The alphabetization of prepositions

Professor Wellisch's main thesis in his article on the alphabetization of prepositions in subheadings (The Indexer 12 (2) Oct 80)—namely, that they should not be disregarded—cannot be allowed to founder before the attacks of Messrs. Gordon and Raven without some sort of defence. The craft of indexing has been bedevilled by the idiosyncratic practices of individual indexers who refuse to accept sensible standardization, and Prof. Wellisch is right to point to the need to give positive advice to students of indexing. It is difficult enough to have to say to such students seeking guidance that there is often more than one legitimate answer to a particular indexing problem, without needlessly increasing the number of instances.

John Gordon points to one or two slips made by Prof. Wellisch, but this surely does not invalidate his main argument. (In any case it is rather naughty of J.G. to try to argue that transposition of an initial article is the same as ignoring it for filing purposes. Not at all. The main reason for transposition is to make alphabetization clear, and one of the planks of my argument for taking every word into account when alphabetizing would be that having established a principle—alphabetical order—one should stick to it as rigorously as possible.)

The problem (of initial prepositions in subheadings) arises because there are still too many indexers who make unnecessarily long, rambling subheadings consisting of actual phrases from the language of the text. I would contend that subheadings should be as short and concise as possible and should serve to set the main heading into an explanatory context (chain-indexing style). They should not necessarily, pace the late, respected G. Norman Knight, 'bear a close grammatical relationship'. The notion that they should perpetuates the inverted heading form which does so much to muddy the waters surrounding this topic. It could be argued that the following is unacceptable (however punctuated):

- prepositions, initial, in subheadings
- and that the next example is not much better:
  - prepositions
  - initial
  - in subheadings

Does not the following perform the task adequately:

- prepositions
- subheadings

An indexer should not allow himself to be deflected from the concepts he is indexing by too heavy a reliance on the words the text uses to clothe those concepts. We are indexing subjects, not words.

A related point for consideration is that an index ought not to attempt to be a précis of the text; it is merely a pointer to information, and the index-user must perforce be prepared to make a further consultation of the text itself.

It would be interesting to know whether the proponents of the 'ignore-the-initial-preposition' argument would apply it to main headings as well as to subheadings. There are many titles that begin with prepositions and conjunctions, and surely no self-respecting index would do other than take account of them. If the said proponents make a distinction between filing main headings and subheadings it might be instructive to hear upon what grounds.

In summary, I would hold that:

(a) John Gordon is right when he suggests that the number of subheadings beginning with a preposition should be severely limited by the application of a better technique in the formulation of subheadings; this, I think, is the main point;

(b) the above being conceded, all other considerations be subordinated in this instance to the desirability of being able to state unequivocally that alphabetical order is being followed.

Geoffrey Dixon,
Ayr

I read recently the article by Hans Wellisch, USA, concerning the alphabetization of prepositions, and subsequent arguments from SI Chairman John A. Gordon. It is irrelevant that he speaks as an indexer and not as the Chairman of The Society. He speaks well.

In my teaching, I urge my students to look again and again for an alternative to beginning or ending a subheading with a preposition, an inverted article, or the connective 'and'. An extraordinary majority of the subheads in conventional, modern indexes don't need to be there. They are not needed most of the time for clarity, as some indexers seem to profess. There are occasions for using these 'small' words to keep from being ambiguous, but those instances are truly few. This is where judgement and good editing come to bear.

There are those who think that the inversion of an article is a must. I think it is not. This is carrying bibliographic citation style into indexing, and most of the time it's not necessary. When dealing with computers, although the mechanical marvels can do almost anything, it is expensive to program an unnatural format.

When there is a river of prepositions, articles, and connectives, it's time for the indexer to look again at the value of the subheading phrase with and without the 'small' problems.

In another letter, Mr. Raven, of London, reiterates Mr Gordon's feelings and adds the comment about the merit of indexing important, not unimportant, words. This is where the indexer must use good judgement in
choosing phrases that modify. I often have a phrase subheading that I edit and re-edit to get the right balance of meaning and typographic display.

The main thing an indexer must think about is guiding the reader. You, as an indexer, are performing a most meaningful service.

In defense of Hans, a compatriot in the American Society of Indexers, he won the first H.W. Wilson Award for the best index of the year in 1979. Truly, he is a fine scholar. Perhaps his views are proving that even professors have critics!

BevAnne Ross, Past President
American Society of Indexers

‘Indexing’ in encyclopaedias

There are two omissions from Hans Wellisch’s interesting article ‘“Indexes” and “indexing” in encyclopaedias’, (The Indexer 12 (3) April 1981, 113-16).

First, he refers to a number of articles in Encyclopedia of library and information science but does not mention my 3½-page article on ‘The Society of Indexers’ in volume 28 of that work.

Secondly, he omits mention of ALA world encyclopedia of library and information services (Chicago: American Library Association, 1980). The 7-column article on ‘Indexing and abstracting’ by Toni Carbo Bearman on pages 243-6 of this displays a marked American bias, especially for a world encyclopaedia.

