Review: Nifty scanner eases farewell to paper

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Here's where the iPad has gotten me: I'm sitting with an old book in one hand and a utility knife in the other. My plan is to make the two meet, by cutting up the book and feeding the pages through a scanner.

The printed word has been shackled too long to paper, and I want to carry it around on my iPad tablet computer.

Cutting a book is hard, though. There's a mental block to overcome. After a lifetime of valuing books, I find it difficult to destroy one, even to preserve it in digital form — particularly if it's a hardback.

The iPad, as a fantastic replacement for paper, deserves only half the blame for putting me in this position. The other half goes to the Fujitsu ScanSnap s1500.

As I started thinking about scanning my documents and "going paperless," I thought about the ideal scanner: It should take a pile of papers and scan both side of each sheet, so I don't have to feed them one by one.

It turns out that there aren't many affordable, consumer-level scanners like that. But all we need is one good device, and the ScanSnap is it. If you can swallow the $430 price tag, it's ideal. It goes through paper like a bonfire.

The ScanSnap is designed from the ground up to turn stacks of pulp to bytes. It doesn't have the large glass bed of the conventional scanner or copy machine. Instead, it looks like a small inkjet printer, taking up only a bit more desk space than a lunch box. It has a 50-sheet holder and feeds each sheet between rollers while scanning both sides at the same time through two thin strips of glass.

It takes just 3 seconds for the ScanSnap to scan a sheet at a decent resolution. That compares with 30 seconds for the two other sheet-fed, double-sided (or duplex) scanners I tried, the $140 Canon Pixma MX870 and the $270 HP ScanJet 5590.

The quality of ScanSnap's output is good, too. The other scanners had problems with pulling the paper at an even pace past the scanning slit. That resulted in letters that were either stretched out — too tall — or squished. That "funhouse effect" was nearly absent on the ScanSnap. It was also better at pulling the paper straight across the slit, avoiding skewed lines.

What if you forget to take out the staples from your tax return before stuffing it in the scanner? No problem! The ScanSnap is smart enough to figure out if two sheets are sticking together, and it will stop so you can fix the problem. Return the sheets to the feeder, hit a button and scanning resumes.

So what's the point of scanning your documents? Well, it's an easy way to organize everything. Like most scanners, the ScanSnap comes with software that "reads" the scans, making them searchable. Scanning also makes it easy to send documents around — if your mortgage broker needs your utility bill, it's easier to scan and e-mail it than to fax it. And obviously, scans take less space than binders full of documents.

Because the ScanSnap is so fast, it's tempting to scan books as well. You could carry a couple of bookshelves worth of scanned books on the iPad.

Copyright law gets in the way of that vision, though. You don't have a blanket right to scan your books. This probably comes as a surprise to people who have been "ripping" their CDs for a decade. The music industry doesn't challenge this practice, but that doesn't mean it's legal, strictly speaking.

Although copyright law is complicated, one thing is clear: Books published in the U.S. before 1923 are fair game. I bought a collection of fairy tales from 1913, and after steeling myself, cut the pages from the spine. It helped my conscience that the binding was already in poor condition. It took 10 minutes for the ScanSnap to turn it into a lovely PDF file, with the color illustrations intact. I loaded the file into the GoodReader app on the iPad, and it looked glorious.

One odd thing that needs mentioning is that the ScanSnap comes in two versions, for Windows and Mac. The printers are identical. Only the bundled versions of the PDF-editing software, Adobe Acrobat, are specific to Windows or Mac. However, the basic software that comes with each printer works on Windows and Mac, and that is sufficient to create PDFs. So one scanner will work OK even if you have both Windows and Mac computers in the house.

Secondly, the ScanSnap isn't quite a replacement for a good flatbed scanner if you want to scan photos. It's optimized for speed, not photo reproduction.

The Pixma and the ScanJet aren't necessarily bad products. They simply lack the ScanSnap's focus on scanning stacks of paper. Both have flatbeds for careful photo scanning, and the Pixma works as a color inkjet printer and a fax machine. They're also cheaper than the ScanSnap, but if you have a lot to scan, it's the one that's a bargain.

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