

E-MAIL MURDER MYSTERY

Goldie Alexander & Hazel Edwards

Published by [Pearson Education](#) AWL in the Rave series.

Net-Launched by M.L.C. school in Kew, Melbourne in a chat-link with students in schools Australia-wide on Tuesday 21st October 1997

Internet Relevance:

This book is especially suited to an internet chat-link because of the e-mail theme within the story. The 'virtual murder' is just a hypothetical story within a story, which Ben embroiders, as his injured brain begins to work again.

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Summary of E-mail Murder Mystery

Confined to a Rehab ward, 14 year old Ben is e-mailed by the mysterious OMEGA. Head-injured and with badly fractured legs in the tragic accident in which his older brother Jamie died, Ben has yet to come to terms with his feelings of loss. OMEGA's messages suggest writing these out. At first Ben resists. But as OMEGA's persistent hints continue, Ben's laptop responses become an exploration of the process of shaping ideas.

'Alpha' is the beginning of Ben's net identification. But who is OMEGA? Suspects include info-tech student Zoe, Mum, Dad, pushy teacher Grace Chang, sexy nurse Kira and George, the computer-phobic patient in the next-door bed.

Medically, some head-injured patients have gaps in their lives. Before the accident, Ben was a brilliant student, but now his memory is impaired.

Some of the story is in e-mail format so that the text links books and Internet possibilities. Structurally, the story relies on parallels. As the head-injured patient Ben is also Alpha 'net junkie', juxtaposed are pieces of his old life and the therapeutic value of transposing raw emotions to a crafted story. Sample micro-stories using

different genre are inserted in the text as part of the plot. Ben's crafting of these can be read as a lesson in creativity.

THEMES TO KEEP IN MIND AS YOU READ

1. Coping realistically with death and tragedy.
2. Relationships with family, schoolmates and others.
3. Technological change versus the comfort of the familiar.
4. Creativity or looking at things differently.
5. Self knowledge and growth, even when unsure.

TOPICS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Imagine a member of your group is in a bad car accident.
2. What might have contributed to the accident? How might the driver feel if others were injured? If you were a passenger or the owner of the car would you feel more or less responsible than the driver does? Why?
3. By definition, an accident is an accident. What else might contribute to a 'prang'? What are some possible reasons for negligent driving?
4. 'Trauma' is the word used in connection with road accidents. Emergency staff have to deal with victims of car accidents and their relatives. Often people are in a 'stressed-out' condition. Immediate shock and long-term stress shows in varied ways in different people. Consider the likely responses of ambulance officers, police, fire officers, emergency staff at the hospital and patients.
5. How might the group react if one member were suddenly confined to a rehab ward? Would you visit? Would you write? Would you feel awkward about what to say either about the accident or 'ordinary things' your friends are continuing to do? If you were the patient, how would you feel about a boyfriend or girlfriend visiting?
6. After reading the story, discuss to what extent the cover of E-mail Murder Mystery reflects Ben's state of mind? If you were given the brief of designing the cover for this story, how would it look? Why?
7. Within families, people often react differently to tragedy. Early on, neither Zoe nor Mum share their true feelings with Ben. To what extent are they trying to spare him? How might they be feeling?
8. Recently, there have been 'ethical' discussions about the way in which tragedy is reported in the media. Is the media being intrusive on personal grief or sharing facts with the public to keep them better informed? Media-handling of tragedies such as the Port Arthur shootings and the Thredbo landslide has been criticised as insensitive and attempting to sensationalise. Should so much media space be devoted to tragedy? Can this give the t.v. audience a slanted perspective on life? Does reporting of the tragic detail help prevent future loss or merely allow viewers to vicariously experience dramatic 'fact' as opposed to the drama of t.v. soaps?
9. If one person in your group had a disability, how might the group's reactions change? To what extent might it depend upon the type of disability? E.g. Loss of a limb? A racist attitude? A periodic mental illness? Being wheelchair bound?
10. E-Mail Murder Mystery contains more than one mystery. What are they?

