How to recognise a good Index
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Discusses criteria for evaluating printed subject indexes, based on those used as guidelines by the Wheatley Medal selection committee. Some common faults in indexes are mentioned. The intention of the article is to suggest a method of assessing indexes which can be applied by anyone who needs to do this, as well as to indicate what the characteristics are of an outstanding index.

It has been initially gratifying to note that in recent years the number of indexes entered for the Wheatley Medal seems to provide evidence that the compilation of high-quality indexes in Britain is a thriving activity. However, it has subsequently been disappointing to find after only a brief preliminary examination that several of these indexes are not outstanding in any way. This article has been written in an attempt to show how a good index can be recognised. The criteria discussed are those which serve as guidelines for the Wheatley Medal award. The comments are the author’s personal views, and the article is in no way an official statement on behalf of the Wheatley Medal selection committee. It is hoped that its publication may encourage nominations for the Wheatley Medal, but it is intended to serve also as a guide to anyone who has occasion to assess the quality of a printed subject index.

The Wheatley Medal is awarded for an outstanding index. This is perhaps not sufficiently appreciated, and there may be some who regard it as the reward for a perfect index. It is unlikely that a perfect index, in the sense of one that is universally recognised as being incapable of improvement, has been or will be compiled. Outstanding indexes certainly exist, good indexes are numerous, but there are unfortunately many indexes which are of indifferent quality or downright inadequate. How can an index be placed correctly, after a brief examination, within this spectrum? Several criteria will be put forward and discussed, of which some are objective in nature, while others—a majority—involve some degree of subjective assessment. Some are concerned with features which inevitably occur in all indexes (such as length of the index and the arrangement of entries in it). Others relate to features which are not necessarily present in every index (such as an introductory note). Thus, not all of these criteria will apply in every case, and the odd fault under any of them will not invariably disqualify from the highest grading. Shortcomings under several headings are a clear indication that an index is not in the top class.

The order in which the various criteria are considered can be varied according to circumstances and personal preference. An early indication of a good index can be found without even examining a single index entry, by considering the length of the index in pages as a proportion of the number of pages in the work indexed. If this proportion is less than five per cent it is unlikely that the index can be sufficiently detailed. However, due regard should be paid to the format of the index. If it is set in two or more columns to a page, the proportion may fall below five per cent without necessarily indicating insufficiently detailed indexing. Another point to watch for is whether the work indexed includes a significant number of pages of illustrative or tabulated matter, which would thus call for a comparatively small number of index entries. Regardless of the size of the work being indexed, it is reasonable to assume that any index which amounts to about fifty pages or more deserves further scrutiny.

In turning attention to the index itself, probably the first item to claim attention will be the introductory note, if there is one. Points which should always be noted include a statement of what the location references refer to, if this is not page numbers; the meaning of any abbreviations which occur in the index; the significance of variations in type-faces within entries, such as the use of bold numerals for major references or of italic numerals for illustrations. Any deliberate limitations of coverage should be explained, such as the exclusion of references to illustrations and appendices, or the omission of entries for topics which are mentioned only in passing in the text. It is advisable to carry out some spot checks to make sure that the indexer has consistently done what the introductory note proclaims. So far as statements of limitations are concerned, if these are reasonable in relation to the work being in-
dexed then the indexer should be credited for the decision and for drawing attention to it. Conversely, if, after further examination of the index limitations are found which have not been noted, this may be counted a serious fault. As well as considering the content of an introductory note, attention should be paid to its style. A good introductory note will be clear and well expressed, without an unnecessary word.

