I began indexing in 1976 after taking the Rapid Results College's correspondence course. By 1980 I was working up to 30 hours a week freelance and from the end of that year, until I took a job in the middle of 1983, full-time. I gave it up partly because I wanted a change and partly because I felt that I had done as much as there was to do, even though the work was still coming in. I hope that the description of strategies which follows may help others to achieve a freelance career as demanding as they want to make it in this most satisfying field.

There are three principal rules. Neglect any one of them and you have little chance of success. They are, in ascending order of importance, be competent, be reliable, and be available.

**Competence**

You must know how to index, no publisher has time to teach you. The RRC course is probably the best way to start since it points up the basic principles and the basic errors. You will learn not only that your approach has been wrong (if it has) but why, and how to correct it. By the end of the course you will know whether this is the sort of work that suits you. If you have any doubts, then stop now. To be a successful indexer, you have to like it and you have to believe you're good at it.

Once you have acquired basic skills, you can start looking for work. But don’t imagine you’ve stopped learning. In the periods between jobs (which at first will be long) you must read, and read, and read. Read everything you can lay your hands on about indexing, about book production, and about publishing. Take out a subscription to *The Bookseller*. It’s invaluable for getting to know the jargon, and nothing gets you accepted as a professional more easily than knowing the jargon. The issues, too—PLR, piracy, who’s the President of the PA. You want to be remembered, to talk to your publishers about things that matter to them.

You will also need skills beyond indexing, such as editing and proofreading. It’s axiomatic that indexers should read their own proofs but they need to know how, and they need to do it properly, otherwise they’re in no position to try and insist. Equally, editing skill is a must. For a start, you have to edit your own work and if possible mark it up for the printer too. Let a publisher’s editor get his or her hands on it and terrible things can happen. Editors aren’t supposed to know how to index, and mostly they don’t. Besides, you want as much work as you can get—and an index is, in page terms, only a small percentage of a book. And not all books have indexes. So if you’re prepared to say ‘and if there were any editing . . .’ then you’re on your way to a broader involvement in books, an involvement that can only help all aspects of your work, as your knowledge of the processes and priorities involved increases. You should read—and preferably buy—the standard work on copyediting. It also contains helpful material on indexes, and on bibliographies and illustrations, as well as a table of proof-correcting marks. Then pester and pester until someone lets you have a go—a short set of proofs to read against manuscript can teach you enormous amounts about proofreading and about editing.

But let’s get back to the indexing. Every index you do should in theory be better than the last. In practice of course, it often isn’t. But every index is different—presenting new problems to solve, new techniques to invent and new challenges to your analytical and synthetic powers. You should be ready to admit—after a decent interval—that a particular index wasn’t your best, and to say why, and how it could have been improved. If you have made a reasonable shot at it, and providing you fulfil the other requirements explained later, they’ll give you another. Good indexers are not so easy to find and a lot of people want to try it, but second chances are sometimes given. If, however, a first job is not followed by a second, forget that publisher and try elsewhere. It may not have been the fault of your work—they could have been using you to fill a temporary gap while their regular indexer was unavailable. And that might happen again—but don’t depend on it. What you are aiming for is not casual work but three or four regular clients whose books suit your style and your interests; for whom you can always turn out the sort of job they want, within the parameters they set. And don’t be discouraged too soon if all you get is one-offs. You may simply not have found your fit.

**Reliability**

This should really be underlined three times in red. However inspired an indexer you are, however well you
know your subject, however skilled you are at fitting your work into the odd pages, if you can't keep deadlines you are out. We know that 'they' can't keep deadlines, but you must. Demur, negotiate, juggle, skip the dentist but make it. Better still, beat the deadline by two days. Regularly. And if they come to expect it, then fine—don't forget you want the reputation and you want the work. In realistic terms, if you're doing regular work for a particular publisher you can get away with being late about once a year, and by about three days. In general terms if you put them first, they'll put you first, it's as simple as that.

Reliability also implies, as suggested, that you will turn in a competent job to the length and depth specified. And be ready to define beforehand, if asked, what that specification should be. The ability to do this comes only with experience—like skill in estimating—but try your ideas on them anyway. You can learn a lot from their reasons for turning you down, and they get to know that you care about the books they're producing, and that matters a lot. Publishers are always in a hurry, and the more they feel they can depend on you, the more they will. And that leads to the final point in this section, which can't be stressed too strongly. There is never time to do things over again, so your typescript has to be not only accurate, in on time and the right length. It has also to be fit to go to the printer. The editor will mark it up, if you can't, or don't know the typesetting specification, but if your original presentation is bad there will be sighs and you won't be asked again. So use decent paper, type double-spaced with wide margins at either side and at top and bottom; number the pages in the top right-hand corner, encircling the numbers to show that they mustn't be set; and don't make too many mistakes. Any correction should be clear and using standard marks. If you make a really nasty mess or long handwritten insertion on an otherwise beautiful page, then retype it. But if there really isn't time, then write in the margin (and encircle it) your apology to the printer. You'll never know how he reacted, but printers are human and he'll appreciate it—and perhaps make that much more effort to decipher your scribble correctly. He may even correct your mistakes. It cannot be stressed too much that book printers and publishers depend on one another for their livelihood and the more mutual consideration that can be shown, the better for everyone—and that includes you.

