

WRITING MAGA-BOOKS

800 words by

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Maga-books are a new visual concept for educational books. 'Mag' refers to magazine. 'Book' relates to book. So these publications are highly visual, almost comic in style, but not Manga as in Japanese comic visuals. Aimed at the visually literate, the graphic designer has a major input. However, it is important to ensure that the intellectual content, such as health and medical facts, are best conveyed to the target audience.

Initially we were approached with other creators (dramatists, illustrators, publishers and actors) by the Royal Children's Hospital 'Murdoch Institute' who specialise in research of children's illnesses. They were concerned that their young patients were having a hard time as often their classmates did not understand the demands of certain illnesses such as epilepsy or diabetes, and neither did some parents. Educational authorities also needed to know when certain absences from school were legitimate, and how to accommodate individual health needs.

Over afternoon tea, we discussed obesity, risk taking, genes, height, epilepsy, diabetes and children born with indeterminate gender. In return we were given a fast medical overview with visuals. The brief was to find 'artistic' ways of getting health messages across to primary and secondary students as well as to the parents and communities in which these children live.

We met a few times and brainstormed ideas. Both doctors and self-employed freelancers were busy people, and we didn't have time to waste unless the briefs could be shaped into realistic aims. There were long discussions on various ways to get the message across, especially to teenagers. We were asked to submit proposals on health research areas and the best methods of conveying these educationally.

There was agreement that TV has a wide viewing. A one-off TV soapie set in a Diabetes summer camp could work as mainstream entertainment but only if the medical facts were background to the story. Classroom plays aimed at the educational market were also suggested. Not only did these involve the actors and audience, they also provided opportunities to discuss a controversial issue 'at a distance' where the students are playing a role, and yet experiencing another lifestyle. Another suggestion was a Short Story Collection where commissioned stories would have medical details indirectly included.

In the end Magabooks became our choice of medium. We soon realised that unless the content were related to the curriculum, teachers wouldn't use it. Enter educational packagers/publishers Gary and Shelley Underwood who had extensive curriculum experience and could see the commercial possibilities of linking hospital requirements with educational needs.

Earlier, they had compiled a multi-cultural religious package which was comparable in complexity. Their 'Harmony and Understanding; package contained 20 student magabooks , teachers' notes and also BIG books for class usage. Each was linked to a curriculum topic with contemporary photos.

In our case, safety and health tend to be viewed by students as boring, so both layout and content needed a mixture of 'faction' and formats like Q and A, diary entries, 'active' menus and activities. Coming up with the initial concept areas was difficult. Catchy titles were vital. Obviously calling a booklet 'obesity' was off putting. Agreement was reached on 24 topics which would fit under curriculum headings. Then went under the general title of "Health and Understanding", and contained three subtopics: Active Life style, Growth and Development, and Personal Health Choices.

The Murdock Institute medical specialists provided us with data, especially of the lesser known medical areas. They also checked what we wrote and suggested any necessary alterations. Though we were careful to be factually correct, we found it difficult to turn a complex medical problem into one line using simple vocabulary. However our job was to make obscure medical conditions accessible. On average, we probably did 10-20 re-writes on most pages. Writing the preventative 'keep fit' hints was easier than the moral dilemma of some of the 'risky business' or 'disability'. Because certain phrases were either in or out of vogue for describing certain conditions, that also became a challenge.

We are not illustrators nor photographers, but we needed to locate visuals. So we quickly learnt how to conceptualise graphics and access stock photo sites. Later the publishers would pay for the most appropriate. 'Hi-resolution' transfers soon became a problem. Some photos were super 'hi-res' and clogged our emails, and when that happened we snail-mailed disks. Keeping track of so much information was hard. At first we had folders simply labelled *Sick*, *Safety*, or

Obese but then there was too much carry over and then it all had to refined and rewritten.

After many redrafts and much re-editing we are proud of the end product. Though the material is as intended, informative and factual, the designs and illustrations are exciting and innovative. Together with the Murdoch Institute we can only hope that these serve their purpose in bringing greater 'health and understanding' to both children and adults.

Check www.hazeledwards.com & www.goldiealexander.com for further links.

Health & Understanding link

<http://www.blake.com.au/Health-and-Understanding-Active-Lifestyle-s/2021.htm>