

# How we index: six ways to work

edited and introduced by Pat F Booth

A practical guide in which six experienced indexers outline their day to day work methods.

These descriptions of real-life indexing originally appeared in *Unit B: Choice and form of entries* of the Society of Indexers' *Training in Indexing* open learning manuals. Their purpose in that Unit is to give trainee indexers a glimpse into the working lives of six experienced freelance indexers, so that — in addition to acquiring basic knowledge of indexing technique and principles — they may gain some understanding of how the work is actually done. What is revealed is that indexers have their individual ways of working. In response to a demand for straightforward material about indexing, the Society of Indexers and the various authors have agreed to republish the original material here, with small additions. We hope that it will be of interest to all indexers, but of especial use to those new to indexing.

Every index needs to be individually considered in relation to context (including user need), and may need tailoring to suit the publisher's house style, specified length and number of entries, layout, and other special requirements. The ideal situation (plenty of time, ample space available for the index, acceptance of everything the indexer supplies) sometimes contrasts with the reality (last-minute commissioning of the index resulting in tight deadlines; restricted space; omission of introductory statements; quibbles about forms of heading and layout).

Here some experienced indexers (mostly of books) describe their own methods.

## GILL RIORDAN

*Gill Riordan marks the proofs, then makes entries straight into a computer, using a word-processing program.*

It would be nice to read the whole book before starting work on it, but that's a luxury. Usually time dictates a hasty look at the contents page and then it's straight into reading and **underlining all indexable items**. This requires a flexible approach. It can be done, for example, on train journeys, or, surreptitiously, at boring committee meetings.

Then I **enter the marked-up items on the computer**, using a word-processing program. I include anything that might be important — names, objects, ideas. They can always be erased later, but take hours to find if you need to hunt back for them. I'm not fussy at this stage whether the page numbers are attached to prospective subheadings or are in long strings. The important thing is to get them down somewhere.

I make sure as I go that I have spelt the **names of people** as they appear on the page and that the page numbers are correct, so that I won't need to check them again. Of course, if they acquire a large number of location references, subheadings will have to be created. Sometimes interesting discrepancies are thrown up, with different spellings or initials in different chapters which the editor hasn't noticed.

That's the raw data collected together; the tough, and time-consuming, bit comes next. I work through my printout,

checking location references back to the text and making sure I have understood what the author is saying. The intention is to create an index that is **well-structured and easy to use**. There are several key factors:

- (a) I try to make **main headings from the majority of entries**. Some will also be subheadings under other main headings; if only a few location references are involved, I prefer to repeat them rather than use cross-references.
- (b) **Deciding whether to retain an entry** — only if it adds something reasonably substantial to the reader's knowledge. It is necessary, for example, to decide on some sort of rule of thumb if a book ranges widely over a topic and is full of brief examples.
- (c) For each main heading with more than six or seven location references, it is necessary to review **subheadings** already created and/ or to decide on new ones. Location references in subheadings should not repeat location references against the main heading.
- (d) I think carefully about **initials and acronyms**. For example, if the text refers to 'British Computer Society' and 'BCS', I would have two parallel entries:

BCS (British Computer Society) 95, 99  
British Computer Society (BCS) 95, 99

If the text never uses 'BCS' on its own, I forget the first entry. If, on the other hand, there are many location references and subheadings are necessary, I would put the subheadings under 'British Computer Society (BCS)' and have a line for 'BCS *see* British Computer Society'. Sometimes it is the acronym that is better known, e.g. NATO. In this case, I would put the subheadings under 'NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)', with a cross-reference 'North Atlantic Treaty Organization *see* NATO'.

- (e) I try to **collect together all the references to a subject** in one area of the index, taking account of the recommendations of BS 1749 6.3 on subjects beginning with the same entry term, e.g.:

light 18–24  
Biblical references 96–7 (*subject entry term with subheading*)  
*see also* painting; photography  
light, artificial 50–3 (*subject entry term with qualifier*)  
light and shade 121, 123 (*subject entry term as first element of phrase denoting a compound subject*)

Light of the World, The 98

- (f) I try to take on board all the recommendations in BS 1749 and BS 3700.

