Letters to the editor

Homograph arrangement — (3): copy-editor survey

from Simon Cauchi, Hamilton, New Zealand

I have duplicated the Garry Cousins survey on homograph arrangement among my fellow-subscribers in the Internet discussion group Copyediting-L (CE-L). The invitation to take part ran in part as follows:

"May I duplicate a survey done by Garry Cousins and reported in a letter to The Indexer (Cousins 1996) about alphabetical order in indexes? A follow-up letter on the same topic from Michael Brackney (1996) is also worth reading. He devised a somewhat longer list and proposed five different arrangements, but I think Garry Cousins’s original lists will serve the purpose.

Please respond only if you are *not* yourself an indexer."

Respondents were asked to say which order in the two following lists made more sense to them:

**List A**
- London, Jack
- London, William
- London, Central
- London, Diocese of
- London Airport
- London, Midland and Scottish Railway
- London University
- London: an illustrated history

**List B**
- London Airport
- London: an illustrated history
- London, Central
- London, Diocese of
- London, Jack
- London, Midland and Scottish Railway
- London University
- London, William

Both the above lists are in word-by-word order (though List B would remain in the same order if it were rearranged according to the purest form of letter-by-letter sorting). List A is sorted according to a rule that headings consisting of the same words should be in this order:

1. people
2. places
3. subjects
4. titles of books, etc.,

and then sorted alphabetically within each of these categories.

This rule is found in the chapter on indexing in Judith Butcher’s *Copy-editing* (3rd edn, 1992) and in some of the older works on indexing such as R L Collison’s *Indexing books* (1953) and G Norman Knight’s *Indexing, the art of* (1979). Nancy Mulvany in her *Indexing books* (1994) calls it an “odd rule” and advises against it. The rule still has its adherents, however, such as Geoffrey Dixon, who has written twice to The Indexer about it. His first letter (Dixon 1995) inspired Garry Cousins to devise his survey, and in his second letter (Dixon 1996) he offers a critique of Garry’s survey results and once again defends the rule.

**responses**

Of the 29 respondents in the CE-L survey, 3 chose List A and 26 chose List B.

In Garry’s original survey, all 28 respondents chose List B, and he wrote that he almost wished someone had picked List A so that people could be sure he hadn’t fudged the results. So he’ll be pleased to know that List A has at last got some votes! Many CE-L respondents offered comments on the lists as well as a vote. Here are some comments from the majority favouring List B:

"My personal preference ... is to keep things simple and alphabetize all entries continuously regardless of their semantic values, because it makes word searches through the index faster. Your first example requires too much pre-analysis on the part of the index user, and that takes time. So I vote for the second case."

"List A is an abomination. ... I am completely unable to understand the rules by which it was generated or by which I could try to search through it were it longer than about 10 items."

"The organizing principle of List A eludes me. Are you sure it’s not just random??"

"If I were looking something up in a book indexed in the style of List A, I would be mightily annoyed."

"List A: Ack ptui! What esoteric, ivory-tower system does *this* follow? List B: Much better. Alphabetical is alphabetical. This one gets my vote."

"List B, without question. I can’t make heads or tails of the first. ... With the latter, it’s easy to find exactly what I’m looking for because the list is arranged using the letters of the alphabet in the sequence I learned when I was 2 or 3."

"I’m not an indexer and list A makes no sense to me at all. List B would be my choice as a user."

"At first glance, List A appears all jumbled; once I stop and look at it I can see why particular items are grouped together, but if I were in a hurry to find something (and I rarely dawdle over an index—they’re not nearly as much fun as dictionaries), I’d find what I wanted in B faster."

"Although I understand the logic of list A, I would find the logic of list B much easier to use."

The minority voting for List A offered the following comments:

"This list is separate by category which would make it easier to find what you were looking for. In a strict alphabetical list, like B, it might be difficult to find things if the list was long IMHO."

"Of course, in such a simple list it doesn’t really matter — it will be easy enough to pick out what you’re looking for. ... But I’m thinking more in terms of a complicated index. ... There I really think that your brain can process all the entries more easily if they are..."
Homograph arrangement — (4) using punctuation

from Michael Brackney, California

As with Garry Cousins’ earlier efforts (Cousins 1996), I applaud Simon Cauchi’s (1998) efforts to clarify the matter of filing homographs in indexes: his survey also suggests that many index users have difficulty with the “person, place, subject, title” rule for grouping entries with identical leading homographs into categories that defy strict alphabetical order. Unfortunately, in my opinion, he too does not address the question of whether taking punctuation marks such as commas, colons, and dashes into account provides a filing order that works better for most users than one that disregards them. Indeed, after mentioning my letter to The Indexer (Brackney 1996) in which I brought up this question, he just ignores it.

Since writing my letter, I myself have been unable to research this question, and I’ve received no responses from readers of The Indexer to my survey suggestion. After reading Geoff Dixon’s letter (1996) that appeared next to mine, I felt inclined to agree with him that “a more realistic sample of index headings” in “a very large index containing dozens of same-word headings” would provide a more convincing result than any offered by a short list survey. What’s needed, I think, is a usability study as opposed to a preference survey, so the task is greater than I imagined — and as Simon Cauchi indicates, finding suitable index examples to work with may require more than a little looking.

