What is a Good Index?

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The making of an index is, or should be, quite a simple matter. The increasing complexity of modern life sometimes encourages people to believe that all processes must be complicated and that all arts or sciences have their own secrets which only the initiated (and sometimes after a long initiation) are privileged to share. Whether indexing is an art or a science is an open question. But one thing is certain—there is no mystique about it. It is, perhaps, an over-simplification to say, as some do, that the only desiderata for an index are knowledge of the alphabet and the use of commonsense. But the essential rules of indexing are few.

In addition to these few rules there are, it is true, a number of conventions which the fledgling indexer, at least, would be wise not to flout. But experience of collating indexes to a number of works of many volumes, in which separate volumes have been indexed by different people, has shown me that individual indexers, all equally admirable, have their own particular and slightly different ways of going about their task. One comes to recognise the brushwork. My own answer to the question as to whether indexing is an art or a science would probably therefore have to be that indexing is an art. Indeed one imagines that in years to come, when scholars will doubtless pay as much attention to the index of a book as they do to the text, the expert will be able to distinguish, in the absence of the artist's signature, between an early Knight and a late Stallybrass.

Criteria for indexing

If, then, indexers are not to go solely by the rule book, what criteria are they to adopt? It must first be assumed that indexes to all works of non-fiction are necessary. This is an assumption which presumably can be safely made in the columns of The Indexer, though there are still some people, some publishers indeed, as well as general readers, who have to be convinced of its truth. But it is an assumption on which we must act, though of course different books may require different types of index.

The late Sir Cuthbert Whitaker, who created the index to Whitaker's Almanack, found in a periodical a reference to that index which said, in effect, that though it broke all the canons of indexing, the person using it could always find what he wanted. Of this remark Sir Cuthbert was justifiably proud because, as he said, he had always supposed that that was the object of an index.

It is a point which we should all do well to bear in mind. The indexer should never forget the user over his shoulder. Indexes are compiled not for the sake of the indexer, nor the author, nor the publisher, but for the

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benefit of the person who has to use them—the ultimate consumer. If the indexer were to put himself more often into that person's place and ask himself what he would be looking for, the general standard of indexes might improve. They would become simpler, they might even become shorter.

One or two examples may suffice. Mr. Gordon Carey, than whom there was no greater authority, read a memorable paper to the Society of Indexers some years ago called 'Room at the Top'. The burden of his argument was the undesirability in an index to a biography of covering columns of index in sub-headings under the name of the subject of the biography. Who has not been daunted by the sheer bulk of such entries, and baffled by the apparent impossibility of finding the needle in the haystack? And, as Mr. Carey pointed out, the relevant entries can in so many cases, with some thought and ingenuity, be quite well included elsewhere.

Two of the more remarkable index entries which I can recall ran as follows:

Dead men's shoes, stepping into
Deadwood, cutting out of

Perhaps these were out of the ordinary. Yet it is surprising how many index entries are found to start with an adjective. But if we except such recognisable references as 'gross national product' or 'Glorious First of June', how often would a user look for such an entry?

On the other hand, a certain amount of duplication may be reasonable. The before-mentioned index to Whitaker's Almanack contains references both to 'Ministry of Defence' and to 'Defence, Ministry of'. This, perhaps, is one of the canons of indexing which it infringes. Of course, there might be a cross-reference. Yet it must be about an even chance whether the user will turn first to 'Ministry' or to 'Defence'. So why not satisfy him in either case? Many will hold in any case that duplication of references is in itself a better solution than a multiplicity of cross-references, which can often be frustrating, particularly when the number of references which they cover is few.

One must repeat that an index is not an academic exercise for the expert, it is in many cases an essential aid for the student and in all cases a useful adjunct to the book for a general reader. Perhaps it is not too daring to suggest that a panel which awards prizes for indexes such as the Wheatley Medal should itself contain a representative of the consumer.

Conditions for indexing

We have now to consider the conditions under which an index is compiled. It should go without saying that many leading publishers have for long taken great pains over indexes. It is also true that most of the remainder have now come to realise that an index is needed. Reference to recent issues of The Indexer will show that reviewers are certainly ready to remind publishers of the need, and the Society of Indexers, in its relatively short life, has not been without its influence.

