GOOD PRACTICE IN INDEXING — THE NEW EDITION OF
INTERNATIONAL STANDARD ISO 999
Pat F Booth

The long-awaited and much-discussed second edition of the international indexing standard (first published in 1975 under the title Index of a publication) is now published. In the United Kingdom it replaces British Standard 3700:1988 Recommendations for preparing indexes to books, periodicals and other documents. It is the only indexing standard in existence which has been contributed to on a world-wide basis and agreed by national representatives on Technical Committee ISO/TC 46 Information and documentation, Subcommittee SC9 Presentation, identification and description of documents.

It is well-presented and user-friendly. The text extends across the full width of the page and has good bold headings, making it easier to read than a double-column format. There is plenty of white space around and between the paragraphs, so that it will be convenient for indexers to add their own annotations — practice notes, comments, and queries. The detailed index (compiled by Janet Shuter) leads to relevant clause number(s) — more specific than page numbers in this case.

Purpose
ISO 999 contains guidelines for the compilation and presentation of indexes. It is not a collection of ‘commandments’; rather it sets out basic principles, to which an indexer can add the style and procedures appropriate to a particular index and its users. The guidelines apply to the indexing of all kinds of document, whether written, printed or non-print, and to all production methods, whether manual or computer-assisted.

Many examples are given, as illustrations, not as prescriptions. Examples of French and German index entries are also included, which is useful where the practice differs between countries, as in the choice of singular and plural nouns as headings. In English the plural form of nouns is generally used for countable objects (‘animals’) and the singular for non-countables (‘freedom’), whereas in French and German the singular form is usually preferred.

What it contains — how it can help
The nitty-gritty of indexing is covered in the sections on content and organization, the arrangement of entries in indexes, and the presentation of the printed index. Some of the recommendations made on just a few of the most-debated technical points in index-making include:

Locators — form and presentation
Full page ranges are normally preferred, rather than elisions: 33-35, 115-116, 234-235, not 33-5, 115-16, 234-5. The use of ‘ff’ and ‘et seq.’ is not recommended. The standard has nothing to say on whether the topics contained within a long page range against a heading should be analysed into subheadings to that heading — a subject on which indexers continue to hold differing opinions.

Subheadings — order, and inclusion of prepositions
Normally the order should be alphabetical, but other arrangements may be suitable in some indexes. Prepositions should be included only if they remove ambiguity; they can either be recognized or ignored for purposes of alphabetical arrangement (but within an index the practice must be consistent).

Alphabetical arrangement
Word-by-word arrangement is preferred, but letter-by-letter is accepted for the continuation of an index arranged by that method. For me, this is too rigid. In practice, the method of alphabetical arrangement is one of the points which indexers need to agree with the publisher/customer at the outset; letter-by-letter is used as house style by many publishers and produces equally good indexes. Some of us, given a free choice, wait until we have generated all our index entries, then compare the results from both methods to see which gives — for a particular index — the better result.

On the thorny question of the order of headings beginning with the same term, the recommended sequence is that the term (with or without subheadings) comes first, followed by the term with qualifier, and finally the term as the first element of a longer heading. The type of heading (personal name, document title, ‘subject’) does not influence the order; the punctuation signs within the headings are given filing values by the indexer within the context of a particular index.

Introductory notes
Although indexers know that some publishers are strangely reluctant to include such notes, the standard supports those of us who consider the introductory note to be an integral part of a good index. Unless everything in the index is self-explanatory, a note is recommended — to explain, for example, the use of bold or italic type, the meaning of abbreviations, and the order of subheadings.

Towards quality in indexing
The list of definitions serves to remind us that we should be precise in our use of indexing vocabulary. For example, a ‘heading’ and an ‘entry’ are not the same — the former is part of the latter. An entry consists of a heading plus locator(s) and cross-reference(s) or both.

A step-by-step analysis is provided of what the indexer should do to ensure fulfilment of the function of an index (which is, of course, to provide the user with an efficient means of tracing information), and six different types of indexes are identified.

The quality characteristics of effective indexes are set out and the need for good relations between the indexer and the author and publisher is emphasized. Any experienced indexer can confirm how important it is to establish a complete understanding with the customer about what is required and what is feasible in the space and time available.

Professional development
Good practice in indexing does not stand still, but changes to keep in touch with new developments in document preparation, presentation and use. Professional indexers need to keep up-to-date, so as to produce old-fashioned indexes for modern texts and users. Reading through the standard, relating the individual recommendations to your own practice, is a useful exercise. Because there are choices to be made in, for example, the choice of indexable concepts, the formation of headings and subheadings, the arrangement of entries and subentries, and punctuation and styling, you are provoked into thinking carefully about what you are doing at certain stages of constructing an index, considering why you are doing it and checking that the results are as intended and are presented in the way most helpful to the user.

All indexes, whether of single documents, multiple documents, or collections of documents, and whether working alone or in teams, will find ISO 999 a valuable addition to their desk-top indexing reference collections, for consultation and annotation, and as a basis for discussion with those who commission indexes and those who use them.

The standard will be considered for review in 2001. Comments from practising indexers will no doubt be invited at that time, through the national representatives.