How long should an Index take?

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The Society was asked last year for guidance on the rate at which an indexer should aim to work. It appears that, as the hours pile up (at £1 per hour!), some indexers become conscience-stricken, feeling that the final sum due is going to be altogether too exorbitant. So many hurry up, skimping the latter part of the work, while others cease to charge, giving—say—five, ten, or fifteen hours free and thus, of course, undercutting their colleagues.

Good Technique Saves Time

Some of the trouble could be avoided if indexers followed the course recently advocated in The Indexer (Vol. 7, No. 3) by Mrs. Margaret Anderson. Her advice was to divide the total number of entries allowed for the printed index by the number of pages of text to be indexed, thus arriving at the number of index entries possible per page of text. If, for instance, the index can comprise 1,100 single-line entries and the text consists of 275 pages, then one must work to 4 single-line entries per page.

The point of this easy exercise is to prevent oneself from writing out 10, 15, or 20 entries per page when only 4 entries can be accommodated in the index. Over-indexing of this order certainly does waste time. Equally certainly, one ought not to charge the publisher (or author) for one's own incompetence.

Seeking A Standard for Comparison

In order to give a standard for comparison, the Society asked half-a-dozen very experienced indexers to state how long they had taken for a few recent indexes and to specify how the total time had been allotted to the various stages of each index. Those approached responded most generously but it proved almost impossible to distil any general results from the material supplied. The reason was the large number of imponderables. Two books on the same subject, for instance, and with the same number of pages, may vary widely in difficulty of text; or the length of index permitted may be quite different; or the indexers themselves may vary in temperament even though both are well known for competence and efficiency. The material showed, for example, that one indexer had taken nine hours for a book of 245 pages on Religion while another had taken fourteen hours for a 283-page book on the same subject. Again, one indexer took 29 hours for a school history book of 157 pages, while another took 15 hours for a history book of 160 pages. (An interesting light is cast on the time-factor by the publisher who warmly congratulated the indexer who took 29 hours on the speed with which the job was done. He was not being sarcastic.)

Since it is not possible to draw general conclusions, it seems best just to give some excerpts from the material received. These show what is in fact being done by some of the best indexers in the profession and contain a good deal of information which should prove useful, especially to less experienced members of the Society.

First excerpt

This indexer sent a table covering the only four indexes for which a breakdown was available showing the hours spent on each process but he also sent a second table, for a few more indexes, without a detailed breakdown. Here are the tables:

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The indexer commented further as follows:

'The wide differences in the amount of time spent on making cards, relative to the size of the indexes, are due to different methods of work. I use three methods:

(1) Straightforward but very detailed indexes: paper slips typed, without any pre-reading. Slips sorted after all are typed. This method I used for medical indexes. It's the most economical in time.

(2) Cards written, without pre-reading, and sorted as the index progresses. Used for most general books where I can decide on subject entries as I go along.

(3) Book read right through first, entries being marked. Then cards written and sorted as work progresses. This is the most time-consuming, and is used for difficult work, like the books on psychology and literary criticism.

Sometimes I even change method part way through an index, when I've got the pattern of headings settled, and so save time on the rest of the index.'

Second excerpt

This indexer supplied a great deal of information, in statistical form, from which the following table has been compiled: