Teaching the young to use indexes

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Only those readers who are teacher/librarians or full-time school librarians are likely to find this article wholly relevant to their work. My hope is that indexers generally may be interested to know how their work should be presented and taught to young researchers.

Instruction in the use of book indexing is now only one facet of a wide course given in the best schools throughout the whole period of education. This is referred to as 'User Education' and involves, for teacher and pupil, learning to understand and benefit from the immense amount of technology that now belongs in a 'Library Resource Centre'. Books remain a vital part of this type of library but they are supplemented by numerous audio and visual aids which demand varying amounts of technical skill.

In teaching children indexing principles, absolutely nothing can be taken for granted. Some factors I mention may seem trivial, or blindingly obvious; but I assure you that I have found each of them a stumbling block during the many years I have been an intermediary between children and books.

Incidentally I shall refer to the pupil as 'he' unless the context or problem is exclusively female. So take 'he' to mean both sexes and look for no hidden prejudice!

First teach your alphabet

Before starting to explain how to use any index, make sure the pupil knows the alphabet. It is amazing how often this is overlooked. I have come across pupils in secondary schools who could not write out the alphabet, and others who did not recognize 'A' as the same letter as 'a'—and so on through the alphabet. Working in a school library is an astonishing way of catching those who have slipped through the educational net. When I worked in a secondary school library I had on the wall a large frieze of the alphabet in both upper and lower-case letters, and this was often consulted. In a multi-racial school, of course, learning the English alphabet is of primary importance. In addition it is essential to understand the principles of alphabetization beyond the first letter of a word. Many find this difficult, and it is probably best to start demonstrating with a simple dictionary before embarking on a real index.

Another obvious point must be made clear from the start: the difference between fiction and non-fiction! Personally I think it is better to refer to 'Information books' in a school. 'Non-fiction' is a librarians' term and may confuse less bright children.

Make quite clear the different reading skills required. We expect to read a fiction book from beginning to end, but more often than not we want to extract specific facts from an information book. But on no account discourage a child from reading right through an information book if it is on a subject of particular interest to him!

Make sure the different purposes of the contents list and the index are fully understood. The contents list tells the reader whether the book covers the ground he wants; but it gives no details, and the headings are in the same order as the material in the book. This is useful to anyone wanting to study a subject as a whole, but not much help to anyone wanting specific items of information, e.g. for a topic or project.

Teaching how to use indexes is not very effective if presented as an isolated skill. The best way to do it is to help a pupil who has found a book on a subject he is interested in and wants specific facts. You can then demonstrate how the index makes this possible.

Inadequate materials

New factors have unfortunately emerged which may make teaching the use of indexes rare and difficult. How much real opportunity does the average child nowadays have of handling books in his school work? In these days of savagely slashed book funds and the demise of many a school library service, children are learning from (illegally) photo-copied parts of a book, and are restricted to what is given to them. Alternatively, the teacher may hand out worksheets with questions to answer.

From the point of view of learning to do research, worksheets are preferable. I detest them because I feel there is a danger of a pupil's mindlessly answering questions on a subject in which he has little interest. It is doubtful how much of the information thus gleaned will be retained. But at least completing a worksheet involves finding a book in the library, or classroom collection, and using the index to find the answers to questions.

Children’s use of libraries

In a well organized library, understanding an index will grow from quite early experience in finding books on particular subjects. Librarians use colour coding for the very young. For example, nature books are marked with a
small green label, science books with a blue one, and so on. The colours are purely arbitrary but they make grouping, and finding, similar books easy for even infant pupils (unless they are colour blind). Somewhere in the library there should be a large board with subjects listed in alphabetical order and including the relevant colour as a guide to finding the required subject in the library. A simplified Dewey number can also be shown on book and board. Some schools drop the colour for juniors, leaving only the Dewey number. Others keep on the colours to help less able children. A child accustomed to this system will not be baffled by a simple index.

Is the index good enough?

If you decide to teach a small group, or an individual, how to use an index, first check the index. Assess its real usefulness to an interested pupil or to one preparing a project, and its conformity with (at worst) minimal indexing standards. Indexes to children’s books need to be just as meticulously compiled as those for adults, otherwise a child may be discouraged and end by thumbing vaguely through the book just hoping to find what he wants. The most exasperating thing for our young researcher is probably a heading followed by a ‘string’ of numbers. Turning to many of these page numbers he may find only a brief passing reference to what he wants, and gradually become bored. Individual page references should be separated by commas, but when a piece of information has continuous treatment on several adjacent pages, only the first and last pages should be indicated, thus: 4-7 (not 4,5,6,7, or 4ff. or 4 et seq.). This is obvious to the professional indexer, but I mention it because it must be explained to children. They can then decide whether to omit the passing references and consult only the longer ones until they have found what they want. They should be led to feel that the index is making their work easier, not more confusing by a mass of references.

Personally I think it is all too easy to over-index books for children, and daunt them by too many pages printed in double columns. A quite brief index, carefully compiled, can often cover all the necessary ground. For small books (less than 100 pages) for young children, a clear and detailed contents list is often enough.

Even more discouraging and confusing is the misuse of subheadings. I have seen a book on giraffes in which the index-heading ‘Giraffe’ is followed by no less than 42 subheadings detailing every possible characteristic and idiosyncrasy of giraffes. As the whole book is about giraffes, each of these should be headings. Subheadings should never be in the same order as the information appears in the book, but always in alphabetical order. Subheadings should be cut down to a minimum, just as strings of page references should be avoided. The giraffe book is by no means an unusual example. A book on Queen Victoria has 35 subheadings under ‘Victoria, Queen’. There should be no need to labour this point, but unhappily its observation is still too infrequent.

The difference between references to text and to illustrations must be absolutely clear. There should be a note of explanation at the beginning of the index. I think using heavy type to indicate an illustration is better than using italics, which many children find confusing.

Should a pupil ask for your help in using an index, be sure he understands the basic principles I have mentioned, but do allow him to find the information for himself. Remember we all learn more by ‘doing’ than by ‘being told’.

Publishers’ attitudes

I cannot but wonder whether the majority of publishers are yet convinced that an index is a vital part of an information book. A few years ago I made a check in the Inner London Education Authority’s permanent display of recommended children’s books in print. I chose class 500 (Natural Science). Of 1,223 books looked at, forty per cent had no index at all, 723 had indexes—many of them mediocre and some worthless. We can only hope the position has improved since then. Certainly there are continuing protests about poor indexes (or lack of index) in reviews of children’s books, whether reviewed individually or in lists of rejects made by judges considering awards. Surely these strictures cannot all fall on deaf ears! But even now, many publishers seem to pay scant attention to the need for and compilation of an index. Many indexes look as though they had been ‘farmed out’ to anyone willing to have a try—certainly not to anyone familiar with the British Standard (BS3700:1976) on the preparation of indexes. We really must continue to demand the highest standard, even for a simple index, to avoid misleading or confusing children and leaving them with a poor view of indexes.

So may I end with a plea that if you are indexing an information book for children, you take as much care as you would if it were a specialized, erudite book written by a Ph.D.!

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**PRECIS online in Canada**

An information network for audio-visual materials, FORMAT, is due to go online across Canada early this year. The National Film Board of Canada has developed a system that will allow Boolean searching in French and English by title, series, producer, director, distributor, type of material, language, date or date range, colour or b/w, running time, and uncontrolled vocabulary keywords. Subject data will be input as PRECIS strings. (NFAIS newsletter 24 (6) Dec. 1982, 24.)