

# LETTERS

## The alphabetization of prepositions

May I, in my personal capacity and *not* officially as Chairman of SI, cross swords with my learned and respected friend, Hans Wellisch? In 'The alphabetization of prepositions in indexes', (*The Indexer*, 12 (2) Oct 80), he carves to ribbons 'the antiquated and dysfunctional rule to disregard prepositions and conjunctions in the alphabetizing of subentries'. Completely watertight his arguments are not, though highly persuasive; neither is his evidence entirely accurate.

He says, for example, that 'the indexes to *The Indexer* alphabetize all subheadings uniformly,' implying that subheads are invariably sequenced as he considers they should be. Not so. Vol. 10 index ignores these troublesome little words: in several instances, pairs of them ('in a', 'on the', etc). Vol. 7 follows the Wellisch principle, despite lapses ('in' before 'by'), but confuses the issue of 'all-through' consistency by ignoring article *after* preposition ('on the') whilst alphabetizing any article which *begins* a sub-entry. Vol. 5 likewise retains and strictly alphabetizes article (definite and indefinite) as first word of any subhead, whilst transposing—and thus ignoring for alphabetization—in all main headings. *Indexer* indexes lack (more's the pity) the uniformity of alphabetization Hans Wellisch claims to find in them. Also, unhappily, some of them make mincemeat of his footnote that 'initial articles are unlikely to be the first word of a subentry'.

Another source of evidence, the British Standard on *Alphabetical arrangement* (BS 1749:1969), is far too sketchy and superficial to help indexers through any of their genuine problems. The term 'subheadings' appears twice only; it seems to mean 'qualifiers' rather than subheadings as understood by indexers, and to be more or less synonymous with 'subsidiary items', which are referred to with confusing frequency, including three different definitions of meaning. Nowhere is there any mention of the other half of the important Wellisch footnote: 'Initial articles play an insignificant role in the alphabetizing of index entries because they are normally inverted, as in "*Tempest, The*".'

Robert L. Collison, another Wellisch witness, has long made use of the sensible device of thinking up subheadings which do not need introductory connecting words. *Indexers and indexing* has an index of over one thousand entries, and of the high proportion which are subheadings, just four begin with a preposition, none with a conjunction or an article. The same approach has been adopted in *The Indexer's* most recent index (Vol. 11). Apart from 'on' (once), 'with' (once),

and 'of' (twice), all the very numerous subheadings begin with a noun or a defining adjective.

This, it seems to me, is more the sort of ground on which the Societies of Indexers should take a firm stand. Is your preposition (or conjunction, or article) really necessary?

John Ainsworth Gordon,  
London

There seem to be one or two misconceptions in Professor Wellisch's interesting article, 'The alphabetization of prepositions in indexes', which ought not to pass without comment.

Professor Wellisch refers to two books (one of which is Norman Knight's *Indexing, the art of*; I have not seen the other) which advocate the alphabetizing of subheadings by principal words, ignoring any prepositions etc. with which subheadings may begin, and complains that they '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'.

In fact, of course, there are a number of non-alphabetical arrangements that may legitimately be used in an alphabetical index, as Professor Wellisch must be well aware and as Knight certainly explains quite clearly (*Indexing*, pp. 115ff): the conventional arrangement of kings in numerical order, for example. Professor Wellisch was presumably thinking only of casual, unsystematic deviations from alphabetical order; but that does not cover the case of prepositions. To ignore ancillary words that do not indicate the subjects of subheadings is not to create 'exceptions' to the principle of alphabetization, but rather to give a different answer to the question, What should be alphabetized?

Professor Wellisch lists a number of authorities, none of which, he says, 'prescribes or even mentions' the possibility of ignoring prepositions. Authorities whom he did not see fit to list, for some reason, include Judith Butcher, whose *Copy-editing* (Cambridge, 1975, p. 139) makes it clear that prepositions may be ignored, and M. D. Anderson, who states (*Book indexing*, Cambridge, 1971, p. 9) that to ignore prepositions is the 'more usual' method. (Mrs Anderson also (p. 11) makes an important distinction between word-by-word arrangements, in which prepositions tend to be ignored, and letter-by-letter arrangements, in which they tend to be alphabetized. Professor Wellisch, unfortunately, did not find space to mention this distinction.)

