

## Of Special Interest

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### Guidelines for School Libraries: Great Britain

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*The School Library Association (SLA) of Great Britain is producing a series of pamphlets on school library organization and use from which individual schools can create library handbooks that meet their particular needs. This approach offers flexibility for both publishers and users. Costs are kept low, the material can be updated easily, and current issues can be addressed quickly. This account of the process was written by a member of the SLA Publications Committee, which was responsible for developing the series.*

At the end of the 20th century, modular courses are the fashion in education: we shop mainly at supermarkets, we dine at self-service restaurants, and buy our clothes on a mix 'n' match basis. Customers are free to select what they want to produce the result they desire. It is not surprising, therefore, that when the (British) School Library Association decided to revamp its publications program a few years ago, the Publications Committee decided on a similar approach to providing a handbook for school librarianship. In Britain there are wide variations in school libraries and in the qualifications and experience of the people running them. The term *school library* may describe a small collection of books gathered together for the use of young children in a small rural school or, in the case of a school catering for students up to the age of 18, it may mean something that has the appearance of a small-scale university library. The "librarian" may be a teacher running the library as well as teaching in the classroom or a highly qualified librarian with many years of experience working full time in the library with a team of assistants.

The SLA Publications Committee, therefore, decided to produce a series of A4 pamphlets (21 cm x 30 cm), each covering a specific aspect of school library organization and use, leaving individual schools to decide which pamphlets they required to create their own handbooks.

This approach has great advantages for the publisher. There is no need to find an author who can cover every aspect of the topic equally well, nor to devise some grand plan whereby a team of authors working under an editor operate to some universal plan. Reducing each writer's responsibility to a small, clearly defined area meant that busy school librarians with current grassroots experience could be asked to contribute to the series. With clear briefs set out for potential authors so that pamphlets did not overlap un-

necessarily, and with a Publications Officer in place to oversee the manuscripts, the Association was soon in business. There is no need to find a team of writers who then all have to meet the same deadline: each pamphlet can appear as soon as the text is ready, and all the advantages of desktop publishing techniques can be used, leading to a speedy, low-cost production process. This approach also eases cash flow problems because the first pamphlets quickly bring in money to finance later titles. Potential authors invited to contribute can face the prospect of producing a few thousand words within a reasonable space of time.

The Committee started off with rather grandiose ideas. We chose A4 size partly because the resulting page lends itself to the inclusion of clear tables and diagrams, but mainly because we had plans to have holes punched or at least indicated in the pamphlets so that they could be filed in an elegant ring-binder that we would also market—in Europe A4 is the standard size for this facility. We also discussed a classification scheme for numbering the pamphlets so that even though they would be published out of sequence, they could easily be assembled in a logical sequence as they appeared.

In the end these elaborations were abandoned. We contented ourselves with compiling a list of possible topics, sorting priorities, and producing a flexible working plan. Hindsight shows this was a wise decision. Flexibility is an important element of our success. In 1989, when the series was first planned, we decided a top priority was a guideline on how to produce a secondary school library policy. At the time, writing much-needed policy statements was the topic of the moment and few people had any idea of how to set about writing them. The newest Committee member was invited to tackle the task of telling people how to do it. (Five years later she has just become Chair of the Association—could this be cause and effect?) Nobody would have dreamed of asking a new committee member to write or edit a whole handbook, but the production of an eight-page guideline would be well within the capabilities of anyone elected to a national committee. And so it proved to be. The first edition of *Establishing a secondary school library policy* was published in 1990 and the series was launched.

Now, at the beginning of 1995, there are 12 titles, some of which have already been published in a second, revised edition. This reflects another advantage of the flexible approach; where necessary, a pamphlet can easily be updated. It is also possible to cover the same subject at different levels where appropriate. For example, separate pamphlets cover the establishment of a school library policy, one for primary schools, another for secondary schools. Also, separate primary and secondary pamphlets cover *Designing and planning school libraries*. Although all the basic topics are covered—issue systems, book selection, and basic routines (cataloguing and classification)—it is also possible to cover new concerns on the horizon. For example, a new national system of inspecting schools has recently been

introduced in Britain, so one of the 1994 titles was *The school library: Preparing for inspection*. The latest publication is *Introducing new technology into the school library resource centre*, which takes account of the latest developments in interactive media—this is another title that is likely to need frequent updating. It is also the longest guideline so far published, 24 pages, which brings me to another plus for this method of publishing.

A librarian who might be overwhelmed at the sight of a substantial hardcover book running to 300 pages is instead faced with a short, well-spaced text in large type covering a precise problem, which immediately appears user-friendly. Judging by the sales figures, every guideline has met the needs of a significant number of school librarians. Prices for members of the Association (nonmembers pay slightly more) range from £1.50 (\$2.25) for *Annual report and statistics* to £3.50 (\$5.00). These are cheap enough to be bought in bulk by school library services, the support services provided by many local education authorities in Britain. The specialist primary school publications have proved to be particularly popular in this respect.

The low cost also encourages impulse buying at conferences, seminars, and workshops. The guidelines look attractive, their covers in a range of bright jewel colors, using the same geometric cover design with the title clearly featured in the center. The title always includes an accurate description of the contents, *Basic routines*, *Selecting books*, *Preparing for automation*, *Information skills*, likely to catch the eye of someone who may think, "that's just what I need at the moment." How better can a professional association respond to the needs of its members?

Details of all the School Library Association publications can be obtained from the Executive Secretary, SLA, Liden Library, Barrington Close, Liden, Swindon, Wiltshire SN3 6HF, UK.