The alphabetization of prepositions in indexes

Hans H. Wellisch
Associate Professor, College of Library and Information Services, University of Maryland

Two recent textbooks on indexing, one American, by Harold Borko and Charles L. Bernier,¹ and one British, by the late G. Norman Knight,² state in more or less categorical terms that conjunctions and prepositions (or, as Knight prefers to call them in one passage, 'unimportant words'³ should be disregarded in the alphabetical arrangement of subentries to index headings. The Borko-Bernier book says: 'All prepositions are alphabetized, letter by letter, except those starting modifications. To omit prepositions would cause ambiguity and confusion.'⁴ [My emphasis.] Conjunctions are not mentioned in this context but the index to the book makes it clear that the conjunction ‘and’ (practically the only one being used as the first word of a modifying subheading) is also to be disregarded. Their index disregards all prepositions at the beginning of subheadings, including ‘among’, ‘between’, ‘from’, ‘into’, and ‘with’, whereas Mr Knight is more restrictive: ‘. . . the conjunctions ‘and’ and ‘as’ and the prepositions ‘for’, ‘in’, ‘of’, ‘to’ with which the subheading may start, must be ignored in determining its alphabetical order . . . ’⁵ [My emphasis.] (Incidentally, ‘as’ is not a conjunction when used in the sense of ‘in the role, capacity or function of’ which is the only sense in which it can appear as the leading word in a subheading; the Oxford English Dictionary considers it to be an adverb, while the American Heritage Dictionary says that it is a preposition.)

The two books thus differ in what they consider to be ‘unimportant words' but both leave students of indexing with the impression that the alphabetization of modifying subheadings is a generally accepted custom, and Knight even implies that it is mandatory. At the same time, both books stress the necessity of strict alphabetizing without any exceptions, apparently not being aware that their instruction regarding the treatment of prepositions runs directly counter to that elementary ground rule.

Actually, among contemporary guides and standards that deal with the alphabetical arrangement of index entries, there seems to be only one which prescribes such irregular treatment of prepositions, namely the Manual of Style⁶ issued by the University of Chicago Press (hereafter referred to as the Manual): ‘18.54 In alphabetizing headings of subentries, introductory articles, prepositions, and conjunctions are disregarded’. (p. 416).

It is probably this source that inspired the authors of the two books to make their statements. However, none of the following textbooks, guides, and national standards published since 1969 prescribes or even mentions separate treatment of prepositions and conjunctions.*

In chronological order, they are:


Contains no specific rules on conjunctions and prepositions.


The chapter on alphabetization, written by Knight himself, contains no reference to any special treatment of prepositions, nor do other chapters make any allusion to that topic.


Though both prepositions and the alphabetization of index entries are dealt with, the two are not linked in any way, and no special rule is given for the filing of subentries beginning with a preposition.


‘That [alphabetical] order must be determined by the first word of each modification, whether or not it is the most significant word.’ (p. 101) [My emphasis.]


Neither section 6.2 'Arrangement', nor section 7.2.3 'Arrangement of subheadings or modifiers and their locators' mention any exceptional treatment of prepositions.


Section 6.2.3.1 'Letter-by-letter and word-by-word alphabetization' states unequivocally: 'No matter

*(Initial articles play an insignificant role in the alphabetizing of index entries because they are normally inverted, as in 'Tempest, The'; they are unlikely to be the first word of a subentry.)
which system of alphabetization is chosen, care should
be taken to group in one alphabetical sequence all the
subheadings that qualify a single heading'. [My em-
phasis.] Section 6.2.3.2 makes the alphabetization of
prepositions optional only when they appear within the
name of an organization or in titles which begin with
the same word. This, of course, has nothing to do with
the issue discussed here. Consistent with the provisions
of the standard, its own index does not disregard any
prepositions, nor do indexes to other British Standards,
e.g. those to the schedules of the Universal Decimal
Classification (BS 1000).

It is therefore difficult to understand why Mr Knight
found it necessary to make such a peremptory statement
in his otherwise exemplary textbook, the more so since
he cites BS 3700 frequently as an authority. It is perhaps
less difficult to explain why such a practice should have
been considered at one time by indexers. The rule to
disregard certain initial words in subheadings made its
earliest appearance in the 6th edition of the Manual,
published in 1919. Its rule 240g stated: 'In indexing
general terms the alphabetical arrangement of sub-
divisions is much more useful than the numerical order
of page numbers; but in so arranging such material only
the first principal word should be taken, i.e. adjective,
noun, verb, adverb, not the article, conjunction or
preposition.' The rule thus originated at a time when
alphabetical arrangement of subentries was apparently
not at all common, and it was then perhaps something
of an improvement. It was clearly based on the
assumption that index users would not be much helped
by subheadings beginning with a preposition, and
would rather look for the word following it as being the
one that actually modifies the main heading. This
assumption, like so many others in indexing and
cataloguing, was of course made without any attempt to
find out how indexes are actually used, for what pur-
pose, and by whom. It was pure and simple armchair
reasoning by some anonymous editor who set himself
up as an authority. The rule, though worded differently
in subsequent editions, remained intact until the present
12th edition, compiled in the late 1960s, when user
studies were still in their infancy, and computerized
filing of entries had just begun but had not yet been
applied to index production on a large scale.

