



Encyclopedias in the Age of the Ringbinder

Article Author:

[Nicholas Tucker](#) [1]

86 [2]

Article Category:

Other Articles

Byline:

Nick Tucker reports on new problems for encyclopedia publishers.

National Curriculum demands have posed new problems for encyclopedia publishers. While non-fiction books spring up overnight covering Key Stage 2 in this or Key Stage 3 in that, encyclopedias normally treat all subjects according to their intrinsic importance. Should they ever give disproportionate space to *The Great Fire of London* or *Acid and Alkalinity* because both subjects have been picked out by the National Curriculum for History and Science respectively, then readers from other countries in which these encyclopedias are sold may wonder at this sudden surge of interest. And while National Curriculum syllabus suggestions can be extremely specific ('Listen to pieces of music by composers such as Bach, Beethoven, Wagner, Vaughan Williams and Shostakovich'), they also sometimes come over as rather more diffuse, challenging even the most carefully composed encyclopedia index to locate them successfully. There is also no guarantee that current syllabus requirements will remain the same for long, given the speedy rate of change so far and promises from Sir Ron Dearing of more upheavals to come in 1995.

<!--break-->

Using encyclopedias to help with National Curriculum subjects can therefore be a hit or miss affair, especially where shorter, less comprehensive sets are concerned. But the three main sets catering roughly for ages 7-14, and so spanning the distance between Key Stage 2 (7-11) and Key Stage 3 (11-14), all do something different. Far from competing with each other they are better seen as complementary, one leading to another as the child matures and school work becomes more demanding. The **Oxford Children's Encyclopedia** (7 volumes, 1,648 pages, £125) is the obvious choice for stimulating a child of seven or so at the stage of building up initial interests. **Children's Britannica** (20 volumes, 6,768 pages, £275) then takes the child from the end of Key Stage 2 and into Key Stage 3, consolidating early interests and providing more detail on a wider range of subjects. **World Book Encyclopedia** (22 volumes, 12,000 pages, £529) completes the job up to the end of Key Stage 3 and beyond, providing a comprehensive range of topics in much fuller, more analytic detail.

The **Oxford Children's Encyclopedia** is easily the most fun. Print is large, and there are many brightly coloured pictures and diagrams ingeniously worked in around its brief text. Margins are wide, and can therefore be used for additional 'fascinating facts' of the type that children used to enjoy in their comics. Only the index is over-severe, consisting of lists of names and number references just occasionally broken up by modest line drawings. Younger readers are not naturally attracted to indexes, but they must learn how to work them if an encyclopedia is to be put to full use. Oxford should try harder here, incorporating the user-friendly readers' aids so skilfully deployed in its other six volumes.

Given that children were widely consulted about the choice of contents, entries like Table-tennis, Darts, or *Dragons* owe more to their popularity with the young than to whatever role they play in any tree of essential knowledge. But early National Curriculum needs are also well served, although more important entries rarely extend over two pages, so limiting the treatment of subjects like Roman Britain. Such brevity helps make the set easy to handle, but much is lost

too. Entries on *Decimals* and *Percentages* are somewhat bewildering, with not enough room to explain the basics of these subjects adequately. The entry on *Sculpture* has some lovely illustrations, but once again is forced to rush its fences in the effort to be brief. Pupils who think that all modern sculpture is merely silly will not have much chance of correcting this view here or during the entry on *Henry Moore*: 'He never tried to copy precisely the source of his ideas, but rather to suggest a likeness.'

As this last quotation suggests, there are still some fairly hard concepts in this set. An average younger reader will sometimes have problems, for example with Dylan Thomas's delightful but wayward definition of *Poetry*: 'What makes me laugh or cry or yawn, what makes my toenails twinkle ...' The core subjects of English, Maths and Science cannot be treated in depth, and bare statements too often serve as explanations at the same time. But if we are thinking mainly of Key Stage 2 with its emphasis on accumulating facts and the first understanding of simple theories, this set has much to commend it. Page lay-outs are often brilliant compared with the cramped, prose-heavy appearance of the more traditional encyclopedia sets. Language is direct: *Tchaikovsky* 'tried to hide his homosexuality from society', rather than suffering from nameless 'events in his personal life' in the mealy-mouthed version preferred by the **Children's Britannica**. For children from 7-10, this set is an excellent choice, even though readers will soon have to graduate from it after starting secondary school at the age of 11.

Passing on to **Children's Britannica**, the 1988 fourth edition although updated to 1993 now shows signs of age above and beyond its dedication to 'Their Royal Highnesses The Prince and Princess of Wales'. Many of its pictures are in dull black and white or pale colour, and some entries need revision. Given the emphasis in the National Curriculum on written English skills, it is unfortunate that while there is reference to *spell* in the entry on Magic, there is nothing about *Spelling*. No encyclopedia could have predicted every topic the National Curriculum would concentrate upon, but when put to the test some of the entries here prove disappointing. Weather is illustrated by three exceptionally dreary black and white pictures. Energy and *Gravity* are no more exciting and receive less than adequate coverage, although other cross-references eventually provide a fuller picture.

