Portable Document Format (PDF) is a file format used to present documents in a manner independent of application software, hardware, andoperating systems.[2] Each PDF file encapsulates a complete description of a fixed-layout flat document, including the text, fonts, graphics and other information needed to display it. In 1991, Adobe Systems' co-founder John Warnock outlined a system called "Camelot"[3] that evolved into PDF.

While Adobe Systems made the PDF specification available free of charge in 1993, PDF was a proprietary format, controlled by Adobe, until it was officially released as an open standard on July 1, 2008, and published by the International Organization for Standardization as ISO 32000-1:2008,[4][5] at which time control of the specification passed to an ISO Committee of volunteer industry experts. In 2008, Adobe published a Public Patent License to ISO 32000-1 granting royalty-free rights for all patents owned by Adobe that are necessary to make, use, sell, and distribute PDF compliant implementations.[6] However, there are still some proprietary technologies defined only by Adobe, such as Adobe XML Forms Architecture and JavaScript for Acrobat, which are referenced by ISO 32000-1 as normative and indispensable for the application of the ISO 32000-1 specification. These proprietary technologies are not standardized and their specification is published only on Adobe's website.[7][8][9][10][11] The ISO committee is actively standardizing many of these as part of ISO 32000-2.

PDF was developed in the early 1990s as a way to share documents, including text formatting and inline images, among computer users of disparate platforms who may not have access to mutually-compatible application software.[12] It was among a number of competing formats such as DjVu (still developing), Envoy, Common Ground Digital Paper, Farallon Replica and evenAdobe's own PostScript format (.ps). In those early years before the rise of the World Wide Web and HTML documents, PDF was popular mainly in desktop publishing workflows.