Indexing Technical Books

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There are two basic kinds of indexes that may be constructed for technical books: 1, a descriptive word index; 2, a topical index. A topical index is best for a work that covers many topics, a descriptive index is best for a work covering only one topic.

There are no special rules for indexing technical books that are different from the rules for indexing other kinds of books. However, strict adherence to the general rules of indexing is of the greatest importance.

The first thing the indexer must do when indexing a technical book is to establish an outline of the topic or topics covered in the book. He must know the scope of the book and the author's intention.

The table of contents in a technical book is usually detailed and specific enough to be used as a basis for the outline for the index. Therefore, prior to beginning actual indexing, the indexer should read the table of contents carefully, read the introductory portions of the work including any definitions or exclusions, and then re-read the table of contents.

This will enable the indexer to decide on the emphasis needed in the index and to establish, in his mind, groups or topics which he will want to establish. Two or more related index lines constitute a group, although the indexer should only rarely establish an independent group for a topic that would have five or less index lines, when working from the scheme or table of contents. Perhaps 80 per cent of the lines in the index may come directly from the table of contents if it is a good one.

A PARTISAN INDEX

Mr. Kenneth Rose ('Albany' of the Sunday Telegraph), who was a guest at the luncheon given by the Society in December 1971 to mark the 80th birthday of its President, reports that a 'splendidly provocative sweep of British history from the Roman occupation to European entry', was published by Weidenfeld in September. The author is Paul Johnson. 'If Gibbon has the more memorable footnotes, Johnson scores with his index, compiled by himself. Under "English characteristics": Anti-clericalism, attachment to royal showmanship, belief in their divine mission, bellicosity, blind prejudice, capacity for muddle, double standards on sex, missed opportunities, racialism, snobbery, unchanging sense of humour . . . "

Hardly necessary to add that for five years the author edited the New Statesman.'