There are, for example, ten lines on the American Society of Indexers followed by this brief recognition of the parent society: ‘The Society of Indexers is a similar organization in Great Britain. The two societies are formally affiliated and share in publishing a journal, The Indexer’. The sparse bibliography consists of two American books, one of which received mixed reviews from both Dr Wellisch and myself, an American periodical article and an allegedly international ‘kit’ with a definite US bias, which I reviewed unfavourably in The Indexer (12 (1) April 1980, 48-9). There is no mention of any of the standard books on indexing or abstracting by our President, Robert Collison. Finally, Ms Bearman makes the common mistake of referring to PRECIS as Preserved Context Indexing System instead of using its correct name, Preserved Context Index System.

K. G. B. Bakewell,
Liverpool

Whether to type indexes

I am pleased that my letter on the subject of typing indexes (April 1980) has brought forth some replies (April 1981).

A. B. Lyons has a good point in that a typed copy gives an overview of the whole index, but I am still of the opinion that that advantage is far outweighed by the amount of time (and labour) spent in typing—time better employed in the proper editing of slips.

Lucy Pollard is ‘amazed’ by my letter. I am equally amazed that she writes ‘my slips are invariably covered with alterations as well as notes for myself about cross-references, alternative headings etc.’ I fear she makes extra work for herself. It is helpful if cross-references, as they are written, are kept separately and in alphabetical order from the other slips until sorting. Such a separate collection of slips can be used as an aide-mémoire to headings previously selected during the progress of the work. Alternative headings, if not decided upon during indexing, can be noted, for later consideration, on a sheet of paper or in a note book together with other queries and doubts, and not written on the slips.

With some indexing experience and a reasonable knowledge of the subject a choice of words should come naturally. After studying the nature of the work to be indexed the indexer will be able to make up his mind on layout. Positioning of headings, entries and sub-entries on the slips should clearly indicate the desired indentation (in addition to the marking-up of slips before despatch to the printer). If these ‘tips’ are adopted I suggest there should be very little need for later alteration of slips, apart from that required when two or more...
entries deal with the same point and need to be coordinated.

I have recently compiled (with some assistance) and edited an index to the revised laws of one Commonwealth country, consisting of 10,500 pages in 16 volumes. The slips amounted to 38,000; this index was not typed. I mention this to emphasize one of my original points, that if printers are willing to set mammoth indexes from slips they will surely do the same in the case of mini-indexes.

An index made up of legibly and neatly written slips, properly marked-up, needs no typing.

A. R. Hewitt,
Shermanbury, Sussex

As the original contributor to the symposium 'Indexers at work' (The Indexer 11 (4) Oct. 1979, 213-19) whose reference to typing the index drew forth A. R. Hewitt's unfavourable comment (April 1980), I naturally welcome the support of A. B. Lyons and Lucy Pollard, and fully endorse their arguments. To these I would add that typed copy is easier to pack and cheaper to post than bundles of cards; and most important of all, typing the index enables a copy to be kept for reference and as a replacement if—ultimate disaster—the original gets lost.

F. T. Dunn,
Charlbury, Oxford

Lucy Pollard wishes to know how the 'non-typing' breed of indexers go about their work. The explanation is simple—the exercise of a good memory and the careful formulation of entries before putting pen to paper. An additional aid is a sheet of paper kept on one side on which to note down particular headings which have been used and therefore must continue to be used. By these methods the large majority of my slips need little or no alteration at the editing stage and, may I say, there are very few corrections on my proofs.

Since I compiled my first index, in 1940, I have done several hundred indexes and never once have I typed one or even been asked to.

Typing is an added expense and wasteful of time. I have today completed an index of around 8000 slips. To type that would take an inordinate length of time and about 100 sheets of paper. After all, if an index is 'typeable' by a typist it is equally able to be set by the keyboard operator.

Naturally handwriting must be clearly readable, but good handwriting is an art which can be (and should be) cultivated.

Congreve Banwell,
Henfield, Sussex

An indexer's worth—and a copy-editor's

There is a good deal to ponder in Dr Holmstrom's letter (The Indexer 12 (3)), but no comparisons made between indexers and copy-editors will be valid if they are based on his definition of copy-editing. It is less than the whole truth to say that 'good quality of copy-editing depends on obedience to the rules given in a printer's house style manual'.

By copy-editor, I take it, Dr Holmstrom means an editor who prepares an author's typescript for the press, as distinct from one who decides that the book is to be published or who performs any other editorial task. By house style he no doubt means a set of rules or guidelines, decided largely on grounds of taste or custom, which, very broadly speaking, can be applied to most typescripts in a more-or-less routine way. House style covers such matters as the use of italic type, the treatment of numbers (in figures or spelt out), the style for dates (nineteen-twenties, 1920's, 1920s), and so forth. The term is misleading in that on most of these points the choice is limited, and one publisher's house style is not easily distinguished from another's.

Attention to 'house style' makes for easier reading and is not without value, but a good copy-editor will be aware that mistakes made by author or typist are more important.

The typist's mistakes can be anything from simple mis-keying of common words to mis-reading of dates etc. and omission of sizeable chunks of text. Authors are fallible when it comes to correcting their typists' work (even, or perhaps especially, when they have typed the book themselves), just as they are fallible when it comes to proof-reading, and the copy-editor needs to be constantly alert to the possibility that any mistake that a typist can make may have been made at any point.

