

Indexing for children

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Discusses problems in indexing for children, and considers ways to improve the quality of children's indexes and how to ensure that indexes are included in children's books.

I became interested in indexes for children when I was asked to index an excellent guide to children's information books, *Finding out about finding out* by Bobbie Neate.¹ This volume describes the difficulties children encounter when trying to retrieve information from books, and mentions indexes in a section on structural guiders in children's books. In her survey, the author found that only 58 per cent of informative texts for children have indexes.

The books that had indexes gave children little guidance as to their arrangement and use, and many of the indexes were unhelpful in that they included references to words merely mentioned in the text. This does more harm than good, as children make the effort of finding the entry and then cannot do anything constructive with the information they are given. I have heard this criticism voiced by many teachers, librarians and children themselves.

Bobbie Neate later asked me to index a set of primary school textbooks of which she was the series editor, published by Longman Education. I was encouraged by Longman's development editor to work with my oldest daughter, then six years old, to help me compile the indexes (as described in the *SI Newsletter*).²

The Longman books were simple and highly illustrated. Indexes to such books may well be little more than lists of nouns or verb forms such as 'walking', 'playing', etc.

I was asked to advise on the index layout. I asked for the alphabet to be printed in full, upper and lower case, on the same page as the index, and for each alphabetical section of the index to be indicated. Longman did not take up my suggestion of using colour for the alphabet and the first letter of each word, owing to design constraints; nor did they use my introductory statement, perhaps thinking it unnecessary for such a small index, and that guidance might be given by teachers.

Each book had 24 pages and I was asked to include not more than 24 entries in each index. We agreed that subheadings would not be a good idea as they would introduce another alphabetical sequence. Choosing not to use subheadings can make it hard to avoid strings of undifferentiated references, but it was not too much of a problem in such short books. Longman also asked me to try not to reproduce terms used in the contents list, as children need to see the index as a separate access to the information contained in the text, and one that is organized differently from the contents list. The basic format that we arrived at was used by editors in-house to construct indexes for some of the other books in the series, and I was given a number of books to index for the next age group in the series.

On the whole I feel that this level of collaboration between

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indexer and editor is right. With children's books in particular, some departure from the standard format of an index may be needed, and the indexer should be involved in any decisions regarding this, perhaps taking a more creative design role.

Librarians' views

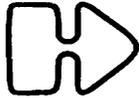
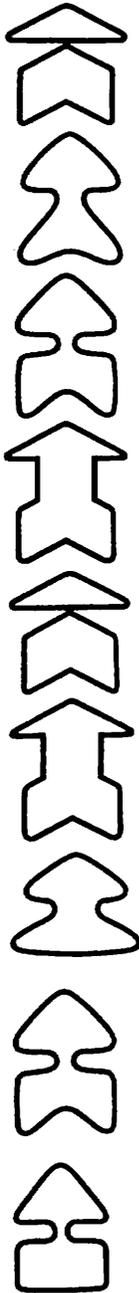
I asked several publishers and librarians about their views on indexing. The librarians seemed to be indexers' natural allies, and had many suggestions. They felt that children needed to be introduced to indexes early and to the concept of books as tools, not necessarily to be read from cover to cover. Indexes in children's books need a good explanatory introduction, an indication of where pictures and major references occur in the text, and a large capital letter to indicate the beginning of a new alphabetical division within the index. Subheadings are necessary to avoid strings of references, but perhaps better avoided in books for children under eleven years old.

Children need a complete success rate when using an index and may well give up after one unsuccessful attempt. They do not have the linguistic flexibility to hunt for synonyms if they cannot find the word they seek in the index. David Streatfield, from Information Management Associates, told me that he thought that indexers should move away from the concept of keyword or single-word indexes, which are more appropriate for adult readers. Phrases or sectional tags, similar to those found in the contents list, might be more useful for children.

A comprehensive school librarian in Boston Spa had strong feelings on this topic. She felt that 8–11 was the optimal age at which indexing skills should be taught and that the UK's National Curriculum had made a noticeable difference. Most 11-year-olds have now been taught to use dictionaries, glossaries and indexes, while most 16- and 17-year-olds still rely heavily on the contents pages. Her own test is to ask children to find out as much as they can about Hitler in an encyclopaedia. She finds that 11-year-olds turn first to the index volume of the encyclopaedia, while the 17-year-olds turn to the 'H' volume, thereby missing many cross-references and additional material. She also uses environmental studies as a topic to encourage children to select books across the Dewey Decimal range. She will not buy books without indexes for the school library, unless they are otherwise excellent. For example, the *ITN factbook*, widely used by 11–16-year-olds, has no index. She says that much time is wasted by children on this otherwise useful book during project work.

