Candidates for registration and their work

Jean Simpkins

After the publication in this journal of an article that described in general terms the procedures used by the Society of Indexers in assessment for registration (The Indexer 14 (3), April 1984, 179-80), it was suggested that intending candidates might appreciate a more specific analysis of this subject. So, four candidates were asked to describe their personal experience. Two of these had been successful at the first attempt; one had failed; and one had failed at the first but passed at the second attempt. Their accounts of their experiences follow, together with some indication of the reports of the assessors. Names of the indexers and details of the books indexed are not given, as some candidates asked for this information to be withheld.

Candidate A

The first candidate, who passed, was on the point of retiring from the Royal Navy and had experience of the commercial world.

'I first got the idea of indexing as a part-time occupation from a magazine called Business Ideas. I did the BIPT course with Michael Gordon . . . After I'd finished the course I wrote to a number of publishers saying that I was a part-time indexer, but would be grateful for any work that wasn't required by the day before yesterday! Or any old sets of proofs they could send me. The index I submitted was one [resulting from this] which I picked out because I thought it was one of my better efforts. The subject, a study of big business, interested me, and I think that helps.

'I was pretty clear about the criteria by which the index would be judged, but despite sound advice from Mr Gordon, was not very confident of success.'

Assessors' report

As far as accuracy was concerned, only three errors were detected; one was in page numbers. There were too many prepositions in subheadings, e.g.,

- technology
- in computers
- in photography.

The index was good on proper names, but concepts could profitably have been extended, e.g., children, role of; customer service/wants; fashion; management; specialization.

Subheadings should have been in alphabetical order.

'One of the best indexes sent to me for assessment . . .'

... a competent, professional index . . .'

In view of the generally high standard of this index, the comments were less detailed than usual.

Candidate B

In contrast to the first candidate, the second, who failed, was a lady with plenty of practical experience as an indexer but no formal training.

'I started indexing in April 1977, and completed 18 indexes before August 1979 when domestic circumstances forced me to stop temporarily. Since then, from February 1981, I have compiled another 23. (I have always done some proof-reading and copy-editing as well.) I have indexed educational books from middle school to tertiary level: history, geography, economics, etc . . . I have taken no course in indexing; I could not afford to when I started. I read all the books I could find and was lucky with personal contacts to begin with!'

The book indexed was about the concept of eternal life.

Assessors' report

There was no criticism on the grounds of accuracy, although errors in alphabetization were detected.

The concepts indexed tended to be treated superficially, e.g., atheism: 'The indexer lists p.58, but pp.58-61 cover this topic. It is better to give all the page references that are going to help the reader . . . There are other references and allusions to atheism in this book which are not indexed.' Cross-references were not sufficiently informative. Under atheism the cross-reference was 'see also materialism etc . . .' What about, for example, Marxism; nihilism; existentialism?

Of about 30 cross-references, only about six pulled their weight. In nearly all cases, page numbers could have been duplicated, appearing under both forms of heading without wasting space. Frequently the references themselves were unnecessary. There were too many see also cross-references from the specific to the general.

Some headings were long and clumsy, e.g., Marxism/neo-Marxism/critical theory and ascension/assumption/exaltation. These should have been split up into separate headings. Headings omitted included psychoanalysis; evolution; cosmology; mourning; burial. Unnecessary headings (leading the user to mere passing mentions in the text) included anthroposophy; theosophy; kabod; bioplasm.
Some subheadings—e.g., under immortality—should have been main headings. There was a need for subheadings in some places where large blocks of page references were given.

The method of referring to saints' names was unconventional and clumsy.

Much space could have been saved on the indexing of both titles and authors of books; this space could more usefully have been devoted to the more detailed treatment of concepts. The main headings tended not to be specific enough for a book on such a specialized subject.

This index was not accepted.

**Candidate C**

This candidate, who passed, was another who, like the second candidate, had no formal training specifically in indexing but was, as a librarian and information scientist, no stranger to the world of publishing. Instruction was taken from Norman Knight's book. The index submitted for assessment refers to a book on documentation practices to which the indexer himself had contributed a chapter on information retrieval, and the index was 'volunteered' rather than commissioned.

**Assessors' report**

Apart from some inaccuracies such as the occasionally misquoted volume number, the most serious complaint concerned the ineffectual use of cross-references. In some cases the user of the index was directed from one heading (e.g., see also roll film cameras) only to find the same page references under the second heading. A fault quite often noted by the assessors in their work generally is the making of a cross-reference to a heading where there is only one page reference, so that a duplicate entry under both headings would take up no more space.

One assessor noted that sometimes several subheadings were given, all with the same page reference, indicating an extravagant use of space.

A minor criticism concerned the use of prepositions at the start of subheadings; this, if carried to excess, would affect the comprehensibility of the alphabetical sequence.

It was generally felt, however, that for the specific requirements of likely users of this particular index, it would be adequate.

**Candidate D**

Our final candidate was successful on her second attempt. Before turning her attention to indexing, this lady had been among other things a teacher, and while working as an editorial assistant on a medical journal had done some work on its cumulative index.