11. Although from the same family, Ben, Zoe and Jamie seem very different. What are some of these differences? Or does the viewpoint from which you see them, matter more? Remember, much of the story is through Ben's eyes.
12. Why does Dad find it so hard to talk to Ben about the accident? To what extent is this a believable male reaction?

INDIVIDUAL RESPONSES

1. How did Ben end up in rehab?
2. What happened to Ben's brother, Jamie? At what point in the story do you realise he is dead?
3. Who is OMEGA? Why might Ben have problems identifying his unknown correspondent?
4. Chart Ben's rehabilitation; both mental and physical.
5. Explain to a computer-illiterate-person, how to send an e-mail. Remember to keep your explanation simple.

ACTIVITIES

1. Writing a 5000 word story for a young child.
2. A 1st person piece showing someone in a difficult/ uncomfortable situation
3. Write your own mystery.

DISCUSSION RESOURCES

A

Binbeal: Rehabilitation Services for Children With Head Injuries (adapted from an article by Hazel Edwards for *Primary Education*, October 1992)

'That's almost a miracle walking up the passageway.' (neuro psychologist)

'They say this is like a horror movie, but they've never made movies this bad.'
(Parent)

'I was so glad to find there was help available for my student's transition back to school.' (classroom teacher)

Have you had a head-injured student rejoin your class weeks or months after being in a road accident? Were you worried about not knowing how to cope? Many teachers fear they haven't had any clinical training to cope with head-injured students. Many students do not know how to react to a friend's personal tragedy and loss. Yet returning to school is a major step in the rehabilitation process.

Binbeal, the Traffic Accident Commission Centre, is a unit specifically for children and adolescents who have been injured in road accidents and their families. There is

a range of assistance available for the child, the family and the classroom teacher involved in the transition back to school.

'We're doing something, no-one else is doing. And we're happy to be used as a resource,' says Clinical Director Dr Kevin Dunne. 'Our child clients are individual people, not sets of problems.'

Psychologist Pam Martin talks of the need to recognize the effect of the recovery of the family in treating the child who is part of a family, a school and a wider community, all of whom have been affected by the accident trauma. Schoolmates may have been alongside the child pedestrian hit by a car, or other members of the child's family may still be in hospital or may have died tragically.

A team consisting of a special educator, speech pathologist, clinical psychologist, neuro- psychologist, paediatrician, physiotherapist and remedial physical educator, work together to help the student return to school. Significantly, the classroom teacher and parents or guardians are also members of that team.

What Happens at Binbeal?

A typical client might be a student hit by a car, unconscious in hospital for four weeks, then in hospital for two months with a closed head injury. After leaving hospital, child-clients usually live at home and attend Binbeal as outpatients. They have not yet returned to school. The frequency and length of sessions at Binbeal vary according to individual needs. Three sessions of two hours weekly would be common. Country students can stay overnight.

At Binbeal a video is made which records the client doing various activities (such as drawing or reading) to evaluate the child's level for functioning. A family interview is held to assess the needs of the family. The client sees the video later, and it is often used as motivation to show how much improvement has been achieved. 'I couldn't do that before. Now I can!'

Then a Rehab. Plan is drawn up. This is a blueprint for therapy and is reviewed monthly.

Anniversaries of the accident can be a bad time. Siblings often cope initially but find things more difficult as time passes. Binbeal offers a mixed age Sibling Support group from Prep to year 9. They have group discussions as well as opportunities to discuss feelings. These may include art projects, making videos and even creating and performing puppet plays.

School contact may start with a teacher and a couple of classmates invited to Binbeal for lunch and an activity such as pottery. One client re-met all the students in his class, visit by visit. Each time, two students who had visited before, came with another two new ones rotating. Recognition that return to school is a major step in rehabilitation is important.