On the positive side, **Children's Britannica** is the only set that addresses younger children successfully at length as well as at their 'own level'. The entry on *Poetry* really explains what happens in a poem; *Ancient Rome* is also excellent - all 15 pages of it. The one volume index serves most usefully as a mini-encyclopedia, including a few brief facts and figures and one-line definitions among all its various page references. It also carries an excellent, child-friendly introduction explaining how an index actually works.

Neither Science nor Maths are as well served as the humanities, but it is always easier explaining *Christopher Columbus* (very well put over here) than *Algebra*, where the entry is too compressed and occasionally puzzling. While a child can follow the basics about a historical figure possibly at first glance, maths comprehension depends on a step by step intellectual process impossible to put over in just a few pages. But all intermediate encyclopedias could at least aim at providing readers with a useful revision course in basic mathematical and scientific concepts, while not attempting to teach many more complex processes at the same time.

A more imaginative use of page design and graphics would certainly help this set, whose layout is still reminiscent of basic, nineteenth-century conventions. *Population* does not have a single illustration, and without sight of that steeply rising graph it is difficult for young readers to get a true understanding of this particular problem. Yet the **Children's Britannica's** relaxed writing style still makes it a very friendly set: a bit wordy, like an ageing teacher now set in their ways, but also able to draw on years of experience in communicating with pupils. For the first half of Key Stage 3 (11-14) this would still be my best buy.

World Book Encyclopedia is a much longer, more thorough work, covering all the topics specifically suggested in the National Curriculum. To make it easier to locate these subjects, the publishers have issued their own **National Curriculum Guidelines** in a separate pamphlet. This summarises the contents of the National Curriculum and then shows where to find its main topics, or their nearest equivalent, in the set itself (an idea other publishers could usefully copy). The tally between what the National Curriculum requires and what the **World Book Encyclopedia** provides is virtually complete.

In general, entries on Science and Maths are more successful here. The relaxed professionalism of the writers and the greater space they have at their disposal make it possible to explain a number of complex matters more clearly. Shorter entries on historical figures are often not so effective, and the treatment of literary subjects can be rather dull. But the seriousness with which major topics are followed through (7 pages on *Fractions*; 5 pages on *Climate*) will prove welcome to older readers involved in home or course-work and needing a full discussion to draw upon.

Such seriousness of purpose does not always make this set easy to read. Print is small, sometimes especially so. Pages are crowded, with few breaks between slabs of prose to rest the eye. While some attempt has been made to cater for younger readers, the general tone points firmly at brightish 13-14 year olds and beyond. The stage of education mainly catered for is therefore a time when learning becomes more real and earnest and less a matter of random interest and the sheer fun of open-ended exploration.

All three sets make few concessions to less skilled or motivated readers. Explanations are often brisk, with few safety-nets for children who might not understand the first paragraph and who then look in vain for additional help in what comes next. **World Book Encyclopedia** includes some questions for readers to answer for themselves after longer entries, but the other two sets have little by way of any self-checking techniques. These would be easier to build in if and when these encyclopedias one day also appear on CD-ROM, where it should ' then be possible to incorporate various interactive programmes through which readers could check how much they have followed at different levels of difficulty.

I would also welcome a much greater emphasis on teaching young readers how to use encyclopedias. This could be another area where children might initially be set a variety of simple learning tasks aimed at showing them what exactly cross-references are and how best to use them along with an index. But currently even the most user-friendly sets are like those teachers who cater well for able children but sometimes go too fast for many of the others. It would of course be hard to market an encyclopedia specifically aimed at slower learners. But there are ways of making sets more manageable for more children without losing the excellence found in the volumes I have reviewed here; still very good value compared with so much other non-fiction now written for the young. ?

Nicholas Tucker is a lecturer in Developmental Psychology at the University of Sussex, with a special interest in children's reactions to literature. ,

He has written a 48-page **Buyer's Guide to Encyclopedias**, published by Cressida Press (1 871327 04 0), costing £2.75. Our Non Fiction Reviews Editor, Eleanor von Schweinitz, reviewed this pamphlet in **BfK 84** (Jan 94).

Page Number:

22

Source URL (retrieved on Sep '19): <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/86/childrens-books/articles/other-articles/encyclopedias-in-the-age-of-the-ringbinder>

Links:

[1] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/member/nicholas-tucker>

[2] <http://w.booksforkeeps.co.uk/issue/86>