"After giving up full-time teaching, I decided to try indexing among other ways of making money. I taught myself from books (G. Norman Knight, Indexing, the art of; M. D. Anderson, Book indexing, and articles in The Indexer. I did my first proper index for an honorarium only. The first index I submitted for assessment was the third proper index I had done. It was a very long and complex historical book, and I had had great difficulty getting it done in the time available.'

The indexer's feeling that given more time, a better result might have been achieved, is a sentiment not unfamiliar to indexers of many years' experience!

As to her second index, this indexer was afraid that the simplicity of the book would not be in her favour. In fact there was sufficient substance in the book to demonstrate her mastery of the basic rules of indexing.

**Assessors' report on first index (not accepted)**

The fault which was of most concern was the manner of presenting subheadings and sub-subheadings. The latter cannot be accommodated in run-on paragraph form. One assessor quotes G. Norman Knight's Indexing, the art of, pp. 56, 98 and 164, and the section on subheadings, run-on, as the authority for this.

The treatment of dates was criticized as inconsistent. The form recommended is the abbreviated form indicating the century in italics. There is a section in Knight on the indexing of terms containing numerals.

One assessor queried the three separated entries for famines, and the four entries for Coutumier de . . . /Très Ancien Coutumier . . . 'These should have been conflated under custumals or coutumier with a cross-reference.'

The assessors noted many references to small specific topics, such as names of villages and of diseases, but a lack of headings representing general topics such as 'food', 'employment', 'cost of living'. The entry for 'diet' was considered inadequate.

Another general comment suggests that several index entries refer the reader to references in the text which are not worth indexing, while other topics such as social and economic matters are omitted.

**Assessors' report on second index (accepted)**

**Main headings.** The names of obscure persons need an informative epithet. Some terms used as main headings are misleading and unlikely to be sought by an index user looking for the information entered there: e.g., 'Herefordshire', where the information is relevant less to the county than to the clergy.

**Exclusiveness and inclusiveness.** Some trivial entries are given space, such as all parishes and their dioceses; this practice is not always justified by the usefulness of the entries. Other entries are not given sufficient analytical treatment.

**Subheadings.** Some are good, some poor. In the case of concepts they are often non-existent. Headings where
they could with advantage have been used are 'tithes', 'Luther', 'Muntzer'.

**Cross-references.** There are some instances of the common fault of making a cross-reference to an entry where there is only one page reference. More cross-references than are supplied are needed in some places, for instance from the entry under 'Friars' to other headings where relevant information is to be found.

**Strings.** There are a few entries where as many as six or seven page references are given. This indicates a need for more subheadings.

'... a simple form of index, but the indexer has increased its usefulness by a good deal of research, thus providing additional useful information.'

**Conclusion**

It may seem surprising that only one of the four candidates had pursued a formal course of instruction in indexing. It is interesting to note that this particular indexer had very few criticisms applied to his work by the assessors. He was completely new to this type of work, while each of the others had had some experience of publishing.

Criticisms most commonly made by the assessors (applying to candidates generally, not just to those we have mentioned) include the following:

1. A tendency to enter in the index easily identifiable topics (whether or not the references given direct the reader to a useful source of information) at the expense of abstract concepts to which the author may have referred obliquely or in various terms and phrases.
2. The use of cross-references directing the reader to a single page reference, when entering the reference under two separate headings would have occupied no more space.
3. Failure to edit the index with intelligence and understanding of the subject matter. This is shown by the use of entry words which are not mutually exclusive, so that closely related topics may be found under several different headings; by a choice of words and terms which are not concise or unequivocal in their meaning; and by a generally uneconomic use of available space.

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**Indexing in UK library schools: a survey**

Olwen Terris

In January 1986 the Society of Indexers' Training and Accreditation Board sent a letter to each of the 17 library schools in the UK, aiming to establish:

1. Whether indexing and subject analysis were taught as a compulsory part of the course;
2. What aspects of indexing were covered in the curriculum.

The schools were invited to send a prospectus or course outline.

Ten library schools replied to the first mailing, and four more to a follow-up letter six weeks later. All 14 enclosed either a prospectus or course outline. (The three schools that did not reply were the Polytechnic of North London, Ealing College of Higher Education, and University of Sheffield Department of Information Studies.)

**Indexing as taught by library schools**

I have not attempted to evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of the indexing lectures in individual library schools. One school will naturally place a stronger emphasis on certain topics than another, but generally the aspects of indexing listed below are covered by at least one lecture in all the schools. Nor have I attempted to calculate the number of hours spent on indexing in lectures and practical work. Not all schools provided this information, and the quality of the tuition and range of topics covered is more valuable than the hours given to indexing on the timetable.

1. Theoretical aspects of subject analysis were covered well, with lectures on epistemology, concept analysis, semantics, and linguistics.
2. Alphabetization (word by word and letter by letter) was taught in all the schools, as were codes regulating the choice of name and subject headings: AACR2, ISBD, LCSH, Sears, the relevant British Standards, etc.
3. A wide range of indexing systems was taught, both free-language and controlled-vocabulary. Automatic keyword indexes (kwic, kwoc), PRECIS, chain indexing, citation indexing, free-text indexing, pre-coordinate and post-coordinate indexing were covered. Practical sessions on thesaurus construction to support these indexes were a compulsory part of all courses.

An edited version of a report presented to the SI Training and Accreditation Board.

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