Letters to the editor

from Michael Brackney, California:

Homograph arrangement — (1)

I applaud Garry Cousins' experimental efforts to shed some light on the current debate over the filing of homographs (April 1996). Even a little solid evidence of what actually works for readers quickly overshadows much speculation. His survey shows that a lot of readers have difficulty with and/or object to the "person, place, subject, title" rule for "grouping entries into categories which defy strict alphabetical order" exemplified in List A (with some additional headings and capitalized subtitles):

List A

London, Anne
London, Jack
London, William
London
London, Central
London, Diocese of
London Airport
London Bridge
London, Midland and Scottish Railway
London University
London: An Illustrated History
London, Capital of the Commonwealth
London Guide Book
London—Tours of the City

On the basis of the evidence presented, however, I question Cousins' conclusion regarding taking commas in inverted headings into account. Since the "person, place, subject, title" rule alone suffices to determine the filing order of the terms in List A, the preference of his survey participants for the "logical order" of List B ("arranged strictly by the sequence of words, ignoring all punctuation") shows little about the possible helpfulness of taking commas in inverted headings into account *without* grouping headings into categories that defy alphabetical order. To show something about this he would have had to offer at least one other arrangement, such as the variation on List B hereby dubbed List C, with all the inverted names filed together in alphabetical order.

List B

London
London Airport
London: An Illustrated History
London, Anne
London Bridge
London, Capital of the Commonwealth
London, Central
London, Diocese of
London Guide Book
London, Jack
London, Midland and Scottish Railway
London—Tours of the City
London University
London, William

I find List B somewhat difficult to read. The sporadic punctuation breaks interrupt scanning and headings beginning with single punctuation-delimited words like "*London: an illustrated history*", "London, Jack" and "*London, William*" look out of place following multiple-word headings like "London Airport" and "*London Guide Book*".

List C

London
London, Anne
London, Central
London, Diocese of
London, Jack
London, William
London Airport
London: An Illustrated History
London Bridge
London, Capital of the Commonwealth
London Guide Book
London, Midland and Scottish Railway
London—Tours of the City
London University

In List C grouping together and alphabetizing all the inverted names improves *their* readability but leaves the rest untouched.

Taking this process a step further, grouping together titles with identical main titles by taking into account punctuation marks that separate subtitles from main titles helps a lot more. Filing such headings after inverted headings gives us List D:

List D

London
London, Anne
London, Central
London, Diocese of
London, Jack
London, William
London: An Illustrated History
London, Capital of the Commonwealth
London—Tours of the City
London Airport
London Bridge
London Guide Book
London, Midland and Scottish Railway
London University

This arrangement is actually my own attempt at improving on the "person, place, subject, title" rule exemplified in List A, which I was originally taught. It is one I have used when the choice has been up to me, but it too poses problems: it makes an unexplained and possibly helpful/possibly confusing distinction between inverted and noninverted punctuation-delimited homographs, it leaves serial comma-delimited homographs filed together with multiple-word terms, and it features a quite possibly confusing multi-faceted handling of commas throughout. Moreover, like the arrangements in List A and List C, it requires manual sorting.

Last year, mulling over the exchanges between John Vickers and Nancy Mulvany and Geoffrey Dixon in *The Indexer* (April 1995 and October 1995), I discovered that in word-by-word arrangements all the problems mentioned above can be eliminated while optimizing index readability by sorting all commas, colons, and dashes (equivalent to double hyphens) as spaces, as in List E (next page):

I wonder what people think of this arrangement (and whether anyone has ever seen it before). Interestingly, it represents a logical order identical to the one in List B except for what could be considered a more useful regard for punctuation.

List E

London
London: An Illustrated History
London, Anne
London, Capital of the Commonwealth
London, Central
London, Diocese of
London, Jack
London, Midland and Scottish Railway
London—Tours of the City
London, William
London Airport
London Bridge
London Guide Book
London University

(Like List B, List E makes no distinctions among the marks considered, which means that it too can be done automatically by computer.) In word-by-word arrangements this regard for punctuation could be considered more logical as well as more useful, for if we sort spaces, hyphens, and slashes as spaces in order to enhance index readability, why not sort commas, colons, and dashes in the same way for the same reason?