In forming a judgment on the quality of an index several characteristics must be taken into account. The first of these relates to the coverage of significant items in the text. An obvious difficulty arises in determining the criteria for deciding which items in a given text are significant, and the assessor must be on his guard against an inclination to apply standards which are too closely based on subjective criteria. What were the author's objectives in writing the book? For what level of readership is it intended? How has the author organised his text? What kinds of information are conveyed by the work, and to whom will the information be of use? These are the kinds of question the assessor should continually be asking, and to obtain answers to them it will often be necessary to peruse introductory sections and examine contents lists, as well as selecting sample passages in the work for particular scrutiny and checking against the index. If you have special knowledge of an aspect of the subject-matter of the work, the appropriate section may be selected for this scrutiny. Bear in mind, however, that the object of the exercise is to see how good the indexer's judgment of significant items is, and not to find out how well the author treats the subject. In other words, it is possible to have a good index to an indifferent work. The Conditions of Award for the Wheatley Medal stipulate that 'the index must include all headings that common sense would expect, and scholarship need to find in an index'. It is important to take a broad view of the needs of scholarship, and particularly to be aware of the possible value of certain information contained in a work within one field of learning to scholars working in another field. For instance, some otherwise very good indexes to scholarly editions of the correspondence of great men give little or no assistance to scholars whose interest lies in ascertaining, through the recorded views of notable personalities, what attitudes were taken in relation to contemporary problems and issues, which might range from copyright through the conduct of the Crimean War to cremation. Thus, although indexers, and judges of indexes, must take account of the readership the author set out to address, they must also consider the possible wider uses of the resulting work.

In indexing the items which have been selected as worth an entry, has the indexer used appropriate and well-chosen terms in a consistent manner? The appropriateness of the chosen terms should be assessed with reference to the nature of the work and to its intended readership. For instance, in the case of a work dealing with natural history, will the intended readership be more likely to approach it through popular or scientific names of species? In a historical work, are contemporary or current forms of names more useful? Have the indexer's decisions been consistently applied? If inconsistencies do occur it may be because the author has been inconsistent, but in such cases the indexer should make sure that a user can rely on the index to be free from such discrepancies. Consistent use of terms in the 'language' of an index is a greater virtue than rigid adherence to the author's usage. Apart from the question of inconsistencies, is the indexer's choice of terms generally based on those used by the author, or has he preferred terms which perhaps more closely relate to current general use? Some indexes are particularly likely to be used as access points by readers who expect the work to contain information they need, while others are likely to be used more often as a convenient way of finding again parts of a text which has already been read. Many indexes need to be capable of satisfying both kinds of users, and hence in choosing index terms the indexer should have regard both for the author's terminology and for that in common use. To test this the assessor may put himself in the position successively of a reader already familiar with the work and of one who seeks via the index information about topics which may be reasonably assumed to be treated in the work.

Conflicts between variant terminologies can be resolved by careful provision of cross-references. Scrutiny of any index should include an examination of the network of cross-references which may serve to connect related topics and to lead the user from an unused term to its synonym, or from an inverted form of a multi-word term to the form in which it it entered. It is best to spend a little time looking particularly at such references as appear, trying to deduce the basis on which they have been supplied, and then by checking examples of references suggested by certain headings to see if they have in fact been
provided. How easy would it be for a reader with little prior knowledge of the relationship between various aspects of a subject, all of which are dealt with in the work, to find all the relevant headings in the index? While it is more common to come across an index which has an insufficient provision of cross-references, it is also possible to find the occasional example of an index which has an unnecessarily generous provision of references. If the cross-reference structure gets in the way of the user, for instance by diverting him along unprofitable byways where he will find very little relevant information, this is as much a fault as failing to provide cross-references which would be helpful. Another common failing in this area is the provision of 'see' references instead of duplicate entries where there are only a very small number of locations to be recorded, for which it is not necessary to provide subheadings to differentiate between them.

The extent to which subheadings are used to prevent the occurrence of large numbers of undifferentiated location references should be separately considered. If there are numerous examples of strings with more than about six undifferentiated references the index is almost certainly not going to achieve an outstanding grading. This may not, of course, be the indexer's fault, since if there have to be limitations in space allocated for an index it is natural to achieve this as much as possible by cutting out subheadings rather than by leaving entries out altogether. From the user's point of view, however, it is definitely a disadvantage not to be able to select from the index the one or two out of perhaps a dozen location references which are relevant to his needs. This scrutiny should also embrace headings which have been extensively subdivided. Do the subheadings clearly define the aspect of the main topic which is dealt with at a particular location? According to what principle are they arranged? It is sometimes found that the organisation of subheadings under a heavily subdivided heading is by a pseudo-classification, or in an order which corresponds to the order of the first occurrence of each aspect in the text of the indexed work. The assessment of the index for a work about a single subject or the biography of an individual person will be much influenced by the treatment of that subject or person in the index. In theory, a book about a single subject need have no, or only a very few, entries under the heading for that subject, the various aspects dealt with being scattered under headings appropriate to each aspect. The index to a biography is far more likely to have a lengthy entry, sometimes extending over several pages, for the biographee. How easy is it for users of the index to find a particular reference in such a long entry? In cases where the arrangement of subheadings follows the order of treatment of the text it may be concluded that the resulting sequence has more use as an aide-mémoire to the author than for many of the book's users.