Unfortunately the need for an index has not always been equated with the need for an adequate index. Sometimes one gets the impression that after every other possible detail of a book has been settled, somebody suddenly remembers that nothing has been done about an index. The resultant hurried job can hardly mean good indexing. Even more regrettable is the inadequate space often allotted for an index, resulting sometimes in almost more frustration for the user than the absence of an index altogether.

Nearly always, one assumes, the indexer has some sort of brief from the publisher. The indexer may know what constitutes a good index, and may be able to envisage exactly the sort of index he would like to make. But if he is limited by time and still more by space, he is all too often unable to carry out his best intentions. The panel which considers applications for inclusion on the Register of the Society of Indexers is frequently confronted with this problem. The question, to put it briefly, is, does the
indexer himself think this is a good index, or is it merely the best index which he was given the opportunity of making? The panel has now asked that applicants should state what instructions they received.

For the same reason, many experienced indexers have felt reluctant to support the idea that the index should bear the name of its compiler. They have no wish that readers should assume that they regard the dismembered torso which has appeared in print as an index worthy of their signature.

The difficulties are not always simple ones of time and space. Mrs. M. D. Anderson, in her recent admirable booklet, Book indexing, which should be read and digested by all indexers, new and old, speaks of the necessity of dealing with ‘names mentioned by the author without any forenames or initials. A bald surname in the index looks to an indexer’s eye disagreeably unfinished, and a confession of failure, and if possible he should provide a name or initials to complete it, with the aid of his works of reference.’ This is advice which surely should be followed, and to do so will rarely require much additional space. Yet one meets cases of publishers actually discouraging such efforts, which enhance the value not only of the index but of the book itself.

The index itself

But the general picture is not always so gloomy, and we will assume the case of an index compiled under favourable conditions, and turn back to the user and his requirements. One hopes that it is not too obvious a statement to say that the presentation of an index is almost as important as its contents. The first need is simplicity. Short notes of explanation before an index (as exemplified by Mr. Norman Knight) can be very helpful. But in general an index should be able to stand by itself, and the introduction of long and detailed explanatory matter, which is now sometimes encountered, seems something of a weakness. The user really does not want to have to turn back to the first page of the index to find out what it is all about.

Sub-headings

Easy reference also depends considerably on the use made of sub-headings. Many people feel that sub-headings set out separately, rather than run on, help in this respect, but this is largely a question of publishers’ house-style, and run-on sub-headings certainly save valuable space.

For general indexes there are only two acceptable methods of arranging sub-headings, the chronological and the alphabetical, though in more technical indexes classified arrangements are certainly permissible. It can surely not be denied that for histories and biographies the chronological method is to be preferred. There is after all no justification for recording a man’s death before his marriage because the letter ‘d’ precedes the letter ‘m’ in the alphabet.

Order of entries

For general entries, and particularly for abstract concepts, the alphabetical method is no doubt more helpful. I have never seen the case argued for what may be called a hybrid arrangement, that is to say, the use of both chronological and alphabetical order in the same index. But there seems to be no inherent objection to this and in suitable cases it would seem that it should not be ruled out simply by the desire for consistency.

Strings of references

The one thing to be avoided is a long string of page numbers with no differentiation or amplification. The general rule is to place after the main heading only those miscellaneous references to which a sub-heading cannot reasonably be attached. It sometimes happens that in addition to a specific reference on a certain page, for which a sub-heading is provided, there is also a miscellaneous reference on the same page. In such a case, both entries should be included. The situation also arises where two or more entries to the same subject occur on one page. Mr. Knight, in his Churchill indexes, uses the words bis or ter to denote this. Other indexers place the figures 2 and 3 in brackets, thus (2) (3). Either solution is permissible,
though the first seems preferable. But it should be understood that one is discussing here the ideal index, where questions of space do not prevail; in many quite adequate indexes one entry per page will be held to suffice.

A word of caution should be added about the use of the word *passim*. This is to be found in a number of indexes, but it is not recommended, being in fact merely a token of lazy indexing. Inclusive pagination at least is necessary, and usually a further breakdown by providing sub-headings.

