but in Mainz, that was not the case. Instead, the city's instability became a catalyst for change. The city's economic and political turmoil drove many craftsmen into exile from the city, including Gutenberg's printing apprentices, thus spreading the knowledge of the art of printing throughout the European continent with incredible speed."

Warm-Up

- Watch this short video called "Printing 101."
  In partners, small groups, or as a whole class, have students respond to the following questions:
  - Where do the terms 'uppercase' and 'lowercase' come from?
  - How many people were needed to set the type and operate the printing press?
  - In what ways was the printing press as demonstrated in the video revolutionary compared to earlier methods of producing books?
  - What were some of the consequences of the invention and dissemination of printing press technology?
- What do you know about the geography of Mainz, Germany? Could you find it on a map?
  In small groups, ask students to research Mainz's geography by answering the following questions. Ask one group to share their answers with the whole class.
  - In what region of Germany is Mainz located? What are some nearby cities?
  - How big is the population of Mainz?
  - Mainz is located on which major river? How do you think that river influenced the city's development?

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- What is the climate of Mainz like?

Questions for Reading, Writing, and Discussion

Read the article, and then answer the following questions:

- The Latin alphabet was brought to Mainz (and to the rest of Western Europe) by the Roman Empire during classical antiquity. The article says that the Latin writing system, "likely bolstered the eventual success of the printing press." Make an educated guess. What characteristics of the Latin script do you think made it a successful vehicle for printing many centuries after the Roman Empire had disappeared?
- Why was Mainz politically important during the Middle Ages? Be specific. What role did the leaders of Mainz play within the Holy Roman Empire beginning in the 800s C.E.?
- Which two socioeconomic groups in Mainz were in conflict during almost all of Gutenberg's lifetime? What were the underlying causes of this conflict? Cite at least two reasons for the turmoil – one economic and one political.
- What were some of the results of the unrest in Mainz in the 1400s? Write at least three outcomes of the social breakdown that occurred there during Gutenberg's life.
- Gutenberg had a dual identity as both an aristocrat and a commoner. His ambiguous social status made his life unstable. As a result, Gutenberg learned a trade to make a living. What was the trade he learned? Make a prediction. What was the connection between Gutenberg's trade and his later success as a printer?
- Although printing and movable type had been invented in China several centuries before Gutenberg, the technology did not spread widely. What linguistic feature of written Chinese most likely hindered the spread of printing in East Asia? How was the Latin alphabet different from the Chinese writing system? Why was the Latin system more easily adapted to printing?
- How did Mainz's political chaos during the 1450s and 1460s contribute to the dissemination of printing technology throughout Europe?
- What were the long-term impacts of the adoption of the printing press in Europe? Complete the chart below.

	How did the printing press affect this historical development?
The Protestant Reformation	
The Scientific Revolution	

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The Enlightenment	
18th-Century Revolutions (American, French, and Haitian)	

Extension Activity/Homework

- **Write a Counterfactual Narrative**
  Seemingly insignificant decisions can have huge impacts on your life. Gutenberg learned metalworking as a young man to earn a living. His knowledge of how to precisely craft small pieces of metal allowed him to create the movable type later used in his printing press.
  Imagine if Gutenberg had decided to take up another trade instead of metalworking. There were several options available to a young man in his region at the time, including masonry (working with stone), jewelry-making, wine dealing, glassblowing, carpentry, textile weaving, and painting.
  In a short essay, write a narrative of Gutenberg's life in which he pursues an alternate career. In your account, Gutenberg may invent a printing press, or he may not. Use your imagination, incorporate historical details, and make your piece memorable.
- **Hold a Debate**
  The Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson says that the explosion of content now available through social media, podcasts, and YouTube constitutes another "Gutenberg Revolution." Watch the clip of Dr. Peterson on Joe Rogan's podcast here. Do you agree with Dr. Peterson?
  Hold a class debate on this question: "How is the democratization of information gathering and dissemination through social media, podcasts, and YouTube similar or different to the revolution sparked by Gutenberg's printing press?"
  To prepare, have students answer the following essential questions:
  - Do you believe that social media platforms and podcasts represent a revolution in how we gather and share knowledge? Why or why not?
  - What are some similarities between Gutenberg's printing technology and the new social media platforms we have developed?
  - How are printing and social media/podcasting different from the traditional media they replaced?
  - Which groups were empowered by the advent of Gutenberg's printing technology? Which groups were weakened? Which groups are benefiting from social media? Which are being harmed?

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- How is social media and online video impacting the following areas of society: education, politics, religion, and scientific discovery? How are those changes different from or the same as those that were brought on by the printing press in the 1500s and 1600s?

- **Write a 'Butterfly Effect' Essay**

  The Butterfly Effect is defined as a property of chaotic systems (such as the atmosphere) by which small changes in initial conditions can lead to large-scale and unpredictable variation in the future state of the system.

  Describe some things that came about because of Gutenberg's development of the printing press. Can you trace the causes and effects among those events? Write an essay in which you describe five to seven subsequent historical events that came about because of Gutenberg's development of the printing press in Mainz and its rapid spread through Europe. Keep the events within 300 years of the invention. That is, the last event should occur about the year 1800 C.E.

  Each event should be linked in a chain. Try your best to come up with intriguing or unexpected connections that you think will surprise your teacher and classmates.

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