These amendments are all put into the computer and a clean printout produced, ready for the final tidying process. This consists basically of checking for **internal consistency and accuracy**. For example, looking at (e) above:

- the index will have some sort of heading for 'Bible'; there probably won't be a separate reference to 'light', but the

page numbers 96–7 should be among the location references.

- check under 'painting' and 'photography'; each should have a subheading to do with 'light'. I could copy these as subheadings for 'painting' and 'photography' under 'light', but it will probably be useful for the reader to have the opportunity to survey the whole area of 'painting' and 'photography'.
- if there is room in the index, I shall have a main heading for 'artificial light'; check that the location references are the same for both headings.
- try and be aware of other entries which may be related, e.g. if there is an entry for 'chiaroscuro' (light and shade), are the location references the same?; if there is an entry for 'Holman Hunt', there may not need to be an actual reference to 'The Light of the World', but the page number 98 should be among the location references.

I also check for alphabetical order, location reference order, spelling, mis-typings and mis-spacings, before entering this final batch of amendments on the computer. Then the index can be written to disk, printed out on paper — whatever the editor wants — and dispatched. And however thoroughly you check, when you look at the printout two days later, you'll probably find something you missed!

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## BARBARA BRITTON

*Barbara Britton works with paper slips, pen, notepad and (for final copy) a typewriter.*

Suppose that I have settled with a publisher's editor to index a book — say, on the War of the Spanish Succession (early 18th century) — of 400 pages, to be done in three weeks. On receiving the proofs I check pagination and that maps etc. are on the pages given by the contents list. I use a ream of good A4 paper quartered into slips by the local printer's book guillotine (cheaper than cards), shoeboxes with cardboard A–Z dividers, bios and a notepad. The time at this stage is divided into 3: reading the book and indexing the names of people and places, 1st week; re-reading and doing all other concepts, 2nd week; editing, checking, typing, the 3rd week. Being temperamentally incapable of reading for indexing purposes without writing something, I prefer to read and index the names at the same time.

I write fast — every name is recorded as fully as possible on the first slip for each, with its activity on that page (secondary information) and possibly a date (historical work). I proofread as I go and note on my pad the page numbers of errors, and any problems that occur. Since I am reasonably familiar with the subject, I know in advance which names are going to be important e.g. Marlborough, Queen Anne, Louis XIV, nearly all European countries, and battles: after the first slip for each I code them e.g. A for Anne, M for Marlborough. I never go back to a slip, simply making another for the next location reference.

When the pile of slips gets unruly, I sort them very fast — into six groups at first, A–C, D–G, H–L, M–Q, R–T and U–Z, and then put them all into full A–Z order; battles will have few location references which are collected on to one slip, whereas Marlborough, say, will have a long column of subheadings, so all his slips are filed by page order inside a rubber band — then the whole lot go into the box. I prefer this method to dipping in and out of the box all the time. Each subsequent bundle is then interfiled with those already in the box.

These purely mechanical actions give me a relief from writing and making decisions every 30 seconds and so act as small rest periods all through the indexing. Any problems are phoned to the editor.

Then in the second week I read through again for all other concepts, e.g. political factions at home and abroad. Encapsulating ideas into indexing terms takes a lot of thought so now time becomes more important: the index must be finished in two weeks from now, so for the second week the total page numbers are divided by 7 so that I must index  $x$  pages per day, and usually the hours per day increase as thought increases. With luck the names might have taken less time so there is more time for thinking: the creation of subheadings and cross-references offers challenges to the brain and occasionally rises to inspiration. Then with all the entries finally boxed, I phone the editor again to report progress and mention any further problems.