The multiplication of sub-entries, as has been suggested, is to be avoided, but where a large number is necessary, the sub-entries should be broken up into paragraphs, care being taken to make the divisions in suitable places. This practice goes back at least as far as the very good index to a very long book, Morley’s *Life of Gladstone* (does anyone know who compiled it?), and of recent years it seems to have been revived, with good results. Since a life of Gladstone has been mentioned, it may be appropriate to comment that Robert Blake’s admirable life of Disraeli has one of the best indexes of modern times, for it has comprehensiveness combined with simplicity. It was compiled by a member of the Society of Indexers, Mr. F. T. Dunn.

**Cross-references**

The user of the index can also be greatly helped by an adequate supply of cross-references. There is not much new which can be said about them except that cross-references or their absence form one of the essential tests of an index. They are one of the first things for which one looks, whether in officially assessing an index for the Society’s panel or merely in indulging the curiosity about other people’s indexes which afflicts all of us who make indexes ourselves. Some of these points are among the more mechanical aspects of an index. But it seems worth considering also the extent to which the index can be developed to help the reader by supplying more information than he will find in the text itself. It can be argued that if the author does not think it worth while to be specific, the indexer should not be expected to do his work for him. For a fairly lightweight book of travel or a not too scholarly biography this may well be true. But for anything more substantial, and particularly for books which are likely to be freely consulted by researchers, it certainly seems to be the indexer’s job to do more.

**Footnotes and other items**

The question often arises of the extent to which matter contained in footnotes should be indexed. The growing custom of placing notes together at the end of the book, regrettable though it seems to be, has a bearing on this. If notes are at the back of the book they are not normally indexed. Therefore, it will be argued, why should they be indexed if they occur as footnotes to the text? Obviously this is pre-eminently a question of the space available, but on the whole one would recommend a compromise, namely that anything in the nature of additional facts in a footnote should be indexed, but that mere references to books and their authors need not, unless there are already references to them in the body of the book.

This principle of only adding to existing references, and not making new ones, should also, I suggest, apply to books listed in bibliographies, or in lists of books at the end of chapters in the text. Normally, bibliographies are not indexed, unless they consist of discursive notes about books rather than pure lists, or unless there is a specific request from the publisher or author. I once indexed a book of 180 pages by an American author, which had an additional thirty-five pages of bibliography; the specific instruction was that these thirty-five pages should be fully indexed. It was an instance when one could not help feeling that the indexer profited more than the reader.

The indexing, or not, of plates is usually a matter for the publisher’s house-style. In some cases publishers like plates to be indexed and the references to be in bold type, though this of course precludes the other
well-understood use of bold type for principal references to subjects within the text. The captions to figures within the text should almost certainly be indexed.

Another debatable point is the indexing of the titles of chapters. This always seems to me entirely a question of context. In some cases such an entry is superfluous, in others it is strictly necessary, and can indeed form an essential peg on which to hang sub-headings. The advice here must therefore be to treat each case on its merits.

Name entries

The provision of forenames or initials, already mentioned, is essential whenever it is possible, but granted the adequate space which we are now assuming, one should go further. The bare entry Gladstone is inadequate, and even Gladstone, W. E., is not much better. The proper treatment here is Gladstone, William Ewart (1809-98), Liberal statesman. (Yes, all right, early in his career he was a Tory, but let us not be too pedantic). Dates of birth and death, when possible, are an invaluable adjunct. Of course, Gladstone is a fairly simple case, since he remained Mr. Gladstone to the end of his life. Many public figures, however, and particularly politicians, acquire titles. One should write Baldwin, Stanley (Earl Baldwin of Bewdley) even though he was only raised to the peerage when he retired. One should also write Eden, (Sir) Anthony (Earl of Avon), with a cross-reference under Avon; it is indeed particularly important to do this when a man's title differs from his surname. The well-known nineteenth century statesman, the Marquess of Hartington, was equally well-known, after he succeeded to that title, as the Duke of Devonshire. In a long index which I compiled there were numerous references to him under both names, and the best way out seemed to be to say after the Hartington entries, 'For later entries, see Devonshire, Eighth Duke of', and under Devonshire to say 'For earlier entries, see Hartington, Marquess of'. But possibly everyone will not agree with this solution. Of course, these references to titles can be carried too far, and I do not seriously suggest an entry (though it would be accurate) to read: Hogg, Quintin (Viscount Hailsham) (Quintin Hogg) (Lord Hailsham of St. Marylebone).