How well does the index serve its text? This question has been an underlying one during the examination of various characteristics which have been discussed above. Can all significant items of information in the text be located by any reasonably intelligent person through use of the index? Are there any signs of bias in the index, such as uneven treatment of different subjects? Are there inconsistencies of any kind? Deliberate variations in the treatment of subjects which have been explained in an introductory note may be acceptable, provided they are reasonable. It is also appropriate to consider under this head cases in which two or more indexes, or separate sequences of entries are provided. Does this serve the text more effectively, and is it more convenient for users, than a single sequence? It may be generally helpful to have separate indexes of persons, places and subjects for a large-scale work, but in some instances it is doubtful whether the user should be required to select the appropriate index before he can even begin to look for the headings that are relevant to his enquiry.

In the process of carrying out checks of the kind suggested in the preceding paragraphs it may already have become clear that the location references are always accurate. If there is any doubt on this point some further spot checks should be made, working from the index to the text in every case. Inaccuracies in location references are a particularly serious fault, and an inaccurate page number not only renders the entry to which it is attached completely useless but casts doubt over the reliability of the entire index. The occasional very slight error, such as the citation of page 59 for an entry indexing an item of information which actually turns up in the first few lines of page 60, may be overlooked. Such instances are probably due to a reallocation of type by the printer after the return of the page proofs from which the indexer took the location references. But if, as sometimes happens, there is a large number of entries all with location
references one or two page numbers removed from the correct location the index cannot be given an outstanding rating, even though the error may in no way be the indexer's fault. Another point to check while examining the accuracy of location references is whether they are consistently given with each related entry. It is surprising how often it is found that comparison of location references attached to two related entries reveals that a common core of shared location references is accompanied by further references attached to one of the headings only. This casts doubt on the indexer's consistency and thoroughness.

It will also have become apparent by this time how the entries in the index are arranged. It has been pointed out that alphabetical order is not the only arrangement that may be followed. Whatever principles are followed, is the arrangement accurate? And are the principles consistently followed? A misplaced entry is little more use than no entry at all, but an occasional lapse involving a single entry is likely to be less serious than an incorrectly filed sequence of entries. Once more, slight faults are not necessarily attributable to the indexer's carelessness. The printer may have chosen to bring forward a short entry to fill a space at the end of a column so as to avoid splitting a longer entry.

In each of the assessments made so far, attention has been focused on the content, structure or organisation of the index. It is now time to consider critically its presentation on the printed page. Many otherwise good indexes fall at this hurdle, and yet again this may not be the indexer's fault, if he has not been permitted to instruct the printer in the layout which should be adopted. The effective and consistent use of different typefaces, spacing, indentation and punctuation can make a notable contribution to the ease of use and intelligibility of an index. What use has been made of them in the index under scrutiny? Where it has been necessary to carry over entries under a particular heading to another page or column, has the heading (and subheading if one is involved) been repeated at the head of the continuation sequence? This seems such an obvious thing to do, yet it is often not done.

The presence of unusual or original features in an index should always be taken into account. Some indexes serve also as vehicles for conveying additional information, not given in the text, about some of the subjects indexed. An index which has been compiled later than the work indexed, e.g. for a reprint edition, may correct errors in the original work. Special problems may have called for the development of special solutions, for instance, in the index to the proceedings of a committee of enquiry which has to cope with questions, answers, written and oral evidence, and the ensuing report and recommendations. Unusual procedures may have been used in its preparation, for instance involving the use of mechanical aids. In all such cases it is not simply the fact that an unusual or original feature is present that is to be noted. Their suitability and the success they achieve in relation to the text that is indexed should be assessed.

