TECHNICAL FORUM

edited by Geoffrey Dixon

Anne Coles, Martyn Gilchrist and Susan Simpson reply as follows to the questions posed in the last issue—questions which, for convenience, we now repeat:

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

Martyn Gilchrist (letter-writing): I use page references after the main heading when I am pressed for space and must work to a given number of lines. It is possible that space is so limited that the final entry could become, for example:

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

I also use page references after the main heading when they don't seem to warrant a subheading. In theory I would prefer not to use page references in this way if subheadings are used, on the grounds of style and consistency. In practice I seldom do.

Martyn Gilchrist (displays): I believe the page references after the main heading in this example are not only superfluous, but could lead to difficulties if the principle were generally applied. For example if applied to the 'letter-writing' example it would lead to:

I can see that in the 'displays' example a reader can go immediately to that part of the book which covers the whole subject. It seems doubtful that the principle could be consistently applied throughout an index.

Susan Simpson: The page reference in the first question suggests (c) to me. If the intention were (a), bold type would have been preferable. I will be very interested to see other people's reactions to the second question. To me the first page reference is helpful. If I want to know generally about displays, I understand to start at p.51; but if I want specific information, I can go straight to the relevant page.

Anne Coles: When I started indexing, my fear of 'strings' of page numbers led me to subheadings most of which had only one page reference (as in the second example quoted) and were totally inconsistent with the rest of the index in level of detail.

I therefore took the conscious decision that whenever feasible I would try to find a subheading under which I could include several page numbers, and leave the more general references after the heading. I hoped, in this way, to end up with an index that was consistent overall.

The Editor muses: with reference to the second example, it is perhaps strange that nobody has argued that it is all the subheadings here which are superfluous and that the main heading standing alone is quite sufficient. Does a run of 5 pages really need subheadings in an index when they deal consecutively with a single subject? What about economy? What about the argument that an index should not usurp the functions of a contents list? Is not the main function of subheadings to bring together in one place all the scattered references to a topic (to collocate distributed relatives)? If there are no scattered references but merely a subject which is dealt with all of a piece in 20 pages is it not sufficient to say so in one single major reference (e.g. displays 30-50)?
Two further problems to keep the pot boiling:

1. Does anybody have any ideas about breaking up a long, long run-on entry such as one might get in a biography?

2. Spain, New 16–22  
   Spain, population 35–8

This first is an inversion, the terms properly separated by a comma; the second a heading with subheading, and counsel of perfection would advocate replacing the comma with a colon. But is this perfection? It seems to have two drawbacks. Firstly, in an indented index, the second reference would appear as:

Spain  
population 35–8

taking twice the number of lines—and line-saving is often an indexing priority, in this imperfect world. Secondly, ‘Spain, population’ suggests that references only to this specific topic are to be listed. But ‘Spain’ alone seems to promise that all references to Spain will be given—climate, imports, anything Spanish alluded to. One may for some reason wish to list the population references only, and not to imply anything further.

Do these considerations justify the punctuation of a heading with subheading as if it were an inversion?

Your suggestions and opinions, please, as well as further problems you would like considered, to: Geoffrey Dixon, BA,ALA, 93 Carcluie Crescent, Ayr, KA7 4ZS.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Pointing the finger

I was interested to read in The Indexer 4 (3) (p. 209) the extract from Turtle diary by Russell Hoban (Cape, 1975) in which the word ‘index’ was used to mean ‘an indication’, and not, as most frequently used nowadays, ‘a list’—to quote: ‘an index of the decline of Western man’. The Concise dictionary of quotations cites Wordsworth in ‘The Prelude’ referring to the statue of Newton as:

The marble index of a mind forever  
Voyaging through strange seas of thought, alone.

It may be that, over the years, it has been due to the issue of the Roman Catholic Index librorum prohibitum, the growing proliferation of printed matter, and the everyday use of numerical lists such as The Financial Times Index, that the word ‘index’ has come to mean almost exclusively ‘a list’, but there are fashions in words as well as clothes, and I have the impression that I have seen its original meaning being used more often recently. The only reference that I have kept is from The Times of 2 February 1985 in which Roy Strong, the Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum writes, under the title ‘Tables that speak volumes’:

Like the invitations on the mantleshelf or the magazines laid out on the stool before the country house fire, the common denominator of these books provides a fascinating index as to the make-up and preoccupations of the establishment classes.

It would be interesting to know whether members of the Society have come across other recent occasions when the word has been seen to be used in this way.

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Over-courteous indexing

In the course of research for my book on Samuel Johnson’s religion—for which I shall make my own index—I came across the following amusing paragraph in Boswell’s Life (Hill-Powell edition, Vol. IV, p. 325). Boswell is here quoting George Steevens, who helped Johnson with his edition of Shakespeare and also with his Lives of the Poets:

He [Johnson] would sometimes found his dislikes on very slender circumstances. Happening one day to mention Mr. Flexman, a Dissenting minister, with some compliment to his exact memory in chronological matters, the Doctor replied, ‘Let me hear no more of him, Sir. That is the fellow who made the Index to my Rambler and set down the name of Milton thus: Milton, Mr. John.’

Flexman was one of the compilers of the Index to the Journals of the House of Commons. The editor of the Life adds in a footnote that this entry was still to be found in the index to the tenth edition of the Rambler essays (1784) and gives a few more examples from it:

Shakspeare, Mr. William, his eminent success in tragi-comedy  
Spencer, Mr. Edmund, some imitations of his diction censured  
Cowley, Mr. Abraham, a passage in his writing illustrated

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