Usage of the word 'index'

I would like to clarify a point made by Professor Wellisch in his otherwise excellent article (The Indexer 13 (3), 147–151) based, as it was, on listings of usage in dictionaries. I believe misleading conclusions may have resulted from insufficient research whilst investigating the use of the word index in the terms index number and index plate when used in identifying vehicle numbers.

It should first be pointed out that the terms index number and index plate have been used in the UK since, probably, 1903, when the Road Traffic Act of that year, inter alia, provided for the setting up of a register (hence later, registration number and registration plate, terms in general use today in the UK) by local authorities to identify motor vehicles. The index mark designated for each authority was listed in a Schedule contained in an Order made under the Act. Hence 'A' was the index mark for the London County Council, while 'DX' applied to East Suffolk County Council. This meant that such registration numbers as 'A 1' became very marketable commodities since they were transferable from one vehicle to another. I have been unable to confirm exactly but conclude the legislative draughtsman treated the index list as being 'that which points out' and the addition of the words number and plate was a logical, if not official, usage, by the motoring public.

The terms license number and license plate are still not in common usage in the UK (even though motor vehicles are licensed by the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Centre, whose help in research is gratefully acknowledged) for the simple reason that the USA and Canada systems for licensing have not been adopted. In general, such systems rely on physical annual changes of license plates of different designs or colours to indicate that the requisite license has been obtained.

So Professor Wellisch: an 'idiosyncratic' (your word) British usage, yes (it may have something to do with driving on the left!); in no circumstances could the usage be said to be 'superfluous'.

Patrick Noakes,
Tax Editor,
Tolley Publishing Co Ltd, Croydon, Surrey

Law and order, alphabetical

I venture to put once more into question two matters which apparently arouse such passions that British Standards have been equivocal over them. They are word-by-word or letter-by-letter alphabetization, and the order of subheadings. The reason for my foolhardiness in entering this war zone is that, as a teacher, I am compelled to give frequent thought to these grave issues. Students are likely to accept a tutor's recommendations until they have enough experience to reject them. Besides which, students are preparing for Judgment Day and will be correctly taught before approaching assessors to the Society of Indexers' Register.

On the question of alphabetical style I have by serendipity and quite unscientifically carried out some market research. The sample in my survey is upwards of 200 students, who may be regarded, early in a correspondence course, as equivalent to average index users. Nearly all, I have found, make many more errors when arranging in word-by-word than in letter-by-letter order. This is not surprising, since word-by-word calls for the application of more rules, particularly those concerning hyphens and initial letters, which have always presented problems. Students soon learn these; but we are apt to forget that few index users have had the benefit of a course in book indexing.

BS 1749 (1969) is downright—letter-by-letter is 'not recommended'. BS 3700 (1976) is equivocal, offering the pros and cons of each style. I have always preferred word-by-word, partly because it is the style adopted by telephone directories, the indexes most used by average readers. But telephone directories are highly specialized, dealing only in names. Encyclopaedias and, for example, The Oxford dictionary for writers and editors choose letter-by-letter as most suitable for a general index. I have been using them a good deal recently and am inclined to think that they are right.

As to subheadings—please reach for your tranquillizers!—is there any virtue in arranging them alphabetically, other than neatness of presentation? Main headings are arranged alphabetically so that users can look directly for what they seek—a name or a significant word. This is not necessary, nor, I think, desirable for subheadings, since one only has to run one's finger down a short column and the indexer should be able to choose, not the significant, but the explicit word or phrase. In the following example The new Cambridge modern history uses page order:

Agriculture: extension of markets 5, 25; enclosure 24; animal diseases 24; drainage 24–5; improvement in three stages 24–5; tenant farmers' capital needs 25; spread of sugar beet 27; science in 52; technical revolution in 65; employment in 332; effects of revolution on 413

This seems to me to make the handling of the book, turning to and from the index and text, much simpler than the alphabetical arrangement:
Agriculture: animal diseases 24; drainage 24-5; effects of revolution on 413; employment in 332; enclosure 24; extension of markets 5, 25; improvement in three stages 25; science in 52; spread of sugar beet 27; technical revolution in 65; tenant farmers' capital needs 25

The virtue of page order is, of course, partly lost where there is more than one page to an entry; but alphabetical order seems to me to have no virtue to lose. Exceptions can be made, and are permitted by BS 3700, for numerical, serial or hierarchical order. I prefer chronological order for histories and biographies so that, for example, people who are entered achieve education before death. Chronology cannot be consistently maintained since it does not cover such concepts as character or writings; these are probably better entered in separate paragraphs, the arrangement of which can be in page order.

So what does teacher do? Weighed down by the responsibility of preparing the next generation of indexers, should he say that we are an indexually permissive society and that students must decide these matters for themselves? Or may he put forward his own heretical views? Any comments sent to me will be welcome, and I shall be happy to analyse them and forward them to the British Standards Committee.

Michael Gordon, Devon

Indexes to school information books

As an indexer closely concerned with tutoring young people in mathematics, I endorse wholeheartedly Cecilia Gordon's views on the importance of good indexes for school text books (The Indexer 13 (3), 181–2). For example, the H. W. Clayton and D. N. Straker series (A natural approach to mathematics; Pergamon, Oxford) all contain indexes to the pupil books. They are very useful for revision work as well as the teaching of elementary mathematics. However, the School mathematics project; books A–H (SMP; OUP, Cambridge) are not indexed. My offer to provide indexes to new editions of this successful series was rejected, even when I offered to do them for a nominal fee. The editor did not think them necessary, and had not received any complaints on this matter. 'But the teacher manuals have indexes', he assured me.