In the final week (possibly 4–5–6–7 days, depending on previous handling), I start the editing. Given names, dates of birth or death, perhaps need checking in home reference books or demand a dash to the public library. Subheadings are arranged from secondary information and main headings may have to come into secondary level: secondary may become primary information; and cross-references are perfected, many already suggested on the slips as I went along. Many slips are discarded during the editing, because of combining their information onto a single slip, and there is the great pleasure of watching the index slowly take on a consistent form. At the end of the editing I go through all the boxes, making sure that the alphabetical order is perfect.

Then the whole index is typed with carbon copies on A4 sheets. In this third week the hours per day have considerably increased, and may have become hours per night, too. If time permits, a check of the typescript against the slips is done, but if time doesn't, a check is made after dispatch and I phone the editor if I find any errors. A list of the page numbers of proof corrections is typed; an invoice; a short covering note; and then everything is packed and posted. And, yes, I did remember to number the typed sheets and to compose an introductory note explaining the particular signposting in this particular index.

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## RICHARD RAPER

*Richard Raper divides the proofs into sections and makes separate computer files for their entries, merging and editing them for the final index.*

Producing an index, with the assistance of a computer, consists of: planning, reading the text, actually compiling the index and submitting the product to the client.

During planning, the page proofs of the book awaiting an index are divided into sections, each one of which will supply data for a separate computer file. I like to work with small files, because if large, then checking the data becomes more time-consuming as well as being more difficult to comprehend. As a rough guide, each chosen section contains an expected 60 to 100 entries.

Having scanned or overlooked the content of the book, each selected section is read, then indexed. I find it necessary to study each section first, by reading it in detail, as an aid to the intellectual process of choosing balanced or representative terms for the entries. Then on the final reading, the entries are keyed into the computer or word processor.

Choosing items for keying depends on the type of index and expected readership. For example, a biography is treated quite differently compared to a textbook. A technical book would use terms appropriate to the level of scholarship of its users, such as school children at primary level, adults at academic levels, or maybe for general readers.

So where to start? Although I and my colleagues in my freelance business complete a number of indexes each week, I am still occasionally forced to ask this question when presented with a new topic. If in doubt, then I go to my local library and find similar or related books and analyse the indexes therein.

Selecting the terms can involve underlining or marking pieces of text, or better still, keying them directly into the computer, always asking the question: 'Would I use this entry if I were searching for information in the book?' Then I add the page number, or if the subject matter covers several pages, show a page range. It is quite usual to identify a concept with several entries, presenting it as a main entry, and again as subentries for other main entries. Ideally, whatever the starting point of a search, the user should be able to find the answer. Naming people, places and things is simpler, since one entry for each is probably sufficient.

On completion of the file for each section, the resulting index is printed out and checked against the text for accuracy and validity of the entry itself. There is nothing wrong with writing an incorrect entry at the first stage, but it is essential that each and every entry is corrected at the second stage to eliminate all error and imprecision. Then I reprint the corrected file, proof it again and after minor corrections, the file is saved and put on disk as a back-up. Indeed, I keep duplicate back-ups of every file since loss of data is both annoying and time-consuming — if not costly!

The ultimate stage is to merge the separate files, sort them into alphabetical order on the computer and print the merged index for final editing. At the same time the data in it must be checked against the original data from the small files. The index is now ready for its final correction on the computer and preparation of the hard copy or paper printout, and usually a disk version for direct typesetting. Occasionally I deliver an index by faxing the hard copy and emailing the formatted file itself.

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## JEAN SIMPKINS

*Jean Simpkins 'learned some of her craft from ... a retired barrister who may never have set eyes on a computer, but who produced some highly-regarded indexes nevertheless'; she writes entries on paper slips and uses a word processor for final copy.*

For indexes to texts which are a complicated network of interrelated abstract concepts (which many legal texts are), there is much to be said for the time-honoured method of writing entries on slips. It means that the exact form of words to describe a topic need not be finally decided until the editing process is nearly complete, and at that stage the only adjustments that need to be made involve altering the wording on the top slip of a bundle, fixing a rubber band, and moving the bundle from one section of the alphabetical sequence to another, (not forgetting to note any changes to cross-references) so that typing (using a word processor program where one is available) becomes a straightforward matter.