Being available

This starts with letting them know that you exist. If you already know an editor or two who will give you a start, that's fine. Although it isn't wise to use close friends as they may then be embarrassed if for any reason it turns out that you won't do. But if a friend refers you to a colleague, and you and your friend won't be directly involved together, that's probably the best way. If you don't know anyone at all (as I didn't) then you're going to have to write letters. Go to the library and find Cassell's Directory or the Writers' and artists' yearbook. Choose, say, ten companies of varying size who publish the sort of book that you want to index. (The directories show who publishes what.) Since you're not yet a proven indexer, you must be a subject specialist, so your earlier work and qualifications and interests will direct your choice of target. Quite frankly, you haven't a hope of 'general' until you've done something else first. Write briefly to the Editorial Director (or equivalent) of your ten firms and explain that you're looking for a start, that you're a member of SI and have trained in indexing, and that you would be grateful for a chance to show what you can do. Always give your telephone number. You should repeat this procedure—with ten new firms—every six months until you think you don't need to any more. Some won't reply. Most of those that do will say that they have all the indexers they need but will put your name 'on file' in case an opportunity arises (they mean if they're stuck). This can get dispiriting, but keep going. Sooner or later your letter will arrive on the desk of someone who's just got in a pile of proofs on a subject you're an expert in—the index is needed yesterday and the regular person is busy/on holiday/getting tiresome. Or they have two regular people and the work is expanding enough for two and a half. This is your chance, and this is the way it will almost inevitably come. So when the phone rings—be there. Particularly during the two or three weeks after your letters go out. Try not to sound too surprised, do agree to impossible schedules and derisory terms, but do it, and give it everything you've got. Don't pretend you've done twenty indexes already for you won't fool them; but once you've done that first job you're no longer a complete beginner, and your next batch of ten letters can mention the firm you've already worked for. And so it goes and, one hopes, snowballs, until you are an experienced indexer, people have heard of you, and the editors start to recommend you to one another. Until you're 100% sure of a publisher, and that you will be asked again, never turn anything down—however impossible it may seem to fit it in. You'll manage it, and even after years with a publisher it doesn't go down too well to say no. They have to find someone else, and that someone else may just be the person who's reading this in the back issues in 1986 . . . Equally, if you're only at the end of your phone for two days a week, you'll be very lucky to succeed. None of us can be sure, however established we are, that if we are not at home the work will not go elsewhere. They can't always afford to wait and they hate writing letters.

So the best of luck to you. If you do more or less as I have suggested, and if you are actually some good at the work, then you might just about make a full-time job of it. On the other hand, you might not. An element of good fortune is always involved in being in the right place at the right time: the essential thing is to take the best
To keep afloat as a freelance, it was necessary to take on too much (for fear that tomorrow would offer too little), yet never to fail to deliver on time. I had two very strong feelings about the life this led to: one of simple delight, and one of simple horror. Most of the time they were mixed up; I was delightedly horrified. 

—from Shaky relations by Edward Blishen (Hamish Hamilton, 1981, quoted by kind permission of the author).

Freelancing, 1980s

The Independent Publishers Guild, London-based, includes smaller publishers of specialized subject books, and aims ‘to provide opportunities for independent publishers to meet and cooperate’. It advertised a seminar, ‘Freelancing: both sides of the coin’ to be held in London on 10 May 1983, without specifying what type of freelancers might be concerned. But solo sharpeners of lawn mowers or street sellers of wrist-watches would not have benefited from attendance; editing was the chief service considered, but book design, production, reading, research, publicity, marketing, and indexing (once) were all also referred to.

There were three speakers; a freelance editor/proof-reader, an accountant, and a publisher’s editorial director, as well as discussion from the floor. Book lists, advice sheets, and specimen work lists were provided. Much of the advice offered was financial, all of it business-like. The tenor was alarming. Freelancers nowadays come mostly through publishers’ redundancies, so that the market is flooded by former full-time employees with impressive experience and close contacts within the business. It becomes most difficult for the outsider to break in. Far too many of us are seeking—not the rainbow’s end, but the steady trickle of sustaining shower and sun.

Advice was tendered to those considering becoming freelance—all taken to be from a position of full employment. As well as the classic, ‘don’t’, there was, specifically, obtain your mortgage before, not after, casting adrift as officially self-employed. You must be prepared to put up with your own company; to be both workaholic and perfectionist; to work to a greater intensity, undisrupted at home, than formerly in the office. The freelance condition may be a freedom that becomes slavery, subject to tedium, irregularity, and the fickleness of publishers. And there is no one to pass the blame along to if deadlines are not met.

There can be many advantages to publishers in employing freelance workers, whose contributions may even be seen as their life-blood (nearly all their authors fall into this category!). Overheads are reduced; no fringe benefits, pension schemes, insurance, accommodation, to be provided. Payment is avoided during illness and holiday periods, and may be delayed beyond salary dates (shame!). A level of expertise, or number of specialists, is made available which could not be afforded in full-time employment; an atypical specialist may be called for; the publisher cannot be permanently geared to the periods of maximum output. Training is not wasted on staff who then leave; and a fresh eye may bring fresh inspiration to tired subjects. Freelancers give value for money, as they work at a greater level of concentration and productivity than those subject to the constant level of disturbance in an office.

But there are also disadvantages in using freelancers; problems both of finance (the difficulty of estimating costs in advance; there were differences of opinion over the advisability of giving an estimate) and of communication—the lack of the free association of in-house workers leads to added costs of telephone, postage, and secretarial work, and to delays.

Financial advice offered to freelancers included finding and using an accountant, the importance of keeping records, invoicing monthly, where to start the financial year, how to plan for one’s own pension, how to insure professional equipment kept in one’s home and against loss of earnings, and knowing which expenses are tax-deductible (these may include equipment, stationery, travel for research, use of car, sustenance on location, union fees, subscriptions, and rates, heating and lighting of the room in which one works. This last, however, should also retain its alternative character as spare room or dining room, to avoid liability for capital gains tax if the house is sold.) Expenses are tax-deductible from the

References