Even today we know relatively little about the best
form in which indexes are to be presented so as to be of
optimal usefulness.7 What user studies did find out (and
what has been stated, both explicitly and implicitly in
the two national standards on indexing) is that people
expect all entries to be in strict alphabetical order.
Anything else 'would cause ambiguity and confusion'
to quote Borko-Bernier again, who for some reason
best known to them did not heed their own advice, as
shown in the following excerpt from their index (strictly
alphabetical parts of the array of subheadings have
been omitted).

Cross-references
between adjacent, nearby, plural and singular
headings
application on first survey
avoidance by use of nomenclature
blind, in index evaluation

in index evaluation
interfiling with index cards
inverted cross-reference
justification of, inverted cross-references in
in KWIC concordances
making and use in or out of index
from multiword headings to inverted headings
protection against being discarded
among synonyms
in thesauri

Most people not specifically trained in using an index
arranged in this manner would probably think that at
least the first and last but one subheading had been
misplaced by the printer, and that some of those
beginning with 'in' had also been jumbled. Knight
points out that 'even the more erudite are vague about
the order of the alphabet'9 and do not remember the
exact order of the letters of the alphabet. Most people
have enough to do to sort out strictly alphabetically
arranged sequences without having to jump, as it were,
back and forth between the left margin of the graphic
display and whatever shifting point to the right where
the actually 'sought' word is to be found. Research on
eye movements during reading and the scanning of lists
has shown that any disturbance of expected visual
arrangement is confusing and slows down the
sequential scanning of entries.9 Thus, contrary to the
underlying assumption of some unknown indexer in the
distant past, a pseudo-alphabetical arrangement of
index entries is quite counter-productive.

The Manual's rule is actually an attempt to introduce
a (concealed) classification, according to which there are
'important' and 'unimportant' words in index
entries, their 'importance' being decided by their
position in a phrase as well as by their grammatical
role. Besides being untenable from a linguistic point of
view, this practice has long since been condemned by
expert indexers such as J. E. Holmstrom:

'If what ought to be a straight alphabetical sequence
of terms denoting different things is interrupted by
pockets of attempted systematic classification of the
things themselves—'concealed classifications' as
they have aptly been called—the only effect is to
bewilder the user of the index by leaving him in
doubt as to where he ought to look for what he
wants.'10
The task of making a good index is difficult enough, and using one is perhaps not always easy either. But the tasks of compiler and user alike need not be complicated unnecessarily by pseudo-alphabetical arrangements that are intelligible only to their inventors. It may be mentioned in passing that the indexes to The Indexer alphabetize all subheadings uniformly, and that one of the best and most elaborate recent indexes to an exceedingly complex work, namely the index to the Anglo-American Cataloguing Rules, 2nd ed., compiled by Ken Bakewell, also follows normal alphabetizing practice.

An additional argument against any non-standard alphabetizing of words is the increasing use of computers for the alphabetical arrangement of entries. This is one of the things computers really do much better and faster than human beings, and with fewer errors. Though it is not impossible to write appropriate programs that instruct computers to skip a prescribed list of words in subentries and to sort by whatever word follows, it is both costly, error-prone and entirely unnecessary.

The antiquated and dysfunctional rule to disregard prepositions and conjunctions in the alphabetizing of subentries should be eliminated from future editions of the Manual, and prospective writers of textbooks on indexing should heed the rules of the national standards so as to train indexers in the proper arrangement of complex entries.

It would also be desirable if the Societies of Indexers would take an official stand on this issue by endorsing specifically the relevant provisions of their respective national standards.

References
3. Ibid., p. 124.
5. Knight, op. cit., p. 57.

Welcome ALPSP
The Association of Learned and Professional Society Publishers was founded in 1972, and now boasts 96 corporate members ranging from Aslib to The Yorkshire Archaeological Society and including The Society of Indexers. (ALPSP Directory of members and members' publications and services. London: ALPSP, 1980. 90pp. 21cm. £3.) The Association's aims are to promote and improve communication and co-operation between learned and professional organizations in all matters relating to publications, and to organize joint activities and studies. A regular bulletin is circulated to members. Meetings of all sorts—business, seminars and workshops—have proved valuable to members both for their content and for the individual contacts established. Particularly relevant to our own Society is the Small Publishers Group, which considers all problems, editorial, production and distribution, of these members. A seminar on indexing is planned for 1981.

* * *

Peterborough of The Daily Telegraph (17 Jan. 1980) reports page 116 of the index of the current standing orders of the House of Commons as beginning:

Scottish Grand Committee
Scottish Standing Committees
Seats: see under Members...