The professor's authorities include Knight (ed.), *Training in indexing* (1969), with this comment: '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' (my italics). In fact, A. R. Hewitt's chapter on legal indexing emphasizes (pp. 160-161) that, in this speciality at least, the prepositions should not be alphabetized: the subheadings are to be inverted. (Professor Wellisch, unfortunately, nowhere finds space to mention the possibility of inverting subheadings.) As for Norman Knight's own views as expressed in this book, one has only to look at his index to it to see that the prepositions are consistently ignored.

The recommendation in *Indexing, the art of* is by no means an oddity whose presence in an 'otherwise exemplary' work is 'difficult to understand'. It is a common practice, recognized in the literature, and not without precedent in Norman Knight's own earlier work.

On the merits of the issue, there must be something to be said for alphabetizing important words rather than unimportant ones. The kind of index preferred by Professor Wellisch, in which a number of subheadings beginning 'and' are followed by some more beginning 'in', which in turn are followed by more beginning 'of' and 'on' can be tiresome and confusing. In such an index, the *subjects* of each entry's subheadings—the key ideas that users may have in mind and may actually be looking for—are not in a single alphabetical sequence and can be difficult to find (or easy to overlook).

This whole question is a good deal more complex than Professor Wellisch allows. Like the analogous debate between word-by-word and letter-by-letter, it will not be settled quickly or easily, and we may have to reconcile ourselves indefinitely to the existence of alternative treatments for subheadings, each with its merits and its demerits.

Anthony Raven,  
London

#### Whether to type indexes

My friend A. R. Hewitt writes (April 1980, p. 28) commenting unfavourably on the practice of typing indexes. I have not indexed so many works as he has, but I have been at it for some time and my indexes have invariably been typed.

Some advantages of this are: (1) mistakes (including where the typist has misread my handwriting—and a printer would have done the like) can be spotted and corrected, whereas correcting in proof (if you are sent one!) would be expensive; (2) one has an overview of the whole index, and (a) inelegances or perhaps (b) the

need for an additional cross-reference or two, will come to attention; (3) the actual length of the index can more easily be estimated in typescript than on slips and, if necessary, entries can be struck out to comply with publishers' requirements.

What do other members think?

A. B. Lyons,  
London

I was amazed by A. R. Hewitt's letter about the typing of indexes. When I am working on an index my slips are invariably covered with alterations as well as with notes for myself about cross-references, alternative headings *etc.* Only in the case of the simplest of headings, followed by a small number of page references, do I end up with a neat-looking slip. I cannot imagine being able to send an index to the printer without typing it first.

Clearly there is another breed of indexer that does things differently. How do they do it?

Lucy Pollard,  
London

#### An indexer's worth

Indexing is commonly paid at about the same hourly rate as proof-reading and copy-editing; for instance, the London Freelance branch of the National Union of Journalists quotes £6-£7 per hour for all three of these activities. This is irrational, for the following reason. All three can, of course, be done either well or badly; but whereas good quality of copy-editing depends on obedience to the rules given in a printer's house style manual, and that of proof reading depends mainly on alertness in spotting every error, however trivial, the art demanded of an indexer is of a higher order. It is an art (not a science) in that it depends essentially on making value judgements.

Somewhere between attempting mechanically to index almost every sentence in a text (which is impossible, and would be pointless if it were possible) and the opposite extreme of limiting the index entries to one or two for each chapter of a book or each article in a periodical (which should be called cataloguing rather than indexing), the indexer has to decide, having due regard to the total amount of space allowed him, between those items of information that must necessarily be indexed (or cross-referenced) and those that he must take the responsibility for leaving out.

He must take into account informative, intellectual, aesthetic, moral, technological and other aspects of the text that may be important to readers.

