THE EDITOR AND THE INDEXER

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Three things are essential to the production of a good index—a good book, a good editor and a good indexer.

The Random House dictionary defines an index as a more or less detailed alphabetical listing of names, places and topics along with the numbers of the pages on which they are discussed. Like the old New England land deeds that describe acreage as more or less some figure, this definition leaves several values to be determined:

An index is a list of names—all names? or only certain names? An index is a list of places—again all or which? As to topics—in what detail and how arranged?

Unless there is logic in the way those questions are answered, you will have, in my estimation, only a list and not an index. I would like to include in that definition a modification of a phrase that occurs in another statement of the meaning of the word index—"something used or serving to point out; a sign, token or indication: a true index of his character". Let us say "a true index of the character of the book."

Unless an index does reveal the character of a book, it remains a list. Not that a list does not have value, but it is not the effective tool an index should be.

So, who determines the logic of an index? Is it the editor, who often actually knows more about the book than does the author? Is it the author?—but most editors will agree that, with rare exceptions, there is no greater abomination than an author-developed index. Is it the indexer, the person who simply does the physical work of compilation? Is the reader involved? After all, he is going to use the index.

All these individuals are editorially involved, and the index we are discussing is an editorial, not a file clerk, function. Unfortunately, however, all too frequently the final determinant of the size, and hence the logic, of an index is a non-editorial factor: how many pages are left for the index? If too few for the character of the book, too bad; just scrunch what should occupy 5,000 lines (and did in the previous expensive edition of one reprint) into 1,500 lines (as was done in one instance I personally experienced—and the difference between the two editions was not in text content but in the number of illustrations). If too many pages are left, then devise what I call a 'tarantula in left boot' index. That name comes from what, sadly, has become a family joke as I groan that I have another of those padded indexes wherein under the heading 'Boots', to use up lines, I shall have to insert two subheads. The first will read 'Left boot, no tarantula in' and the second will read 'Right boot, tarantula in'. Those subheads will add lines, will they add utility?

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But no experienced editor will box himself into that nasty corner, unless, and this is an almost inconceivable notion, there is never an editorial/production consultation on the ultimate size of the book under consideration. Generally, such consultation is part of the cost and pricing procedure, and the knowledgeable editor will include in his estimating a reasonable projection of the length of the index. As long as a manuscript is available, it is possible to do a rough, reasonably accurate cast off of an index. Select, say, twenty representative manuscript pages. Count names, places and topics that you, the editor, consider important. Multiply the average number of entries by the total pages of manuscript. Behold! a working number of entries for determining the number of pages needed for an index representative of the book.

If by accident, the art director or the production department later influences the actual number of pages available, the editor is in a good position to help determine the logic of the index. He can suggest that the emphasis be upon names rather than subjects if the renown of the names, or the potential reader's familiarity with them, will imply the subjects, or that the emphasis be upon the subjects because they will carry the names.

The reader—the user of the index—must be considered in any compilation. Certain projected readerships and sales are obvious—the ‘juvenile’ will not normally be confused with an adult ‘trade book’, nor that ‘trade book’ with a ‘graduate student text’. But does the author or the editor feel that that juvenile text is geared to a specific reading level? May the indexer introduce words not used in the text? That adult ‘trade book’—if it has been written or edited using familiar or short forms of names, should the complete, formal names be supplied by the indexer? Is that college text to be used primarily as part of a series of interrelated texts, and therefore, hopefully at least, should it have an index reflecting the relatedness of the series? Will it be used by a highly specialized faculty, or is it to be supplemental reading? If index length is not a problem, the professional indexer will index for the broadest use; if length is a problem, should not the editor’s, rather than the indexer’s, judgment of the index logic hold?

There is a theory that footnotes have no place in a well-written book—if the material is important enough to be included, etc. But footnotes do exist. Some books are even written in hybrid fashion so that, in theory at least, reading the footnotes makes you a scholar and ignoring them an improving-your-own-mind reader or a member of the Book-of-the-Month Club or something else less than a scholar. To index footnotes or not to index? Surely the decision should reflect the editor’s and the author’s thinking as well as the indexer’s.

I think one reason why an author-developed index is so frequently a horror is that the author is so close to his book and his subject that he cannot see the forest for the proverbial trees. He can see the logic in, as well as for, his work; he fails to see the various logics the reader brings to any index. These logics are determined partly by the reader’s familiarity with the subject: not everyone seeking information already knows the correct jargon of the discipline for a given concept. The reader is not necessarily the author’s peer. Also, an author is likely to organize his index as he organized his book, which can—in fact, should—be quite an individual approach. But the index-user does not know that organization. He brings to an index his working knowledge, which may be limited, of other indexes.

A good index, therefore, must meet such conventional concepts while retaining the individuality of the book. If the author has, for example, pet terminology that may not be the always-accepted usage, it should appear in the index; but so, at least, should a cross-reference guide to his particular usage appear under the more conventional, even trite, expressions.

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If an editor has no strong feelings about alphabetization, fine—leave it to the indexer. I know what an editor would get from me, but does the editor? Will alphabetization be letter-by-letter (dictionary) style? Will it be word-by-word regardless of the type of entry? Just this one choice can give quite a range for looking up any given item. Letter-by-letter will, for example, give you:

- Browne, Illinois
- Browning, Alfred
- Brown, Xavier.