Publishers' views

The publishers did not seem particularly interested in the production of indexes for children's books. An exception was the primary school publisher Ginn, which had a policy of including indexes in its books, sometimes with the keywords



GAME



Choose a book and turn to the index. See who is the first person to find a word beginning with m.

QUESTION ONE What is an index?

QUESTION TWO How do you usually find what you need to know in a book?

QUESTION THREE Do you ever look at the index first to see what is in the book?



GAME



Choose a word from the index in your book. See who is the first person to find that word on the page shown in the index.

QUESTION FOUR What makes an index helpful?

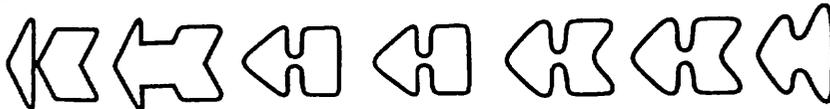
QUESTION FIVE What makes an index difficult to use?

QUESTION SIX Can you find the words see or see also in your index? Why do you think they are used?

PROJECT WORK

Choose 30 words from a page in your book and put them into alphabetical order.

Choose a short book and make your own index to it.



illustrated pictorially for younger readers, and producing them in-house.

One editor said she preferred auto-indexing packages to run up an index, which she would then scrutinize for faults, although for younger readers she would prepare the index herself. She felt that she would generally know the book and the target readership better than an outside indexer.

Research with children

I devised an indexing worksheet and tried it out at my daughter's school. The basic tasks took about 45 minutes to

complete, and there was some project work to be finished separately. I was given a group of six 8-year-olds to try it out with (see figure).

To the first question on the worksheet the children replied that an index was something that guides you to a page and saves you looking through the whole book. They knew that it was in alphabetical order.

When asked in Question Two what they would turn to first, they said in unison: 'the index', but then admitted that in fact they wouldn't! They finally listed their choice of guides to information retrieval in this order of priority:

1. the contents list
2. the library subject index (Dewey Decimal)
3. a quick read of the first few pages
4. the title (is it interesting?)
5. the back cover
6. the pictures

They do not use the index first but are learning how to use it.

To the fourth question they replied that a short index was best, preferably of no more than one page, although they said it needed to contain more than the contents list.

The fifth question elicited complaints about small, tightly spaced print; words in the index that they didn't understand; and words in the index that did not appear on the page, e.g. *body heat* in the index, *body temperature* on the page. They found it confusing if index terms referred to pictures or maps.

We looked at examples of cross-references in Question Six. A simple book about dogs included a cross-reference: 'Alsatian see German Shepherd'. The girl who showed me this example said she would have assumed that there was something about Alsatians in the book but would not have known where to find it. She did not realize that Alsatians and German Shepherds were the same. The first location reference for German Shepherd showed an illustration of the animal, but with no indication that it was also called an Alsatian.

The children made a start on the projects while I was with them. Their difficulties with alphabetical order became apparent. They did not realize that not only the initial letter but also the subsequent letters in words were part of the alphabetical sequence. For children of this age I think a printed alphabet on the index page is useful, although they may have been able to recognize and recite the alphabet from memory for several years. An analogy is that of learning a new language with a different alphabet, then having to use a dictionary in the new language. The use of colour in an index might be useful to highlight perhaps the first two letters of each word.

A Milton Keynes school librarian tried this worksheet with 9-12-year-olds. She reported that few automatically used a book index, and that Question Five brought up criticism of book production and size of typefaces. The children were also critical of broad-class index headings with indented specific subheadings that did not then appear as headings in their own right—they called this 'cheating'! This group of children had not grasped the principle of cross-references before.

The National Curriculum, as it stood in April 1994,³ relates to indexing in several aspects.

By Level Two, an average seven-year-old should be able to 'demonstrate knowledge of the alphabet in using word books and simple dictionaries'. In practical terms this means the child can 'turn towards the end to find words beginning with "s", rather than always starting from the beginning'.

