Book Indexing Postal Tutorials

Ann Hall

A personal account of the enjoyment and stimulation of running a book-indexing distance-learning course for almost 20 years, emphasizing the importance of the relationship between tutor and student and how both can learn from each other.

There are few better ways to learn than by teaching. Since taking over Book Indexing Postal Tutorials (BIPT) in 1984, I have learnt an immense amount about indexing (and indexers). During a conference in Durham in the 1980s, an established and authoritative indexer stated firmly that there was only one ‘right’ way to do any index. This just isn’t true; I have been stimulated and intrigued over the years by the different and often equally valid interpretations of the texts that I offer and the clever ways in which people contrive useful entries to enable access to those texts. Often I have altered ‘my’ version of an entry in favour of one suggested by a student; the so-called ‘model’ answers have changed considerably since those early days.

Course format and content

The content of the course has also changed over the years, although retaining the format of five tutorials, each requiring the student to index a text that has been chosen to present a variety of different problems that have to be solved. Obviously it is impossible to provide an answer to every problem that is likely to be encountered in an indexing career, but the course does manage to deal with many of the more important ones. Those who have completed the course often contact me afterwards when they have what seems to be a new and insoluble problem in a commissioned index, and usually I can help them.

Only one of the texts of 1984 remains in its original form – a complete little book of reminiscences by Ellen Harrison, an academic lady of the early 20th century. She covers so many topics in these 90 pages that it makes an ideal exercise from which to learn the arts of creating major entries, arranging useful sub-headings, organizing cross-references, and so on.

The first two tutorials are accompanied by a similar text for which a suggested index is supplied, thus giving students a pattern on which to base their own indexes. For example, Tutorial II requires an index on California and Arizona, for which an example index on Arkansas is provided. Apart from an exercise on alphabetization, they are also required to correct the errors in a short index. The latter is an excellent way for me to judge whether students are looking clearly at an index as users: I constantly reiterate the importance of the accessibility of an index and the primary importance of the reader. Some people are so eager to show their erudition and cleverness that they forget that they are only supposed to be creating signposts to the text.

For the later tutorials there are neither example texts nor indexes to similar books and they have to make all their own decisions. Tutorial III tends to be the one that separates the indexers from the non-indexers. Those who give up when faced with a 30-page text are likely to fall apart when their first set of ‘real’ proofs is delivered; those who have the tenacity to stick with it and attempt to solve the problems for themselves are probably going to be competent indexers.

When the tutorial is returned to me I mark it (usually within a day or so, except when several arrive at once or when I am working to one of those almost impossible deadlines). I mark meticulously by hand, explaining why my version differs from theirs; praising good accessible entries, even when they are not the same as mine; suggesting alternatives and referring them, where necessary, to my manual of rules and recommendations for indexing. This manual is supplied with the first tutorial and is based on the principles of the British Standard and on books by eminent indexers, as well as on my own experience of indexing over the last 30 years.

Working methods

With the first tutorial I also provide an introductory booklet on how to present indexes for marking and suggest ways of marking-up the text and sorting out their entries. I tell them of the working methods of earlier indexers and suggest that they use file cards for at least their first tutorial, showing them how to consolidate a series of cards into one workable entry. Thereafter, many students use word-processors to combine entries, work them out on paper or continue to use cards. We each have our chosen methods and they learn which will suit them best.

Few students at this stage have access to a specialized indexing program, but when they have completed the course they can download demonstration versions from the relevant websites and make their choice after having sampled them. Locally based students have visited to see how we work in a two-indexer Macrex™/Cindex™ household and we even offer occasional face-to-face instruction in one or both programs for those who would like to see them in action.

Although some students send their tutorials by email, I have to post the marked version back as I mark by writing my
comments beside their index entries. However, the email connection is particularly useful for overseas students.

Statistics

Over the years I have had nearly 800 enrolments, mostly from Britain, but a sizeable number from the USA (20), Australia (13) and the Republic of Ireland (39), with a handful from places like Taiwan, Denmark and South Africa. Certain British postcodes dominate. Apart from London, DG (Dumfries & Galloway) predominates with 29 students and Edinburgh comes a close second with 27. This is not surprising, as a number of people in this area, having seen how much I enjoy my work, are eager to do the same. In Moffat, the small Scottish town where I live, there are six overworked indexers and a few part-time ones. In a population of just over two thousand this is a sizeable number of indexers. If the ratio of indexers to population were the same in Melbourne, it would be a city of 20,000 indexers!

