Assessing indexes
Jean Simpkins

How do newly emerging indexers gain recognition within their own national societies and among publishers? And—perpetual query in indexing circles—What makes a Good Index?

The Society of Indexers' system is based on the assessment of an index submitted to a panel of assessors (with anonymity guaranteed). A candidate whose index is passed is accorded the status of Registered Indexer; it is recognized that this status is of considerable value in attracting indexing commissions.

As a procedure ours is by no means perfect. For one thing it cannot be done quickly; for another there are no absolute standards by which one can judge an index. As we all know, indexes come in a variety of forms and lengths, and cover a multitude of different subjects. Some rejected indexers find it hard to accept their rejection. Nevertheless, all involved with the process are highly competent and experienced indexers themselves, and it is noticeable that all assessors show a profound anxiety to be absolutely fair to a candidate. At present we hope that in general the system is working as well as any such system could; but no suggestion as to how the procedure might be improved is ignored.

Who would be an assessor? The task of studying an index submitted by a candidate for registration and then making a decision as to whether it is—or is not—good enough to meet the standard required of a Registered Indexer, is not one undertaken lightly. The fact that each assessor is one of a team of three specially selected for a specific index makes the prospect slightly less daunting, and the knowledge that no assessor is ever named to the candidate also helps. Nothing, however, can really overcome the sense of depression an assessor feels when his or her verdict has to be 'no'. It is a relief, on the other hand, having studied a submitted index, to discover no serious flaws, and to be able to recommend the indexer for Registration; but the sad truth is that only a small proportion of indexes submitted do reach the required standard of proficiency.

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Types of rejected indexes

Now we must come down to earth and examine the indexes as they really are submitted. There are basically two types of index which fall into the assessors' rejected group.

The first type will have been compiled by a highly trained academic, with a wealth of specialist qualifications. One must respect such a person, who obviously has great intelligence, commanding respect among others in his field, through his thorough familiarity with his subject. His weakness, however, may be a lack of humility when it comes to subjecting himself to the discipline necessary in acquiring the basic skills of indexing.

Sometimes, when speaking to a prospective new indexer, one may be asked the question, 'But what is there to learn?' One may have some sympathy for such a view; most librarians, for instance, who have studied cataloguing and classification may well feel—at the start of their indexing careers—that there is not much in the training that will be new to them. The reality, as all who have undertaken a course of study in indexing know very well, is different. When a highly qualified academic specialist does submit himself to the necessary training in
indexing, he is able to produce work which everyone can respect and try to emulate. Fortunately, there are several such people in the ranks of Registered Indexers—and very valuable they are as assessors.

Another group of candidates comprises those who produce 'mechanical' indexes. Such an index will quite probably be produced by a student who has recently completed a training course, and has meticulously employed the techniques learned therein. What is lacking here is imagination—an insight into the mind of the likely user of the index—and discrimination as to choice of terms, use of cross-references, and the exclusion of unhelpful mentions in the text; spotting, perhaps, two similar headings that could be combined; assembling a long sequence of subheadings and sub-subheadings so as to represent clearly the divisions of the main heading and their relation to it; finding the right word to encompass an abstract concept; and covering synonyms with cross-references. All these things should be in the mind of the indexer at the editing stage—when all the information has been assembled but has yet to be organized systematically. Too many candidates seem to think that the job is done before this stage is completed.

Success!

We all know that there is no such thing as the 'perfect' index. At the same time, we can all recognize a good index when we see one. When the assessors see a good index they rejoice, and recommend Council to admit the indexer to the Register.

The indexer then finds that it is his turn to rejoice, as he will find it easier to obtain work in his new status of Registered Indexer. He would also do well to remember the amount of effort that has been exerted for his benefit since he began to study indexing. He may perhaps feel that it is his turn to do something useful on behalf of the society. The Society of Indexers would not exist were it not for people willing to serve as officers, Council members, or in some other useful capacity, and there is always a wide variety of work to be done which a willing member can undertake.

The task of assessment

The task of the assessor, however, is reserved (for obvious reasons) to Registered Indexers. Any R.I. may be asked to serve in this capacity, and each will be selected with an eye to his personal experience and probably his knowledge of a specialized subject. If he agrees to undertake the assessment of a particular index, and can guarantee to spend a couple of hours on the work in the near future, the relevant documents will be sent to him. These include the index, the text, and a form for him to fill in which indicates the points to be examined in the course of the assessment. What he does not receive is an indication of the identity of the applicant.

Most assessors, in addition to completing the form with a series of marks, make a useful series of personal comments forming a basis of constructive criticism (or praise) which, if properly appreciated by the candidate, can be very valuable to him. The assessor receives a token honorarium, and postal expenses are refunded.

The candidate will receive notification of his success or failure as quickly as can be arranged, but as the work of assessment is done by busy indexers, and as strict anonymity must be preserved at all stages, the final message has to wait for much traffic through the post.

The assessors would far rather pass candidates than fail them. We hope that future candidates may have a better chance of success through knowing something of how their work will be studied, and that the number of competent Registered Indexers will be increased; also that the eternal concern of our society with establishing and promoting high standards of indexing continues to be demonstrated by the work of our assessors.

Jean Simpkins is Acting Chairman of Assessors of the Society of Indexers.

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TECHNICAL FORUM

letter-writing 102-3
campaigns 139, 179-81
local press 66-7
stationery 20-2

Does the first page-reference of the entry above suggest to you: (a) that pages 102-3 have the most important references to letter-writing in the book; (b) that this reference is too trivial to merit a subheading; (c) a general description of letter-writing; or (d) that the compiler of this index has committed a fault? All four theories have their indexing adherents. Further: is the first page reference in the following entry helpful or superfluous?

displays 51-5
away from library 53-4
book 53
exhibitions 54-5
mounting 52
types 51

We invite comment on these usages, which we would like to print as a forum in our next issue, together with any similar technical problems regularly encountered in indexing that readers may like to specify.