Anyway, unless someone knows of other research on homographic arrangements that has not yet been brought to light in this debate, only further experiments can show us what arrangement, if any, really works best for most readers. How about some of us submitting List B and List E (as List 1 and List 2) with the question "Which arrangement would be more natural and helpful for you in scanning and looking up terms in an index?" to willing friends and acquaintances with no special expertise in indexing? I'll gladly send an unformatted questionnaire including both arrangements to anyone requesting one from me at brackney@nccn.net and then collate and summarize any results that come back.

From Geoff Dixon, Ayr, Scotland:

Homograph arrangement — (2)

Garry Cousins (Indexer (20) 1, April 1966, p.31) seeks support for his arguments concerning the filing order of inverted headings and homonyms by citing the results of a mini-survey he conducted amongst 31 of his colleagues. This poll of user opinion would be much more convincing if the participants had been asked to pass judgement on a more realistic sample of index headings. I rather suspect that, faced with a very large index containing dozens of same-word headings the results would have been very different.

The 1968-70 *Cumulative Index to the British National Bibliography* has over 5 columns of entries all consisting of the single word "London" and the arrangement which Cousins prefers would make no sense, because (as I wrote in my original letter) it would allow the sequence of name/forename entries to be broken up. It would also not make sense because it would equally break up a sequence of heading/subheading entries — of which the BNB contains many and which it lists in full, line by line, using a semi-colon, e.g. London: airports; London: education. I invite readers to look at the indexes to *British National Bibliography*, *Encyclopedia Americana*, and *Collier's Encyclopedia*, all of which are arranged on the classified principle of person, place, subject, title. *Encyclopedia Britannica* used also to conform to this pattern, but, since 1985, it interfiles persons and places — although even now it does not go so far as to merge inverted with other multi-word headings. (It could be held of course that *Encyclopedia Britannica* is not

the indexing authority it once was, since it published the 15th edition (1974) without an index, only to find itself driven to reinstate it in 1985.)

A comment in parenthesis here: strict A-Z arrangement soon breaks down when large numbers of entries are concerned, particularly when those entries are of a mixture of types: anyone who has had to deal with the literature of a prolific author (for example) knows this and it is then that the axiom "as simple as ABC" begins to sound a little hollow. As with Garry Cousins' preference, the simplicity is attractive, but unsophisticated and spurious. All indexes of any size print detailed instructions for using them, proof surely that rules have been considered necessary to bring order to a complex problem.

All other considerations apart, there must be some force in the argument that since many other minds — some in large, specialised organisations — have opted for the "classified" method of dealing with this problem, there must be something in it. The filing rules used by the British National Bibliography prescribed it from its inception and BLAISE filing rules, by which the current BNB is ordered, continue to do so. The method is also endorsed in some measure at least by BS 3700 (Preparing indexes to books, periodicals and other documents). One can of course bandy authorities till the cows come home. All of Collison (1953), Knight (1969) and Knight (1979) support my view and I suppose that it does represent the "traditional" position. I see nothing wrong in this however and I repeat what I said before — that large sequences of personal names (or of place names) look silly when they contain "intruders".

In conclusion — Garry Cousins cites ALA filing rules, rule 2.1 to buttress his contention that "librarians have been ignoring the comma since at least 1980". I am not quite sure to which edition of this work he refers* but I have looked at the 1st (1942) and the 2nd (1968) and I find that Rule 2 deals only with *modified and special letters*, and therefore any recommendation to ignore diacritical marks refers only to this category of heading. It does not cover the comma in inverted headings.

References
Collison, R L. *Indexing books*. Ernest Benn, 1953. p.141
Knight, G Norman. *Indexing, the art of*. Allen & Unwin, 1979. p.118
Knight G Norman (ed) *Training in indexing*. MIT Press, 1969.

*I think Garry Cousins was referring to the 1980 edition — Ed

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Homograph arrangement — (3)

Just for the record, here is what the forthcoming International Standard ISO 999 (not accepted by ANSI/ NISO) says:

Index headings beginning with the same term should be filed in the following sequence:

term with or without subheadings
term with qualifier
term as first element of longer term

Punctuation within the headings (in the example below, parentheses to introduce a qualifier) serves to make the nature of the heading explicit and to enable automated sorting.

EXAMPLE
milk
cows'
goats'
Milk (report)
milk allergies
Milk Marketing Board

— *Ed*