Despite these difficulties, I’m still intrigued with the idea of optimizing index readability in a way that keeps family names together — except, rarely, when inverted homographic place names and/or homographic names followed by serial commas and/or homographic titles including subtitles occur along with them — by treating commas and colons like single spaces and treating dashes like double spaces in word-by-word sorts.

Moreover, I find this possibility especially intriguing since it can be done automatically by computer.

This is how the Cousins-Cauchi survey terms would be arranged in such a filing system:

- London: an illustrated history
- London, Central
- London, Diocese of
- London, Jack
- London, Midland and Scottish Railway
- London, William
- London Airport
- London University

If you’d like to share any ideas on this please email me [or, of course, write to The Indexer and share it with all of us!] —JS

I should like to thank my colleagues at the Dublin conference who kindly sent me a card of congratulation on reaching my 90th birthday.

Michael Brackney, brackney@nccn.net.

references


Birthday greetings

from John Gibson, England

I should like to thank my colleagues at the Dublin conference who kindly sent me a card of congratulation on reaching my 90th birthday.

I am very touched and grateful — and still indexing!

We add our congratulations to John Gibson who is not only still indexing but actively contributing to the Society of Indexers.
Letters to the editor

International publication of indexing knowledge:
newsletters vs. The Indexer

from Bella Hass Weinberg, New York

I read with interest Elizabeth Moys' (1997) article about classification in indexes, as I had made several presentations on this theme to regional ASI Chapters. About a year after Ms Moys gave her paper on this topic to the Australian Society of Indexers (about which I had not known before seeing the note in her article), I gave a workshop called The Structure of Book Indexes at the 1996 national ASI Annual Meeting, which dealt primarily with classification and indexes. In my presentation, I emphasized the concept of complementarity of text and index, which Ms Moys discussed as well. The same issues are apparently of interest to indexers the world over. Ms Moys clearly made a concerted effort to acknowledge the prior literature on classification in indexes, citing primarily the well-known manuals as well as reviews from her area of specialization, legal indexing.

newsletters vs The Indexer

It is a shame, however, that the newsletter and monographic publications of the American Society of Indexers were not accessible to her. Key Words has published a number of articles and reviews on classified indexes as well as a series of pieces on subheadings. The latter were collected in a booklet entitled Subheadings: A Matter of Opinion (1995). Had she seen this, Ms Moys could, for example, have further documented her statement that classified indexes are shorter than specific ones by citing Ben-Ami Lipetz's statistical evidence for this.

I believe that this suggests an important policy question for the editors of the newsletters of national indexing societies: should they be publishing articles and reviews of general theoretical interest, or should these all be directed to the international journal of all the societies?

As an American, I am of course most familiar with Key Words, which has recently taken on the characteristics of a journal. As it is a bimonthly, articles submitted to this newsletter are published more quickly than those of The Indexer, but British, Canadian, and Australian indexers do not see them, and the index coverage of the newsletter is far less than that of the journal. I believe the same holds for the newsletters of SI, AUSSI, and LASC: important pieces have surely appeared in them which American indexers would have enjoyed and profited from.

The term newsletter implies ephemerality: libraries rarely retain them because they are expected to contain only information that is valuable for a brief period of time: conference announcements, chapter news, etc.

The financial implications of this policy question are clear — channeling more funds from the national societies to The Indexer, increasing the size of the journal and perhaps its frequency. Such changes would, however, create a more comprehensive and permanent record of the literature of indexing, and I believe they are worth considering.

References


Bella Hass Weinberg

Obituary

Margaret Dampier Anderson

Margaret Anderson, former Vice President of the Society of Indexers, and recipient of both the Wheatley Medal and the Carey Award, died in Cambridge at the age of 97.

Although her active indexing career did not begin until she was sixty, she completed 567 indexes as well as writing a range of articles on indexing, and, most importantly, her invaluable Book Indexing, published by Cambridge University Press in 1971. She wrote her last letter to The Indexer in 1993.

Margaret Anderson joined SI in 1962, becoming one of the first Registered Indexers. She began as a scientific indexer, having in 1920 taken Part 1 in the Cambridge Natural Science Tripos with a first in all three subjects. She held many positions in SI: membership secretary, treasurer, member of the Board of Assessors and finally Vice President from 1972 to 1983. She also contributed to SI's original training course administered by the Rapid Results College. In 1975 she was awarded the Wheatley Medal for the index to Judith Butcher's Copy-editing: the Cambridge Handbook.

She was a truly remarkable woman of immense energy. I do not think we will see her like again. To me she was of the stuff that Mary Kingsley, the Victorian explorer, was made. She put her heart into everything she did, and she did everything well. The Society of Indexers was indeed lucky to have known this "exemplary indexer, promoter of indexing standards and highly influential in the advancement of indexing" — to quote her 1983 Carey Award citation.

Elizabeth Wallis

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