Word-by-word will give:

- Brown, Xavier
- Browne, Illinois
- Browning, Alfred.

Quite a reversal, and if the index is lengthy enough, could place each entry on different pages in each instance.

Without a house style being given to me, has any editor any way of anticipating that perhaps I belong to the school of indexers that use neither of the above approaches alone, but either, depending on choice, in combination with an entry sequence that puts people ahead of places and places ahead of things? In that case, our friend Brown, Xavier might be first or third, but Browne, Illinois would have to be third.

So, unless an editor has no particular feeling on the subject and is content to have the indexes of the books on his list alphabetized without uniformity, it behoves him to develop a house style. I personally have strong preferences, but, like any professional indexer, I will follow the editor's house style even if I disagree with it.

Numbers are important in an index. How are they to be handled? Full hundreds, as 111-117? or only the decades repeated, as 122-28? or (perhaps for space reasons) to use only the digits—122-8? The last is not my own cup of tea, but if consistent use in any given index saves even ten lines to the column in an index that is being compressed, I certainly prefer that form to dropping items—and that is what I would provide unless directed otherwise.

How are subentries to be handled? Is there to be a cut off point of number of page references after which subentries are a must? Are they to be alphabetically arranged, each beginning a new line under each preceding larger head? Are they to be 'run-in', paragraph style, in the same alphabetical arrangement, with a semicolon between items? Or to be 'run-in' paragraph form but arranged in sequential page order—that is, by the first page entry after each item and regardless of the item alphabetization?

These and other matters of style (the use of ff. or passim; illustration references . . . italic with or without illus. before the page number; see also's at the end of a series of references or after the main words—to name only a few) must be determined by someone until there is one single definitive usage. That will probably come some day, partly because of computerization. It is not generally feasible to program idiosyncratic usages.

Should an index be submitted always, or never, on cards? May it be handwritten (Heaven forbid, except in dire emergency!)? Should it be typed on sheets (with or without a carbon) to word- and line-count length?

Such matters of style and format are, to my mind, important. To be intelligible, content needs form.

So now the editor has in his possession an index on cards or otherwise that meets his (or the indexer's) stylistic standard. Is it a good one?

Unless the editor is thoroughly familiar with the physical and mechanical accuracy of the indexer, page references should be spot-checked if possible, and if length of index and time available permit, every page reference, name spelling, and word usage should be checked in the index of a first-time indexer. The editor's favourite indexers could be spot-checked. They too can goof, sometimes for so simple a reason as the arrangement of pages and the location of folios. The previous job a particular indexer handled had the folios on the bottom of the
pages; in this book they were on the top—both jobs, of course, three pages atop each other on a galley sheet. Want to bet on the possibility of visual error? Personally, I prefer working with side-by-side pages, but such proofing seems rare.

Names could be checked for initials and trick spellings.

If the editor had edited the manuscript, then it is possible he would scan the entries to determine that pertinent topics and important names have been picked up. This is particularly important if inadequate space has meant the exercise of judgment in omissions.

The index should be tested by selecting several pages of text at random and then looking for the topics covered in the index. If names or topics are omitted that should appear, the indexer should be asked why over the phone quickly. A good indexer will be able to justify the omissions by the logic of his indexing. If it is decided that the editor’s opinion should prevail and the omission is not justifiable, a quick scan or reworking by the indexer, who must naturally have become thoroughly familiar with the book, will at the least pick up most of the related references.

But all such checking must be done quickly, while the material is fresh in the minds of everyone concerned, not at some indefinite time in the future.

It is a paradox only in a limited sense, but those no-good-indexer authors are frequently very good index critics. If the index meets the requirements of their logic, at least one of the two hurdles of use—the author’s and the reader’s—will have been overcome.

As an indexer, I am only too well aware that the index and the indexer are that last-gasp chance to get back on schedule. The author lost a month, the editor a week, the printer another—that leaves one week for preparing an index that should take three. Miracles have been performed—but not with dependable regularity.

Why not supply an indexer with unpaged galleys at the time the author gets his? No book can be indexed without being read, and early galleys permit the indexer at the least to become familiar with content and organization.

The truism is that no index is better than the book (it can, of course, be worse). The corollary should be: No index is better than the editor’s standards of indexing. Editors determine who does the indexing and how.

INDEXING PLUS

An indexer, like a book publisher’s editor, needs to be constantly on the look out for textual inaccuracies as well as typographical errors. Constant vigilance is required; sometimes textual inaccuracies, or references to the same person or subject under different names, do not become apparent until much of the work of indexing is done—perhaps not until the final editing of the entries. They may not be revealed except by reference to captions under illustrations or a tabulation, or, in a historical work, by an examination of a family tree. This of course takes time; time which, when working under pressure can be ill-spared, but which may result in a more accurate index; if printing has not advanced too far, a better text too.

Indexer and editor both need a fairly wide general knowledge; if the book is non-fiction, a knowledge of the subject-matter of the book is also an advantage.

Those who index books on a variety of subjects often find that they need a collection of reference books, especially if they do not live near a large public library or have access to a university library. The compilation of a list of suitable reference books, which the Council is preparing at the suggestion of a member (as mentioned elsewhere in this issue), should be a very useful undertaking.