At first, the student may return for only part of the day. Structured sessions like Maths or English are easier to cope with than unstructured sport or art. The worst thing to say to a returning student is, 'It's great to have you back. There's lots to catch up on.'

Accept that answers can be given orally, or a multiple choice test given, rather than requiring a lot of writing,' suggests the special educator.

Often if a student looks okay physically, expectations are higher although inside there may be difficulties. On the other hand, just because a child doesn't speak, doesn't mean the child can't think. Forgetfulness or memory gaps are frequent.

'How come she can't remember my name?'

'She got lost after coming out of the school library. And she's been at this school a year!'

Recently, a Binbeal team member was invited to visit a class to discuss head injuries, when the client wasn't present, so students could ask their genuine questions.

One thoughtful query was, "Who do you think was hurt more by the accident, the boy or his parents?"

At Binbeal, even Vegemite the dog provides therapy. 'Children are reassured about this place if even the staff talk to the dog. And for some children who may have lost their dog or other family members in the accident, Vegemite is available for cuddling"

In the classroom, an integration aide may be essential for a head-injured student to isolate the main points and act as a filter. Scribing notes is also an important function of an aide.

'I can't remember things. I need an aide to write things down.'

'Don't you have any friends to do that for you?'

'I don't have any friends. I'm different.'

School is doubly hard for head-injured students. It's difficult for them to concentrate and fatigue can overwhelm. Priorities must be established and educators need to be flexible. Poor concentration, distorted speech, memory problems, inappropriate behaviour and fatigue make classroom adjustment difficult.

Strategies

- A diary or a log is one strategy to compensate for memory gaps. It may include lists of what to do today, names of family members and even photos.
- The assessment video on entry is a valuable tool but also an encouragement about the progress which has been made at times when the family are depressed.
- Adjustment to trauma, whether at school or in the family follows a parallel path. At first shock, with people going onto automatic pilot, going physically

and mentally numb or getting stuck into constant crying. Others are confused because the student 'looks the same' on the outside, but cannot develop longterm relationships. Family boundaries blur and roles become distorted. Nursing staff may takeover the mother's caring role, and she feels usurped. Medical staff take over the father's decision-making role. The injured child may become the baby of the family.

However help exists.

The Binbeal-School Transition Process

- Initial contact with school by phone or in person.
- Discussion of the client's status and progress.
- Visits to Binbeal. Often the teacher and a couple of classmates will visit the client for lunch and an activity.
- Integration support group.
- Help for teachers through discussion or meetings.
- Preparation of class; information session and activities initially and ongoing if requested.
- Student attends school part-time.

Enquiries to Director for Clinical Services, Binbeal. Transport Accident Rehabilitation Centre, 499 Springvale rd, Glen Waverley, Victoria 3150 Tel 9 5662851

B

Collaborative writing and using the Internet and e-mail.

Adapted from THE COMPUTER AGE 13/5/1997

'When we (Hazel and Goldie) first decided to co-author E-mail Murder Mystery, the proposition seemed daunting. We lived a 35 minute off-peak drive apart. Peak hour traffic across town took twice as long. And realistically for this type of concentration, three hour bursts are about the limit.

Fortunately, we had just gone onto e-mail. While Ben was learning to operate the Internet, so were we. Before writing, we researched the medical and computer facts. The Transport Accident Commission hospital staff helped with characteristics and procedures for head-injured patients. We found out about common mind-frames of car accident victims. Our character Ben had been very badly hurt. Many of his memories had vanished. How would he think? How would he be rehabilitated? This was where the Internet proved itself invaluable. Every piece of information was carefully logged into the computer. The attached file was then e-mailed to the co-writer as well as being recorded on a floppy disk in case of break-down.

Our next problem was synthesizing this information into authentic settings where convincing characters spoke snappy dialogue. Too easy if you're sitting at one desk to descend into gossip. Going on e-mail prevents some of this. Going on e-mail wipes

out excuses, prevents procrastination. The computer's appetite is insatiable. It demands to be fed. It won't accept excuses.

