

# Handmade Books

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## The Role of Handmade Books

The very first books in the world were made by hand with letters inscribed in pen on vellum or parchment and decorated with coloured ink. These books were very rare and precious. Only a few people could afford to own them. The invention of printing gradually made books and the knowledge they contained more readily accessible to many more people.

However, handmade books still have a very important role to play in education and in publishing. A famous American artist, storyteller and writer, Ashley Bryan, writes of his work:

In elementary school I began making books. My first books, made in kindergarten (Class 1), were illustrated ABC and counting books. At that time the entire book production was in my hands. I was author, illustrator, binder and distributor. Those one-of-a-kind "limited editions" drew rave reviews from family and friends and were given as gifts on all occasions.

That feeling for the handmade book is at the heart of my bookmaking today, even though my original is now printed in thousands.

Handmade books are important for the following reasons:

**The development of lifelong literacy:** Best of all, handmade books help with the development of lifelong literacy. As children work on bookmaking, together or individually, they recreate the publishing process. They are challenged to think of ideas, write and edit text, arrange it in paragraphs, pages and chapters, design the shape and lay-out, provide suitable illustrations or decorations, and finally produce a book for others to enjoy.

There is a purpose for every part of the process - thinking, discussing, composing, editing, designing and publishing. There are details to be considered at every stage: the clarification of ideas, the choice of the right words and phrases and the selection of a satisfying design for the whole book.

**As a reading resource for children and the community:** Handmade books provide valuable and attractive reading material. Where commercially published books are available, handmade books are a bonus as they provide stories and reports that are of immediate personal interest to children, teachers and the community.

Where there are few books available, handmade books are doubly important, especially when they are in languages other than English. It is good for children to see their home language or languages in print, and good for the community, too.

**As a way of trying out texts produced at writing workshops:** Teachers and other writers often produce very promising work at writing workshops and expect it to be published. Often this is not realistic for in any country normally only truly outstanding work can or should be published.

It must be remembered that professional publishers publish very few of the manuscripts sent to them, often only 5%. Criteria for selection are very strict and even the most successful writers for children may have work rejected from time to time.

The best way to avoid disappointment is to make handmade books. Then children can enjoy the stories and articles that have been created and good work is not wasted. As well as this, a great deal can be learned from sharing the books with children whose responses may lead to revision and eventual publication or to the discovery of new ways of writing.

### **Handmade Books in the South Pacific**

Handmade books have played an essential part in the development of books in the Pacific Island region. Writing workshops in the 1980s resulted in the production of handmade books that varied in size, shape, colour, content and language. Some of these books were developed further and successfully published.

As well as this, the notes developed by Margaret Mooney and Michael Keith at these workshops have now been published by Learning Media as *Handmade Books in the Classroom*. This book deals with ideas for stories and planning and making books. It contains detailed instructions, diagrams and photographs that are clear and easy to follow.

Of particular importance is the list of criteria for deciding whether a story is good or not, including such questions as: Will the story interest and entertain children? Is it worth telling? Does it have a worthwhile theme? Is it well-shaped? Is the language appropriate? Finally there is the question, Is the story believable?

If it is set in the everyday world, Is it accurate? If it is set in a particular culture, Is it authentic? If it is fantasy, Does it present a consistent point of view?

These are the type of criteria used by professional publishers and they are equally important for teacher-made books, or books made with a view to possible publication.

Older children would appreciate the challenge of these criteria but in the early stages of handmade book production, enjoyment and fostering creativity would be the main considerations for teachers.

### **Handmade Books in England**

The appearance of handmade books depends on the creativity of those involved and the actual material available. A Class 1 child may draw a picture and write a few words on a piece of folded paper to make a book; a group of older children may work on large pieces of paper and fasten them with fibre to make a big book to share; a teacher may work with the class on a newspaper-type book on a special theme. These books may be shaped to suit the topic, strengthened with a cardboard cover and hung from hooks, pegs or cord.

In England, The Book Art Project has been launched at the Manchester Metropolitan University to encourage the development of children's self-made books. Workshops are held for teachers where they learn such things as basic book art, where books are made from one sheet of paper without gluing or sewing. Such economical ideas would be ideal for many schools. A more advanced workshop deals with pop-up and moveable engineered books.

Paul Johnson is responsible for the Book Art Project and has written books about making books for children with titles such as *A Book of One's Own* and *Literacy Through the Book Arts*. The illustrations on the brochure from the Book Art Project show conventional books, concertina books (one like a grandfather clock), flap books, simple and complex pop-up books, tiny books and hard cover books. Paul Johnson writes:

Children should use books not only to take things out of, but to put things into!  
The book form concentrates the mind wonderfully. It provides a structure in which children can organise their thinking and learn to communicate just as they will, personally and professionally, in adult life.

### **Creating Handmade Books**

It is interesting to know that handmade books are considered to be so important in countries where there are many published books. It should inspire us to work with children and with the community creating our own artistic and literary treasures - Handmade Books.

### **References**

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