The method I use (for such complex texts) is as follows):

- (a) Read the page proofs marking phrases of importance.
- (b) One chapter at a time — write slips for every possible useful reference.
- (c) One chapter at a time, sort slips into alphabetical order.
- (d) Edit the collection of sorted slips on completing each chapter; this makes it very easy to check on the form of existing headings as one goes along, and gives an idea of the relative weight of any particular topic.
- (e) When the whole text has been indexed, start editing. (At this stage, one is half-way through the job.)
- (f) During the editing stage, examine scrupulously every entry which does not immediately make clear sense; look up all references which appear to refer to the same topic under slightly different wording; expand any references down to sub-sub-subheading level if necessary in order to give precise information; discard any slips which — now that the relationships of the topics are better understood — are not sufficiently noteworthy to qualify for inclusion. Check for consistency of treatment of similar topics.
- (g) Type on to disk, having discovered from the editor his requirements in this field.
- (h) Send the double-checked index copy off on time.
- (i) Chop up obsolete page proofs with guillotine to furnish more indexing slips.

With a simple text the computer indexing program is magic, but the advantage of this age-old system is that it shows that a novice indexer does not need immediately to invest large sums in sophisticated hardware — though a word-processing facility is of immense value.

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## JOHN VICKERS

*John Vickers marks up the page proofs and then passes them to his partner for keyboarding and processing with an indexing program.*

. . . The marking up is done by either underlining or highlighting the words to be used as headings, indicating inversions as necessary and writing in the margin the page range in cases where the reference extends beyond one. This is sufficient for the simpler levels of indexing, e.g. most personal and place names and straightforward concepts. But it has to be supplemented by writing instructions and additional entries in the top, bottom or side margins of the page. These are to deal with such items as abstract terms not used explicitly in the text, cross-references, and entries that call for subheadings. To take a simple example, a reference to the market cross at Salisbury might, according to the context or the scope of the book as a whole, require *either* a sub-entry under the place name *or* a heading 'market crosses' with 'Salisbury' as one of its subheadings.<sup>1</sup> One way of indicating the decision on such a point is to mark the relevant word(s) in the body of the text and then add a note in the margin, using a slash as shorthand for 'subheading'. E.g. in conjunction with the word 'Salisbury' highlighted in the text, 'market cross/' would indicate a heading, and '/ market cross' a subheading to be used.

The use of a program such as CINDEK does not, of course, eliminate the need for accuracy. Checking for errors is as necessary as ever, but is made easier in some respects, while the

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<sup>1</sup>Or, conceivably, both, although this solution is often a symptom of that household malady, Indexer's Cowardice.

nature of the errors to be expected changes. One valuable feature of the program is the facility to print (on screen or on paper) a draft index in the order in which entries were made, i.e. largely, if not entirely, in page-reference order. This makes it possible to check the accuracy of the page references direct from the text, and at the same time to look for accidental omissions.

But this, in turn, forces a choice on the keyboard operator. When further references (in some cases, quite numerous) to the same subject crop up later in the text, the temptation is to call up an existing entry and add the new page number(s) to it. This may involve a minimum of key-strokes and can save repeated retyping of a lengthy heading. But such an expedient complicates any page-by-page checking of the draft index and increases the risk of undetected errors. Moreover, it can itself lead to errors of identification, thereby calling for a further level of vigilance... [Three examples are given, of which the following is the first.]

1. Standard reference works disagree as to whether Thomas Aquinas is best indexed under 'T' (e.g. Webster's *Biographical dictionary* and the *Oxford dictionary of the Christian Church*) or under 'A' (e.g. Chambers' *Biographical dictionary* and the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*). It is relatively easy in such cases inadvertently to make entries under *both* headings — easier, that is, than it was in the days of manual indexing methods. Needless to say, the computer-assisted indexer needs to remain alert to this possibility of error and to adopt or develop safeguards against it. . . .

(Extracted from 'working in tandem — not forgetting the PC' by John A Vickers, *The Indexer* 17 (4) October 1991, 281-2.)

