An indexer’s suggestions to (some) publishers

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These suggestions may seem boringly obvious. Many publishers do not need them, and are begged not to take offence, for they are not being addressed. But the fact remains that, at one time or another, I have wished that the publisher I was working for did not need one or more of these hints.

1. Commission the index well ahead of time, with an approximate date for despatch of proofs, giving a definite date as soon as possible. Indexers can excuse the occasional ‘rush order’ index, due to failure of author or indexer to provide an index as arranged. But normally they like as much notice as possible, to enable them to plan their work without overlapping and gaps.

2. Inform the indexer at once if proofs are to be delayed, giving a new date for their despatch. The earlier notice is given, the less is the disruption to the indexer’s plan of work. It is hard on an indexer who rings up a publisher about overdue proofs to be told: ‘Oh, didn’t we let you know? We ran into trouble with the art-work’, or ‘There was a breakdown at the printers’. The indexer thinks ruefully of the gap thus created in which he might have made the index that he had felt obliged to decline, and of the overlapping with the next index he has booked.

3. Send the proofs promptly, in a form that is convenient for the indexer to work on. Proofs made up in book form are particularly satisfactory, giving an appreciable saving of indexing time.

4. Inform the indexer at once if any alteration is made to the text of the book at proof stage that will affect pagination or index content. The later this information is sent, the larger is the number of index cards that must be sorted out and corrected. If the information is not sent to the indexer at all (and I have known this to happen), the resulting errors in the index will be attributed to the innocent indexer by irate readers.

5. Send a prompt acknowledgement of the receipt of the completed index typescript. This is a valuable piece of property, since the indexer probably has not kept a copy of it (other than the cards), and he is apt to suffer from nightmares about its non-arrival if he does not hear from the publisher within a few days of despatch.

6. Do not allow the author, or an inexperienced sub-editor, to make inconsistent alterations in the index, or alterations that do not respect the indexer’s conventions on punctuation, indentation, order of sub-headings, etc. It is irksome to the indexer to have his work mangled, though of course he accepts alterations correctly inserted, and is glad of those that rectify any mistakes or omissions.

7. Send the indexer a proof of the index if possible, since he is more likely than other proof-readers to pick up printer’s errors in it. This also allows him to put matters right if the index has undergone irresponsible alterations. In return for the chance of reading the proof, the indexer must of course send it back without the least delay.

8. Pay the indexer’s fee within a reasonable time. Two or three weeks may be considered reasonable, two or three months unreasonable.

There are two more suggestions that some indexers would wish to add to the above list.

9. Send the indexer a copy of the book. Norman Knight used to claim that he had been given a copy of every book he had indexed. But I think that indexers ought not to expect free copies of highly priced books, which, after all, represent deductions from the royalties of authors. I have been given copies of about 10 per cent of the books I have indexed, some direct from the author, and have felt very grateful for these unexpected presents. I have asked for copies of a few other books, that were of particular interest to myself or to a member of my family; only one of these requests was refused.

10. Print the indexer’s name at the head of the index. Indexers who expect this seem to have faith that the index will be printed without having suffered damage. But apart from that aspect, I prefer anonymity (though appreciating an occasional little bouquet from an author in a preface). As Gordon Carey once said to the Society of Indexers (The Indexer 5 (2), Autumn 1966, 78–9): ‘If in the theatre of literature, we can be thoroughly efficient doorkeepers, dressers, property men, and stage hands, let us not be too concerned about our names not appearing in lights.’

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