The mistakes that an author can make are even more varied. Some authors, regrettably, are unreliable when it comes to spelling and grammar; others punctuate badly, allow paragraphs to continue for pages on end, or write in a crude and clumsy way that makes reading a chore. Authors are often obscure or ambiguous, they repeat themselves, and they fail to explain things that a reader cannot be expected to know. Their material is sometimes poorly arranged, and they sometimes create muddles over headings and subheadings, placing them badly or omitting them where they are clearly required. Authors frequently fail to number their footnotes correctly in sequence, and similar difficulties arise over tables, diagrams, appendices and bibliographical references, all of which the copy-editor should check (for internal consistency at least, and sometimes more fully). Authors are often inconsistent in the spelling of names, and in other ways, and they sometimes contradict themselves on points of fact or make erroneous statements that a knowledgeable editor can recognize as such. (Errors commonly arise on topics peripheral to an
author's main subject, topics on which he may know less than some of his readers, including the copy-editor.)

Any of these mistakes and weaknesses can occur at any time (and newcomers to publishing are sometimes surprised by the frequency with which they do occur).

A good copy-editor needs considerable powers of concentration and memory, as well as wide general knowledge and the ability to understand the author's text fully. He should then be capable of noticing at least some of the author's occasional lapses and of detecting the kind of mistake whose absurdity, to the informed and careful reader, may be the only clue to its presence. (A wrong date, for example, may be noticed if the editor is able to see that it is impossible or unlikely; illogicality and lack of sense are sometimes clues to a serious omission by the typist.) A copy-editor needs an impecably sound grasp of English and the ability to write clearly. Finally, he needs judgement when deciding whether something really does need to be changed or whether it is perfectly legitimate although not what he would have written himself; judgement, also, in deciding whether only one correction would be appropriate or whether to raise a query because various ways of correcting a mistake are possible or because something may not need to be altered after all.

Needless to say, there are copy-editors whose work leaves a lot to be desired—some do too little, some do too much—and Dr Holmstrom has my sympathy if he has encountered some of the weaker brethren.

Whether copy-editing is more or less demanding than indexing, I would hesitate to say. It is certainly more varied and far-reaching, and requires the making of value judgements (Dr Holmstrom's term) of several different kinds. Against that, it might be argued that an indexer has to produce a coherent body of new material, fit to occupy several pages of the book, whereas a copy-editor merely tinkers with someone else's work. On some such lines an amusing and perhaps useful debate might be conducted, but it would get nowhere if it sprang from a misunderstanding of what good copy-editing entails.

Anthony Raven,
London

Freelances as Bankers

This letter appeared in The Bookseller (3938) 13 June 1981, reprinted by kind permission of the editor

As a freelance indexer/proof-reader I should like to make a point, of importance to individuals as it is to companies.

I sent two invoices on 9th April; I received a cheque for one on 29th May, and am still awaiting response from the other publisher today, 2nd June. Since 1st January I have had just two accounts paid in 28 days or less.

Bad luck? Inefficiency? It seems likelier that freelances are joining the growing number of 'creditors as bankers'. I know the production of good books is an occupation for gentlemen, but it is surely the unacceptable face of gentillesse to assume that money, to the average freelance, is a means of financing the second racehorse, or toy-money for accountants' Monopoly. In my experience it is more likely to be a substance used for paying the gas-bill, or buying the children's shoes.

Many of us come cheap enough, in all conscience. Perhaps next time we prepare to work into the small hours or to use half a day's work-time on a trip to Bloomsbury to meet a deadline, we should say to ourselves, 'Why worry? What's another week, or two, or three . . . ?' But then it would be the poor editor that suffered again. Better, perhaps, just to send revised invoices at regular intervals, duly augmented by appropriate interest charges. Could some accountant let us know the rate he is pulling in on our money?

Judy Batchelor
London

Success is . . .

an entry in an index

The following extracts from 'Success' by Anthony Burgess appeared in Punch 280 (7317) 4 Feb. 1981, 184-5, and are quoted here by kind permission of the author.

The other day I picked up the latest edition of the Pelican survey of contemporary British fiction and found that I was still missing—along with, I think, John Fowles—from the index. I have never felt any particular chagrin about this neglect, but I would feel happier if the index indicated total neglect in the text itself (there's disgruntled dysphony for you). I mean, when you're totally ignored you know where you stand: you're totally too good for the ignorer . . .

Harold Robbins . . . is, however, not satisfied with having sold a great number of copies of books about sex and violence: he wants to be regarded, on the strength of his evident popularity, as the greatest writer alive. Nobody will so consider him (he is not in any index of any survey that I know of) and this makes him some what sour.

A letter from Robin Hyman (of Bell and Hyman) in The Bookseller of 16 May gives the splendid news that the index to the nine-volume Latham and Matthews edition of Pepys is due to be published in the autumn of next year. The companion volume will appear at the same time. What a delight for Pepys lovers and connoisseurs of indexes alike to look forward to.