## PAT BOOTH

*Pat Booth doesn't mark or write on the proofs, and makes entries straight into the computer, using an indexing program.*

I scan through the proof pages (making sure they are complete and legible), but make no marks, except to encircle (in colour) note numbers in the text referring to chapter notes — which usually are indexable in the kinds of books I work on. (Some items, such as minutes or company papers, can't be marked anyway, because they have to be returned to the client's files.)

The purpose of the initial scan (which can develop into closer scrutiny if the identity of the topic under discussion ceases to be clear) is to get an idea of the overall content, the structure of the text, and the principal themes and subthemes, important names, etc. It also reveals whether there are helpful text headings, important words in bold, chapter or section summaries, or any other features which can indicate content and perhaps suggest headings for the index. While scanning, I watch out for any marks made by the copy editor to indicate text adjustments (lines at the top of a page which are to be taken back to the previous one, or at the bottom of a page to be carried on to the next one).

Having set up the index files in the computer, with a suitably recognizable filename (e.g. BUSENG for *Business English*), I take the proofs to the computer and (often using a ruler as a line-by-line guide) quickly digest each paragraph and page, inputting entries (headings and location references) as I go.

The headings used are often words (or forms of those words) which appear on the page (including useful things like the glossary) but otherwise come 'from my head' in order to represent the ideas treated on the page. If I'm not sure exactly

which term to use for a concept, I enter a provisional one, knowing that I will be able to firm it up when I edit, in the light of the other entries made. I use qualifiers and modifiers as seemingly relevant, and add any *see* and *see also* cross-references which look useful. I keep in mind the requirements of good indexing practice.

Once started, I rarely go back to see what I have done in earlier entries — I just try to 'get it all in'. Normally I ensure that entries are automatically sorted (word-by-word or letter-by-letter, as agreed with the client) and merged by the program (MACREX). If I have any queries, I either enter them starting with a question mark, so that they go into the query file, or enter a code letter or symbol beside that part of the entry which is uncertain.

I already know — before starting — roughly the amount of detail needed and the amount of space I have for the index, so the selection of topics and formation of headings takes that into account.

When all the raw entries are completed, I scan through the index on the screen, correcting any obvious mistakes (e.g. keyboarding errors) and inconsistencies (such as different forms of a word). Then I like to print it out (double-spaced), wait a day or so and check the entries (starting at A) against the text, marking changes in green on the hard copy; these could include correcting a location reference, changing a word or phrase to something more suitable, inserting entries for synonymous terms, adding *see* references and *see also* references, resolving the queries. The changes are then keyboarded into the computer file.

If there isn't time to print out a first draft, then I check the index on the screen, making amendments where necessary, dealing with the queried items, marking a code against each correct item, until all are done, then I delete the code.

I add the introductory paragraph (even when I suspect that the publisher won't use it) and print out my file copy of the completed index on scrap A4 paper — usually old page proofs from an earlier job. A final scan (marking in red anything that needs to be added by hand on the client's copy — unusual characters or notes), then print out the posh copy for the client (on new A4 paper) and make a disk file if one has been requested. Notes to the client (e.g. querying the form of a name, or adding a character not available on the keyboard) are marked on the hard copy.

Sometimes I receive the index proofs to check, but regular book publishers usually do it themselves. For other clients who use in-house word-processing or desk-top publishing systems, I prefer to do the checking myself, so that I can ensure that subheading indentions, turnover lines and 'continuation' statements are correct.

I keep the page proofs, plus my A4 and disk copies of the index, until the complimentary copy of the published version is received from the client. Then I make spot checks of the index against my own copy, to see if the entries are accurately reproduced. I also check the paging of the published version against the proof I indexed. Sometimes the text on the pages is adjusted by the publisher after the index has been prepared, without ensuring that the index is amended accordingly. If I find errors of either kind, I let the publisher know.

*Pat F Booth is editor of the Society of Indexers' Training in Indexing series of open learning units.*