Bad indexes

One does not, nowadays, come across many really bad indexes. When one does, the reason for the badness as a rule stems from this lack of background study. I would quote as one example an entry recently met in a book of war memoirs. Sir Henry Maitland Wilson (later Lord Wilson of Libya), a very distinguished general in the Second World War, bore the nickname Jumbo Wilson, and was so referred to in the book in question. But this hardly excused the entry of Wilson, General J.

Certain characteristics of bad indexes may be listed. They are, first and foremost, and perhaps obviously, inadequate coverage of the subject; secondly, a tendency to concentrate, perhaps because they present fewer problems, on proper names rather than on concepts, and finally, headings and subheadings which are not informative enough.

Supplementary information provided

This somewhat lengthy digression may serve to show that good indexing can call for quite a lot of filling in the background—the word 'research' is eschewed as being too pretentious in this context. It may also show one of the reasons why, if the author of a book is able and willing to make an index, he is the best person to do so, since he will need to spend less time in verifying the facts in reference books. He will, of course, also know what items he regards as essential to be indexed.

That a good index by an author is the best of all is probably true, but while the publishers' traditional method of arranging for indexes prevails, it seems to give rise to quite a number compiled by authors which are far from good. It also causes publishers, from time to time, to ask indexers to patch up indexes supplied by authors which have turned out to be inadequate. It is unwise to try to do this, and much more advisable to
offer to compile a fresh index from scratch, a process which in any case may take very little longer. An even more hazardous enterprise, on which I recently embarked for the first and last time, is to fill in the page numbers for references supplied by the author.

Improving standards

In general, however, it seems that the standard of indexes in England has been gradually improving. It is inadvisable to generalise, but a study of indexes of fifty years ago would, I believe, bear this statement out. It is no mere chauvinism, also, to say that the standard in this country is higher than that which obtains in most others.

There is, of course, a lot more ground to cover before there is real cause for satisfaction. An index, unfortunately, is not finished when it is despatched to the publisher. Indeed, to some of us it seems that it is only then starting out on a long journey. One of the tasks which the indexer is uniquely placed to undertake is the tidying-up of inconsistencies in the text. Even the most methodical proof-reader may fail to notice that the same person’s name is spelt variously on p. 4 and p. 400. But the indexer who is doing his job cannot fail to see it. He will, of course, report this, and any similar inconsistencies, to the publisher, who, if he is true to form, will express his gratitude. The indexer should therefore not be too disheartened if, as is normally the case, he finds, when the book is published, that no notice whatsoever has been taken of his well-meant corrections.

The fact is that probably by the time the index is received, all the rest of the book is beyond recall. The same explanation perhaps holds good over the question of proofs of the index. Till very recently the indexer received proofs as a matter of course. Then the supply, with some publishers, tended to dry up. Finally, the position has been reached, in my own case, where, out of just over a hundred indexes compiled in the last two years, I have been sent proofs of two only. Perhaps this is a minor point. The indexer may well feel that reading proofs is just an additional task of which he is happy to be rid. But looking at the subject in wider perspective, this now almost universal practice of failing to send proofs to the indexer can hardly make for good indexes.

Remuneration

One leaves to the last the question of remuneration for indexes. Possibly this is because one still has a lurking feeling that some people think that this is not quite a nice subject to discuss. It is linked with old memories of visits to specialists when one left a cheque for five pounds very discreetly because the subject of fees was not raised between professional people. If indexers want the matter still to be conducted on such lines, it is certainly to the advantage of publishers. But I do not believe that they do.

After all, when everything has been said about raising the standard of indexes, it must be conceded that the great majority of indexers join the Society of Indexers for two purposes: (i) to obtain indexing work, and (ii) to get as much money for this work as they have a right to expect. If the Society can be criticised, I believe that it is because it has not done as much to help its members to fulfil the second of these purposes as it could have done.

The general position of indexing in this country to-day is a puzzling one. On the one hand, publishers say that they have too few good indexers available to meet their requirements. On the other, one knows of many well-qualified indexers who cannot get enough work. The first step towards a solution seems to be a framer and more open discussion between publishers and indexers (or the Society, as representing indexers) in which all the questions of fees and conditions should be raised without inhibition.

In spite of many obstacles, there has been much progress. All that is now required to make a real movement forward in the provision of good indexes is the breaking-down of one or two hedges and the readiness on all sides to get together and examine their problems openly.