These value judgements can be made only by an individual, human mind, nurtured by wide reading of the subject matter in hand. They cannot be made automatically; for example, by computers, which, not being human, lack common sense and are like the beasts

of the field that have no understanding—however quick and economical they may be for the subsidiary task of discriminating between words and their quasi-synonyms (as distinct from between the concepts the words represent) whose overlaps of meaning have already been defined and coded.

On these grounds, payment for indexing by the hour is unrealistic (as well as difficult to calculate when subject to interruptions, and unfair to indexers whose skill and experience enable them to work faster than others). Payment by length of index makes no allowance for deliberate omissions which take skilled judgement. I consider that rational payment should rather be in proportion to the total number of pages of text that have to be intelligently scanned, understood and *thought about*. My own clients accept this principle.

A publisher unconvinced of the advantage of this method might be persuaded by being supplied with the first draft of an index from which unnecessary references to superfluous page numbers had subsequently been deleted to make room for more useful ones.

J. Edwin Holmstrom,  
West Sussex

#### Assassination by index

I am familiar with guilt by association and accusation by innuendo. Until now I had never thought of assassination by index.

I write; and I am one of that band of writers, dear to your hearts, who have immense respect for the index as a product of professional skill, and wouldn't dream of doing their own. My respect is tinged with fear, for I am aware that the indexer has great power, to select, to associate, to bend the reader's eye and mind to certain priorities, juxtapositions, identifications. This power is almost always exercised with great care and delicacy by the 'proper man' in indexing.

My attention has been drawn to the fact that I get four personal entries in the index—clearly not, by the way, the work of a 'proper man'—to a book (better, I think, un-named here) which purports to be a survey of various organizations on the left tending to undermine the established order. The author and indexer—probably one and the same—remain coyly anonymous; though naming others freely. The work is published by a right-wing fringe group. I hasten to say that I have no party affiliations, have never been active on the left or anywhere else, nor do I write about political matters, or in political journals.

My four page-entries equal those given to the Workers' Revolutionary Party, the Young Communist League and New Society, and narrowly miss a dead

heat with the Socialist Workers' Party and the New Left Review. I just pip at the post, Marxism Today, Ruskin College and the Gulbenkian Foundation (!), hand-somely beat the WEA and the Fabian Society, and leave standing such well-known hotbeds of 'subversion' as Edinburgh University, the OU, and the Isleworth Poly. I am not, you will see, the only victim, but I can assure you that the flavour of the survey is such that four entries in this index constitute dubious publicity. Incidentally, Rock Against Racism is cross-referenced and then forgotten: it is also a careless index, and omissions could for all I know offend as much as inclusion!

Shall I ever be able to sell my house or mate my red setter if I get one, do you think, let alone obtain writing and lecturing commissions? Although this letter is written for fun, I do wish to show that someone outside indexing recognizes the scope for influence which the indexer has. Shall we ever, I wonder, see an index mentioned in libel proceedings?

Joan Sallis,  
Richmond, Surrey

#### The indexer as terrorist

As I was about to board a British Airways plane at Belfast Airport, clutching an index tray and set of proofs to my bosom, I was stopped by the security guards and told I would not be allowed to take the index on the plane with me. I threw a small fit and discovered it was the tray they were objecting to—(a short wooden tray, 6 in. by 8 in., quite innocuous). They suggested I might remove the slips and work on them loose (what fun!): but on appeal to higher authority I was eventually allowed to board the plane, index, tray and all. After all this commotion in the searching queue I was regarded with deep suspicion by my fellow-passengers and nobody sat next to me, allowing me three seats to spread my proofs over . . . it's an ill wind . . .

Perhaps a reader of *The Indexer* could offer a suggestion as to how one may hijack a plane with an index?

Oula Jones,  
London

Please write . . .

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We want to hear from our readers, in all areas. What do you like/dislike about the journal? What would you like to see in it? What can you contribute to it? Please tell us of your problems in indexing, or your solutions; specializations, special circumstances; your ideas about indexing as a profession, and how it is changing in a technologically changing world. Letters and articles of all lengths are all welcome for consideration, and should be sent to the editorial address given in back cover of this journal.

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