The criteria which have been discussed above in the context of indexes to books apply also to the indexes to serial publications. For the latter there are also certain other points to consider during an assessment. In the case of indexes to single volumes of a serial, one of the important considerations is continuity throughout successive indexes. Can they be used satisfactorily to support a search for references to a particular topic over a period of time? There are bound to be instances of a change in terminology. How have these been dealt with? Can the user get from the old term to the new one when searching forwards in time, and from the new term to the old one when searching backwards in time? In many serials certain sections contain numerous brief news items, of which there may be twenty or more on a page. Does the index make it easy to find the particular item to which the index entry refers, for instance by using the cross-heading captions as subheadings in the index? An introductory note, explaining the treatment of special features, is particularly likely to be needed in a serial index. Among special features one which should often be present is a list of issue pagings and dates for the benefit of those who may not have individual issues bound. The other type of serial index to be considered here is the cumulative index, which will almost certainly be issued as a separate volume. Here the problems of maintaining continuity may be more easily observed. Again, the treatment accorded to topics which have been affected by changing terminology should be noted. There are likely to be some headings which cover very large numbers of references. Have they been effectively subdivided? For all serial indexes, as for book indexes, their suitability for use by any reader to locate within the text any item which may reasonably be expected to be sought is ultimately the basis for recognising a good index.
Appended to this article is a list of the 15 special criteria which are employed as guidelines by the Wheatley Medal selection committee. If there is difficulty in deciding whether an index is really outstanding, or if it is desired to determine which of several indexes should rank highest, it is possible to use this list to award marks on a four-point scale. Allot three marks for each criterion which achieves a rating of 'good' in the index under consideration, two marks for those which have an 'average' rating, one for those rated 'poor', and no marks for any criterion which does not apply. There is potentially a highest score of forty-five, which is unlikely to be achieved, but any index which gets a score above thirty on this scale will probably be outstanding in at least some respects. However, it is perfectly possible for an index which achieves a score lower than thirty to be successful when judged by a sixteenth criterion, not on the list, which recognises that a proven record of successful use to retrieve information from the text is a sufficient measure of a good index.

Appendix

Criteria used as guidelines by the Wheatley Medal Selection Committee

1. If there is an introductory note, it should be clear and well expressed.
2. The index must be accurate. The location numbers given in the index must tally with the text.
4. Where related entries in the index are each given location references, these must be consistent.
5. An index must have enough subheadings to avoid strings of undifferentiated location references.
6. An index must be arranged in correct alphabetical or other order.
7. Items and concepts in the text must be represented in the index by appropriate, well-chosen terms.
8. The terms must be chosen consistently.
9. There must be enough cross-references to connect related items in the index.
10. There must be cross-references to relate out-of-date or idiosyncratic terms in the text to those in current use.
11. The layout must be clear and help the user.
12. An index must be comprehensive (though certain limitations on comprehensiveness may be allowable if clearly explained) and neither scanty nor unnecessarily full.
13. The index should serve the text and not be a vehicle for expressing the indexer's own views and interests.
14. If the index departs from conventions the departures should be explained in the introductory note.
15. Abbreviations, etc., should also be explained.

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This year there were twenty-three submissions for the award and it is good to be able to record that overall the quality of the indexes was higher than it has been in some earlier years.

On this occasion, the Library Association/Society of Indexers Joint Committee had the unenviable task of deciding whether a particularly fine index was, in fact, eligible for the award. The work was The laws of the Lagos State of Nigeria* (edited by Sir L. Brett) in eight volumes: reluctantly the Committee decided that it could not be considered as it was not first published in the United Kingdom, which is one of the conditions of the award.

However, the Committee had no doubts as to which was the best of the indexes which were eligible. It was Mrs Margaret Anderson’s for Judith Butcher’s book Copy-editing: the Cambridge handbook (Cambridge University Press, 1975). It is not a lengthy index nor is it particularly elaborate nor innovatory, but it is thoroughly appropriate to the book and its likely readership. The Committee found it difficult to fault; it is well laid out and uses sub-heads economically and sensibly. We could discover no significant omissions, the page references were full and accurate. The only faults we could find were occasional cases of items within the text which seemed to deserve an index entry and some under-use of cross-referencing; but there were not many instances of either.

It is not just a competent index: it is an excellent one which fully deserves the award of the Medal. We hope that Mrs Anderson’s work will serve as a model for other indexers who have not achieved the high standards which her work exemplifies.

Michael Wace,
Chairman,
Wheatley Medal Committee.

*Compiled by Vice-President A. R. Hewitt.