People often ask us how collaboration works. Do we sit at the same desk? Who is the ideas person? Who is the REAL writer - wink, wink, nudge, nudge - really? There's no doubt that co-writing takes lots of commitment and dedication. And thick skin. No room for bruised egos. We already knew there was no point trying to spare each other's feelings. Either something worked or it didn't. Often a sentence or a paragraph painstakingly and lovingly crafted by one writer would be sent into oblivion by the other. Anyway, by the time a piece had gone through half a dozen drafts, we could never be sure whose idea or phrase it had been in the first place.

In the beginning, sometimes we crossed cyberspace together, and one draft was superimposed on the other. To eliminate the existence of a multiplicity of story versions and duplicating work, we agreed to a time-schedule. The early morning writer 'fowl' would work on the current draft until 'brain-dead' 2-3 hours later. Then the story draft would be e-mailed to the night writer 'owl'. The agreement was that until the next draft was e-mailed back, no further work was to be done. This provided a thinking break, but also a moral obligation to work when it did arrive.

Whatever arrived by e-mail was modified, criticized, edited and returned. Of course there were problems. Occasionally things went 'wrong with the works' and whole pages, even chapters disappeared into cyberspace never to be recovered. But the advantages were amazing. Whatever you might read about authors working in a blaze of white hot creativity is mostly untrue. Our experience is that writing is a painful, lengthy, demanding, sweaty process; much like putting together a very elaborate cake where each separate and unique layer must be integrated into the whole. By co-authoring through e-mail, we took half the expected time to complete *E-mail Murder Mystery*. All kinds of issues about the emerging story were better understood, as were the various internal stories and the number of drafts it took to 'get the concept right'. Since there was an underlying mystery, having a second mind to check the logic was invaluable...'

C

Tragedy and the media.

The Age Editorial. 7/8/1997

'In times of national tragedy, the media are the main channel of information to the waiting, watching, listening and reading public. So it has been over the past week as Australians have been united via the media coverage in their concern for those trapped in the Thredbo landslide and for their families, friends and rescuers. In general, the coverage was handled with sympathy, respect and support....however, the Deputy Prime Minister, Mr. Tim Fisher, has called for a Press Council enquiry into the behavior of (some of the) media at Thredbo. Concerns have been expressed about one newspaper which reported as dead several victims before they had been discovered....

... Mr. Fisher seems to be unaware that the journalist's code of ethics already requires them to respect private grief. A review of the journalists' code say, "At times of grief or trauma, always act with sensitivity and discretion. Never harass. Never exploit a person's vulnerability or ignorance of media practice. Interview only with informed consent."

NOVEL WEB CHAT LAUNCH

an article of 1000 words.

by Goldie Alexander & Hazel Edwards.

Q. Why launch your teenage novel via an Internet web chat?

A. For immediate responses from our readers.

Our co-written cyber mystery, *E-Mail Murder Mystery*, was launched at hi-tech Methodist Ladies' College, Kew, with the support of publishers, (Pearson) , on the 21st October. Because this paperback is a cyber mystery, and because the co-writers wrote it using e-mail attachments, an Internet launch seemed a great idea.

Students joined in a web chat ranging from far away Tom Price H.S. in Western Australia's Pilbara, to N.S.W. north coast Lismore H. S. These students had read the book before the launch. Interested in how two writers can work on one story together, most had lots of questions.

Longman's marketing manager Annette Street had already sent out some background notes and copies of the book.

In the M.L.C library launch site, two computer terminals and a giant screen were Internet connected. Each school was given a half hour slot. Test messages confirmed that the links were working. As each author replied to the e-mail questioner by hitting send/receive, her photo went alongside it. This saved the author having to sign on and off. It also made things seem more personal.

