The index and the indexer in 'how to write a book' books

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Very many books of advice have been produced by successful—that is, published—authors, intended for their fledgling colleagues. The neophyte reads these hoping to pick up valuable tips on the book trade and its inner workings, while the successful author feels a need to impart to the younger generation of writers the wisdom he has gained from years in his profession. These books typically cover such concerns as how to choose a publisher, whether or not to engage a literary agent, what format to submit the manuscript in, etc. Usually they have something to say also on the subject of indexes and indexing. Examining a sample of these volumes, published in the United States and in India, provides an interesting insight into the attitudes of authors and publishers to indexing and the indexing profession.

The books chosen for examination here were written between 1913 and 1977. The authors are American, British and, in one case, Indian. One of these books deals only with technical, scientific writing, the rest with non-fiction in general. A few were privately produced and probably did not enjoy wide circulation. At least two went through numerous reprintings and were widely distributed by a major publisher. The books examined represent a wide range of styles and approaches, and should show a variety of attitudes toward indexes and indexing.*

In these books the value of an index is never merely assumed; each contains a few lines attempting to demonstrate the importance of including an index in a work of non-fiction. None of these authors, apparently, could suggest providing an index without first stating a case for indexes in general. While each writer acknowledged the necessity of indexes, some did so less enthusiastically than others. One writer devoted three paragraphs to the importance of a good index. Another wrote, 'Every good book deserves a good index. A thorough index increases the value of a book; a poor or careless one detracts from its worth.' Others were fainter in their praise for the value of indexes. 'If your work is non-fiction, it probably should have an index', states one writer tersely, while another mentions that it is necessary only for 'books of a serious nature.'

Who should compile the index?

After explaining the importance of an index, the writer usually discusses who should undertake this task. There is no unanimity here. Some insist that the author himself is the only one who should attempt to index a book: 'There is little doubt that the person best qualified for the job is the author himself.' 'As to the index: you are the expert on your own book, and so you are the prime candidate for indexing it.' This writer then adds, 'However, indexing is a difficult job.' Yet others see it as simply a pleasant diversion: 'Many authors have fun preparing their own indexes.'

Some writers are not so convinced of the value of do-it-yourself indexes. 'Who should compile the index to a book—the author or a professional indexer? There is a body of opinion which is emphatically in favour of professional indexers. But some of the best indexes to books have been prepared by authors . . . ' 'The argument against an author making the index for his own book parallels that of the attorney traditionally advised against defending himself in court . . . a professional indexer can usually do a better job.' 'The making of an index is far more technical and difficult than many authors suppose . . . unless the author is familiar with the elementary requirements of a good index, it is often desirable, if the book is technical or complicated, to have the index compiled by one who makes a business of this sort of work.'

However, the discussion as to who should compile the index does not end here. Many of these works state that the publisher requires the author not only to supply the index, but to compile it himself. 'Unless there is explicit agreement to the contrary, the author furnishes copy for the index as he does for any other part of the manuscript . . . almost tearfully, the author is implored [by the publisher] to make his own index, if at all possible.' Another attributes to a publisher the following: 'An index of superior quality in a technical work is invariably prepared by the author himself.' The writer then adds parenthetically that 'the American Standards Association has disagreed with this.'

Those writers who think that the author is not best suited to index his or her own works usually add some information about professional indexers. Again, there are a variety of approaches to this. 'You can, if you wish,
hire a professional indexer. Since he is unfamiliar with your technical terms, he has to be watched carefully. 'It is not easy to find good indexers. They are scarce and getting scarcer.' It is not easy to find good indexers. They are scarce and getting scarcer. 'There are professional indexers and they do all right. But they cannot possibly know, with reference to a specific manuscript, what is worth indexing and what isn’t.'

Instruction in indexing technique

Many of these books include brief instruction in the technique of indexing, particularly those that advocate indexing by the author. An analysis of the technique presented in these instructions is beyond the scope of this article. The sections range in length from a few examples of indentation to ten pages of fairly detailed guidance. While many styles of index are presented, the general conclusion, as summed up by one book, seems to be that ‘it is always better to have too many than not enough entries.’ It is also interesting to see what is considered a ‘good’ example of indexing. One book gives the following mysterious and mispunctuated entry as its example of proper indexing:

Myrtle, associated with the dead, 158; favourite of Dionysus, 158; used as a surrogate for semele, 158.

Undeniably, a great many books have come into the world with inadequate indexes. This brief examination of ‘how to write a book’ books, which are read by authors during the impressionable, pre-publication stage of their careers, shows, in their conflicting and confused advice regarding indexes and indexing, one probable source for many authors’ apparent lack of concern to provide proper indexes for their books.

References

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5. McGraw-Hill, p. 44.
16. The manuscript, p. 35.

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Should your shoe-box be in your wastebin?

How do translators record their personal favoured terms? The card index may be cumbersome and time-consuming, but among translators it is popular. Even the European Commission has a huge room full of cards, and they are used. To quote Stanley Lyons at the Translators’ Guild annual forum, ‘Card indexes work, folks!’ Chris Perceval uses them, five large drawers-full on his desk and—however gentle—he is no Ferdinand the Bull when faced by the Challenge of New Technology.

One translator—and he is not alone, for a show of hands revealed that virtually all his colleagues there did likewise—keeps the fruits of his terminological research penned into the margins of one much-loved dictionary. We need a dictionary graffiti pool.

Marion Strachan works in a great-name publishing house, producing dictionaries for English as a Foreign Language users. Her own project is ten years old and so is its methodology, making it hard to work with the equipment now available. She criticized the mainframe computer as a lexicographer’s tool, as opposed to a data-handling device, because of its inflexibility, and showed that the problems associated with using new technology tend to be organizational rather than due to any inherent unsuitability of the equipment to perform whatever we want it to do.

It was the most unworldly of the speakers who, his hearers felt, would benefit most from computer experts’ help: John Scott, who produces such gems as the Penguin civil engineering dictionary. His laborious task, with all the inputting, augmenting, rewriting and revision of discrete items of information, would lend itself well to word-processing. Publishers are short-sighted indeed not to ply their authors with terminals, computer memory and technical support, and are fools to themselves in not making use of New Technology to produce shorter runs and rapid updates of, for example, John Scott’s perennial Building dictionary.