I suggest that many editors are so involved with the production of such excellent books as the SMP series that the simple need for an index to help users is overlooked. What a disservice to education!

C. R. Raper, Hove, Sussex

Indexing confidence restored

As a new member of the Society of Indexers I feel that I must write a few words about the Rapid Results College indexing course which I am now about to complete.

More than eleven years ago I used to work in the Scientific Information Centre to the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences. Part of my duties were proof-reading and indexing. When I faced my first indexing task all the instructions I received were: 'find the key words and consult an old copy of the journal to see how it is done'. It worked.

When I came to live in this country I did not know how to go back to my old profession. I must admit that I did not feel very confident in the response of publishers should they become aware that English was only my second language.

About a year and a half ago I accidentally came upon a book called A practical guide to making money at home by Olga Franklin (Macdonald and Jane's, 1977). There I found all the information I needed about the SI and the RRC-course. I enjoyed going through the course. It was a pleasure to find superbly formulated indexing rules and definitions guiding me through excellent exercises. Some of these rules I had just guessed before, others I had come to realize by experience and apply in my work, while still others were new to me. An example are the new specialized techniques emerging from recent technological developments.

It is essential for the practising indexer to have rules and regulations to stick to, though they may be debatable and subject to alterations. Accepting certain rules at a given time is a must, because there is usually more than one possible way to solve most of the indexing problems.

Now I know that it is of prime importance for the indexer to have a good command of the English language, but it is that special inclination, that unique frame of mind and love for the very conditions under which the indexer works, that make the main difference. You either enjoy it, or not. You either are addicted to it, or not. And it was the RRC-course that closed the eleven-year gap since I last worked on an index, and gave me back my confidence.

M. Skipp, London

'Hateful indexing'

I should like to record my gratitude to M. D. Anderson for her splendid rebuttal of Paul Johnson's pitying remarks about indexing as 'the most hateful of tasks' (The Indexer 13 (3), 195). She has made me feel less guilty about enjoying my work ('Mum's favourite thing is reading books, and she gets paid for doing it!'). Indeed, concentration is a great joy—and, I was brought up to
believe, good for us, to boot—though distractions which prevent concentration may have their hateful aspect. And why should ‘intellectual labour’ need ‘compensating for’? Does Mr Johnson find reviewing books so dehumanizing?

As for indexing not being ‘creative’; well, yes, there are rules, systems and conventions to follow, and practice and application may make most of our work more of a skill or a craft than an art, if we have fairly well-stocked, orderly minds to begin with. But there is surely in a good index, however simple, an extra process: a balancing of analysis and synthesis, of reason and imagination; a drawing-in of the author’s mind as revealed in his written words, and a reshaping in our own minds to make a retrieval-tool through which the author’s thoughts may be made accessible to the composite mind of the reader as we intuitively conceive it, which can only be ‘creative’. Even those of us still struggling at the apprenticeship of our trade may pursue this as an ideal. Moreover, we must be humble—we are only to serve the book, and perhaps Apollo on our better days. For me this adds up to art rather than mechanics, if only at rare moments of tricky decision and happy insight.

If any reader feels this is balderdash, he/she, and Mr Johnson perhaps, may take comfort from the old Latin author who wrote (I quote from memory) that the musician does not create, since his work is directed by the composer’s score; the composer does not create, since his work is directed by his muse; but the critic, directed by neither muse nor score—he creates. Perhaps we may be allowed to rank with the critics, at least?

As most of the terms we are using are incapable of strict definition, we might go on arguing about this for ever . . . Why not?

Judy Batchelor, London, W7

The indexer has to be an artist, to exercise judgement with words. The thrill in indexing, greater even than the moment when the first run of slipmaking is finished, lies in the editorial control one exercises, the thinking about what is now going to happen, if you make it. The indexer becomes creator as well as a long-distance runner.


INDEXERS IN FICTION

This, the ninth excerpt in our series, is from a BBC television drama series of 1979, ‘Accident’, written by Ray Jenkins. In the following passage (reprinted by permission of the producer, Joe Waters), Stephen Mitchell is a graduate student, and Albert Ramsey his university tutor. The brief description of the requirements for indexing seems full of insight.

RAMSEY: Poverty is one of the necessary concomitants of a student’s life.
MITCH: Well, I don’t like it.
RAMSEY: No? You’d sooner be getting a hundred pounds a week working on a conveyor belt, would you? Or perhaps you could go down the mines or into the steelworks like most of my family have done. Or even, like you say, teaching kids or writing insidious muck for an advertising agency. Better life, that?
MITCH: Be a better life for Diana—and the—baby.
RAMSEY: Will it? She’s going to thank you a lot, isn’t she, when you tie that load of guilt round her neck? ‘Look at the future he gave up for me and the kid.’
MITCH: Some future.
RAMSEY: Oh, I dunno, you’ll be quite promising material when we get the straws out of your hair. Ever done any indexing, have you?
RAMSEY: It’s a job that demands enormous powers of concentration and a superhuman ability to discard the irrelevant. Wonderful training for the mind. It pays peanuts of course, but you won’t need that much extra to support one small baby. There you are. (Handing him a card.) I’ll tell him you’re coming over. He’s been on to me for weeks about it.
MITCH: But, would he trust me—I mean—he’s the authority on the nineteenth century, isn’t he?
RAMSEY: He thinks he is. I am really—and I trust you.
MITCH: I’ll think about it.
RAMSEY: You will do it, Stephen. And you’ll also make sure that it doesn’t interfere with your work. O.K?
MITCH: Thanks, Albert.
RAMSEY: All in the service.