By Level Three, able seven-year-olds should be able to 'devise a clear set of questions that will enable them to select and use appropriate information sources and reference books from the class and school library'.

At Levels Four and Five, 8-11-year-olds should be able to 'find books or magazines in the class or school library by using the classification system, catalogue or database and use appropriate methods of finding information, when pursuing a line of inquiry.' They should also be able to 'select reference books and other information materials and organizational

devices to find answers to their own questions and those of others.' The examples given for 'organizational devices' are 'chapter titles, subheadings, typefaces, symbol keys, etc.'

The principles of indexing for children are not basically very different from those of all good-quality indexing: strict attention has to be paid to alphabetical order, accurate page references, and avoidance of long strings of useless references. Special points to bear in mind for children, though, are:

1. clear alphabetical divisions;
2. avoidance of too many subheadings;
3. as much explanation as possible in the introductory statement, e.g. how to use cross-references or special typefaces to indicate illustrations;
4. entries in the form of phrases, possibly including synonyms, rather than single-word entries;
5. words in the index matching those on the page as far as possible;
6. the overall design, typeface, spacing, indentation, length and even colour of the index.

Conclusions

I should be grateful to receive suggestions as to how the situation in children's indexing might be improved. We indexers can always attempt to improve our own standards, but many children's books with their indexes are still going to be produced in-house, and many children's books will appear without an index. Is this an area where, instead of selling our own particular services, we should be providing information or education for publishers and their editors in-house, so that they can take a hand in remedying some of the current deficiencies in this area of children's literature?

References

1. Neate, Bobbie. *Finding out about finding out: a practical guide to children's information books*. Sevenoaks: Hodder & Stoughton, 1992.
2. Society of Indexers. *Newsletter*. October 1993.
3. The statements of attainment at levels 1 to 3 are as specified by Order and published in the statutory Document entitled *English in the National Curriculum* (ISBN 0 11 270682 7) on 31 May 1989.

Further reading

- King, H. B. Indexes to children's books are essential. *The Indexer* 5 (3) April 1967, 130-1.
- Miller, Brenda. Indexing children's books. *The Indexer* 8 (4) Oct. 1973, 140-4.
- King, H. B. A survey of indexes in school library books. *The Indexer* 8 (4) Oct. 1973, 210-13.
- Marland, Michael. Reading to learn and using the index. *The Indexer* 11 (1) Oct. 1978, 68-9.
- Miller, Brenda. Indexes of children's books in Australia. *The Indexer* 12 (1) April 1980, 29-33.

A telling picture of a child consulting reference books is found in the story, *Tom's midnight garden* by Philippa Pearce (OUP, 1958; Chapter 14, 'The pursuit of knowledge'). Young Tom has seen ghosts in the garden, and seeks to learn the period at which they lived. His only clue is their 'old-fashioned' clothes.

He thought he knew where he could find information. He had often noticed on his aunt's kitchen shelf, together with Mrs Beeton's and all the other cookery books, a volume invitingly called *Enquire Within Upon Everything*. Now, when his aunt was out shopping, he slipped out of bed and borrowed it.

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Gibbon's original index

We reproduce below a portion of Claude Rawson's substantial review of a new edition of Edward Gibbon's *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman empire*, edited by David Womersley, which appeared in the TLS on July 14 1995.

One of the pleasures of this edition [of *The history of the decline and fall of the Roman empire*] is that it reproduces for the first time since 1788 the 'General index to the Six Volumes', which Gibbon tells us was compiled by 'a person frequently employed in works of this nature', evidently a professional indexer whose identity remains unknown. He (or perhaps she) had a fine appreciation of Gibbonian effects, so that the index becomes a kind of extension to the annotation. Womersley directs us to the entry for Sylvania, 'sister of the praefect Rufinus, her uncommon sanctity', its deadpan notation offering the barest intimation, sufficient to alert the reader but not to spoil the pleasures of discovery, of a quintessential Gibbonian note about 'the studious virgin [who] had diligently . . . perused the commentators on the Bible . . . to the amount of five million lines. At the age of threescore, she could boast, that she had never washed her hands, face, or any part of her whole body; except the tips of her fingers, to receive the communion', an exquisite illustration of that Gibbonian perception of the early Christians as 'ignorant fanatics, uncouth and probably dirty' which F. R. Leavis noted in a famous passage.

