INDEXING is a word with an increasing number of meanings. Fundamentally, whatever modern applications of technology or methodology are used, the simple act of arranging words or phrases relating to objects, ideas, or matter, in a logical sequence, is indexing.

The meaning, however, which most readers of this journal apply to this word is probably that of an alphabetical list of words or phrases appended to a literary text and enumerating the pages on which references to the ideas or facts indicated by those words or phrases may be found.

On the face of it, there would appear to be very little difficulty in making such a list and appending the appropriate page numbers. But as every book indexer knows, the work is full of problems, and the indexer ought not to be held responsible for every aspect of his resulting index. Apart from inconsistencies and mistakes (which are almost sure to be the indexer’s responsibilities) the scope and thoroughness of a book index may be due to the publisher (perhaps with the author’s advice or concurrence) determining that there shall be an index of names only, or separate indexes of names and subjects, or the index shall include particulars of books referred to in the text, or, because of the cost of typesetting, not allowing the use of sub-headings, with the dire result that there are long sequences of page numbers following headings. Or the indexer may be required to compile an attenuated index because of a limitation on the number of pages which can be allowed for it.

The competent indexer prefers to be able to compile what he considers to be the most useful type of index, and this may be determined by the kind of material in the text. A very detailed text will almost certainly require an index with many sub-headings whereas a simple book may need none. If it is considered that books mentioned in the text, or in bibliographies, should be indexed, and they are very numerous, it may be preferable to have the entries in a separate sequence. The wise publisher leaves it to the indexer to do the work as he considers most satisfactory.

Many publishers, for one reason or another, decide not to provide an index. This is most unsatisfactory to readers, many of whom will not buy, or consult, such books because they may require to use them to obtain specific information, not to read straight through. Or knowing that after reading them, they may require to refer to specific information and will not be able to do so unless they compile their own rough indexes as they go along—and this will not be satisfactory. There is an increasing tendency among book reviewers, as readers of this journal are aware, to draw attention to the absence or inadequacies of indexes.

It is a moot point whether the author of a book should index it. Obviously the author can be expected to have all the knowledge of the subject that is required, but he may not have the qualities of patience and attention to detail, the time, or the ability or opportunity to sit down and compile the index in the very short time that the
publisher may require it to be done. He may be a busy person carrying out research or writing creatively, and may much prefer someone else to compile it, even if his contract requires him to provide it. Indexing is a quite separate and distinct occupation from authorship and some people maintain that an author’s contract should not require him to provide an index, or if it does, that it should be the subject of extra payment on the ground that if it were done by someone else a fee—and possibly quite a substantial one—would have to be paid. Therefore the author compiling the index to his own book should be entitled to this same fee over and above his royalties.

That some authors are excellent indexers is proved by the fact that two have been awarded the Wheatley Medal for an outstanding index. This by no means proves that authors are ipso facto good indexers, however; far from it. Many indexers have been called in by publishers to polish up an author’s index or even to provide a replacement.

Techniques of indexing vary and so do the resulting compilations. This is no disadvantage provided the indexes are good. It may be that there is need for a general standard of improvement, and that we are gradually reaching a stage where an approved standard may be determined by examination. The support which the courses of instruction instigated by the Society have received are an indication of the need for training. Perhaps there is also need for more detailed and intensive training in certain aspects of indexing.

Secretaryship of the Society

As we go to press we learn, with regret, that owing to newly commissioned literary work which will prevent their continuing outside interests, Mr. John M. Shaftesley and his daughter, Mrs. Helen A. Levin, Hon. Secretary and Hon. Assistant Secretary respectively, have with very great reluctance decided to tender their resignations.

The Chairman of Council would like to hear of anyone living in Greater London and having a knowledge of the publishing world who would be willing to undertake this work in respect of which a small honorarium is paid.

The Wheatley Medal

Readers are reminded that recommendations of indexes of books for consideration in connexion with the award of the Wheatley Medal should be submitted to the Library Association before 31st March. Last year, none of those submitted was of a sufficiently high standard to merit an award. The larger the number of titles submitted, the greater is the likelihood of an award being made. Readers who are constantly handling books published in 1967 are asked to examine such books with a view to making a recommendation.

The Seventh Training Course in Indexing

will be held at the School of Librarianship, North-Western Polytechnic, 207-225 Essex Road, London, N.1. The Course will last from 1st to 5th April and will contain new features. The fee for the Course will be four guineas. Full details may be obtained from Mr. L. M. Harrod at the School.