During the long launch (10 am until 4 pm) to allow for different time zones, the authors typed into the web chat which allowed every school to read all the questions and answers. Resident M.L.C. students watched answers progressing on the giant screen.

Here are some of the questions and answers they got:

Q. Richard (*De La Salle College. Vic*): Where did you get your inspiration from?:

A. Hazel: Inspiration came from a newspaper feature I did on the Rehab hospital on young people who had memory lapses after being head injured in accidents.

A. Goldie: We were interested in how e-mail could disguise the person who sent it. And how facts could be presented creatively.

Q. (*Salisbury East HS. Sth. Aust.*) Please tell us something about the plot of E-Mail Murder Mystery?

A. Goldie: Ben was in a car accident in which his brother Jamie was killed. There's some doubt about whether Jamie or Ben had been driving. Ben has been head-injured, so there are genuine gaps in his memory, and then there are other incidents he deliberately chooses NOT to remember.

A. Hazel: In real life, this does happen. I did my research interviewing medical and paramedics medics at the Rehab. Hospital. Brothers and sisters of those injured in accidents often have a difficult time because attention is given only to the one who has been injured. Often families break up under the strain.

Q. Jamo Boys (*Jamison High School NSW*): Goldie, what happened if you didn't like what Hazel wrote?

A. Goldie: I told her. And she always told me if she didn't like something I had written. But there was always something worth rescuing.

A. Hazel: Every chapter was rewritten several times on e-mail attachments, so we can't remember exactly who wrote what.

Q. Iseult (*Lismore High School NSW*): Did you have any e-mail fights?

A. Hazel: No. Sometimes I hit the delete button when Goldie gets too wordy.

A. Goldie: Or I ignore Hazel and reformat.

Q. Jamison High Boys: We would like to read a continuation.

A. Hazel: Thanks for the suggestion for a sequel.

A. Goldie: Perhaps a second book could be written from the viewpoint of Zoe, the hi-tech sister.

Q. Andrew. (*Tom Price Senior High School W.A.*) Why would Ben confide to OMEGA when he wouldn't talk about his brother's death to his family?

A. Hazel: Because Ben was so affected by the death, it was hard to speak to those who were still alive. Typing on a keyboard to OMEGA is not as personal as being face to face.

A. Goldie: When something touches you deeply, you often prefer to speak with strangers not involved in your tragedy.

After a slow start, and solving some technical difficulties, the two authors typed furiously. Sometimes they forgot who'd sent the question and had to scroll back. When questions were repeated, the authors suggested students scroll back to a previous answer.

Everyone could read the entire web chat. Occasionally this led to 'chatting up':

Q. Unidentified girls: How old are you?

A. Jamison H. Boys: How old would you like us to be?

A. Unidentified girls: Older than us.

Sometimes questions were answered by readers from other schools:

Q. Anne: Hi Lismore. What rating out of ten would you give this book?

A. Iseult: Probably about a nine.

Over an excellent lunch, Trinity College Boys joined the M.L.C literary club for a more conventional book launch. Then it was back to keyboards and web chat. Questions were getting harder, the answers becoming more technical:

Q. Andrew: When did you start collaborating on this book and how long did it take to write?

A. Hazel: We started plotting about eighteen months before we typed the sixth draft. To start with, we plotted the various layers of mystery in the novel. We decided on the third person viewpoint with some insights into Ben's mind. We didn't want to write in first person in case we gave too much away. We also created a detailed character dossier on Ben and the other major characters. This is where having two minds was useful.

Q. Tom Price SH. How do you work? Do you ever get to see each other in person?

A. Goldie: We'd meet fortnightly. In between, we'd e-mail attachments. Since our writing styles differ, Hazel tends to be short and simplistic, while Goldie writes more description) we had to compromise. We'd argue whether something was believable or not. Damien our technical advisor helped on computer facts.

By 4.30pm Melbourne time, 1.30pm S.A. 2.30pm W.A., all felt this launch had linked old and new technology.