The indexer not only had a fine connoisseurship in Gibbonian irony but an energetic intelligence of his own. His entries, like some definitions in Johnson's *Dictionary*, show a talent for adapting the informative neutrality of a reference-work to the expression of tendentious or highly personal opinions: 'Marozia, a Roman prostitute, the mother, grandmother, and greatgrandmother of three popes', 'Mary, Virgin, her immaculate conception, borrowed from the Koran'. His studied composure not only survives but seems sustained by the repeated planting of explosive charges (this has Johnsonian analogues too): 'Apollinaris, patriarch of

Alexandria, butchers his flock in defence of the Catholic doctrine of the incarnation'; 'John of Cappadocia . . . Is disgraced by the empress Theodora, and becomes a bishop'; 'Sigismond, . . . murders his son, and is canonised'. The blandness of these entries answers to the muffled deadliness of Gibbon's own prose, on the subject, for example, of atrocities in warfare or sectarian persecution. Womersley says the indexer's anticlericalism is more nakedly exhibited than Gibbon's in the history itself, but this isn't always true, and there are examples of opposite tendency. The entry for 'Transubstantiation, the doctrine of, when established' gives no hint of the text's acerbity on the subject of Innocent III, who 'may boast of the two most signal triumphs over sense and humanity, the establishment of transubstantiation, and the origin of the inquisition'. Text and index answer and reinforce one another in a dialogue not unlike that between the narrative and Gibbon's footnotes. The index will seem to some readers very close to Gibbon's own manner, so that the notion of its being his own work (denied, perhaps, out of *pudeur* at confessing to the menial drudgery) might have a certain appeal.

This General Index is a delight to have. Womersley also provides an imaginatively conceived 'Bibliographical Index', partly in response to Gibbon's abandoned project of a seventh volume which would have included a critical catalogue of his sources. The two indexes are probably, in functional terms, an improvement on J. B. Bury's two, which are somewhat differently conceived; certainly the entries on authors are often fuller than Bury's in the number of references and the quantity of analytical information. What we don't have is Womersley's own index to the entire edition, and I suspect that the most signal service that could now be rendered to Gibbon studies is the provision of a comprehensive analytical index to the text, notes and editor's introduction, comparable to that of the Hill-Powell edition of Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. Such a work, beyond the scope of the 1788 index, would open windows on a vast panorama of classical scholarship, European history and Enlightenment thought.

Indexing for children — continued

He looked in the Index for CLOTHING—Styles of Clothing in the Past. There was nothing under STYLES, or under PAST. Under CLOTHES there were subheadings that Tom would certainly have found interesting at any other time—Loose Warmer than Tight, and Rendering Fireproof; but there was nothing about the changing fashions of history. He felt dispirited, as though he had been invited to call, and promised a feast, and then, when he had knocked at the door, found no one *Within*.

. . . Tom returned *Enquire Within*, and, on the next occasion of his being left alone in the flat, prowled round looking for any other book of useful information. In his uncle's and aunt's bedroom he had a find: a complete set of volumes of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* in their own special glass-fronted bookcase.

Tom looked up CLOTHING, and that asked him to 'See COSTUME', which he did. There were many pages in double columns of small print, whose appearance somehow discouraged him. He preferred to look at the pictures.

He noticed an oddity in the earlier illustrations. The men wore various kinds of leg coverings, but never trousers: the first pair of

trousers to be represented was worn by a French Man of Fashion in the Early Victorian Period. Tom did at least know that the men and boys in his garden had all worn trousers—with the exception of Edgar, who sometimes wore a kind of breeches with woollen stockings.

Hot on the scent now, Tom turned to the volume TON to VES of the *Encyclopaedia*, and looked up TROUSERS. There were no illustrations, but the written account was short . . . The wearing of trousers, it seemed, had been introduced in the early nineteenth century; the Duke of Wellington had caused a sensation with his. The article ended: 'Strong opposition was taken against them by the clergy and at the universities. (See COSTUME.)'

Tom now felt he had enough information to arrange into an argument. 'Hatty lived when men wore trousers, so she can't have lived earlier than the nineteenth century, when trousers came into fashion. Very well.'

Extracts from *Tom's midnight garden* quoted here by permission of Oxford University Press.