Another interesting statistic is the gender ratio. In the early 1980s there were many more women than men (a ratio of approximately 5 to 2); frequently they were those with family responsibilities who were looking for a stimulating job where they could work from home. At that time it was often regarded as a ‘pin-money’ job for women with a bit of spare time. When I attended my first conference in Cambridge, in 1980, many people were surprised that indexing was a full-time occupation for me. Nowadays many more men enrol; in October and November 2001, five of the ten new students were men. I attribute this to more public awareness of indexing, the higher profile of the Society of Indexers and the tendency towards teleworking with computers.

Only about 28 percent of those who enrol actually finish the course, which is quite usual for distance learning. There are some who never do Tutorial I, probably because it turns out to be a lot more difficult than they originally thought. Occasionally, indexing comes to the notice of ‘the general public’, who may have been led to believe it to be an easy way to earn a living. There was a huge surge of interest in the 1980s when the Daily Mail featured an article on how simple it was to earn lots of money sitting at your kitchen table with a shoebox and some pencils and file cards. A similar moment of public interest was caused by Bernard Levin’s scathing attack on the publication of a book (by the Oxford University Press) on Cardinal Newman which had some of the most classically awful ‘strings’ that he had ever seen.

Idiosyncratic vocabulary

My marking style is somewhat idiosyncratic and I have developed a vocabulary of my own for various problem areas – such words as ‘umbrellas’, ‘boundary references’ and the ‘skeleton’ (also known as ‘the woods and trees syndrome’) are so familiar to me and my BIPTers that I tend to forget that they are not in common indexing parlance. When I gave a talk at the Melbourne indexing conference in 1995, someone came up to me after I’d shown them a typical page of my marking of Tutorial I to ask what these ‘boundaries’ and ‘skeletons’ were. There are more details about this style of marking and the usual problems that beginners have in their early attempts at indexing in my previous article in The Indexer (Hall, 1997) (but please forgive the lack of italics, which the printer unaccountably omitted).

Indexing standards and rules

I must confess to a rather pragmatic attitude to some of the recommendations in the British Standard (1996). The controversy over Mc and Mac and St and Saint is well-known and still hotly debated. I am generally of the ‘old school’, favouring indexing Mc as if it were Mac. In many indexes Macdonald and McDonald will end up a long way apart and the reader turning to Mc may miss the earlier references. This has recently been brought home to me by the ongoing index that two of us are creating for the local newspaper on the Isle of Arran. We are using an Excel database and have to accept its alphabetization rules; as the spelling in this particular text can be very ‘interesting’, we have to check every Mac and Mc, discovering for instance that Hugh MacLeod is probably the same person as Hugh McLeod. This can cause all sorts of problems for ‘the average reader’, that mythical person who should be at the forefront of every indexer’s awareness. I have a similar attitude to hyphenated words and ask my students to follow my style for the purposes of the course. Afterwards, they are, of course, free to make their minds up about the most appropriate style to use.

Indexing in the real world

One fault of the BIPT course is that occasionally students complete the course without quite attaining the standard that I consider necessary for a good indexer. I assign a rough ‘grade’ to each tutorial (of the C+ or A– variety), finding it impossible to ‘mark’ the work by any sort of percentage system, for the reasons stated in my first paragraph. If students are obviously out of their depth and unable to grasp the main principles, I suggest that they might be better quitting, although I am reluctant to do this until after the second or third tutorials, as some have made amazing progress from very poor beginnings.

After completing the course, many students go on to do the supervision scheme, whereby an index to a full-length book is assessed by an experienced professional indexer in an appropriate subject. Although the supervision scheme is not part of the course as such, I advise most people to do a supervised index, making a particular point of suggesting this quite strongly to those whom I feel would benefit most from this sort of practice (that is, those with a final average of B– or less).

Having contemplated the addition of a sixth tutorial to cover various practical topics as well as, possibly, the use of computers and email, I have rejected this. The course is very definitely geared towards ‘back-of-the-book’ indexing: I don’t claim to teach how to do computer-orientated indexes or explain how to use or index the Web or email. However, when returning the fifth tutorial I do supply students with advice on getting work, keeping accounts, joining the Society of Indexers and so on – and then they’re on their own. Many go on to become excellent indexers and keep me...
informed of their progress. What is particularly thrilling for them, and me too, is when they phone to tell me that they have received their first set of proofs. I remember the panic and the exhilaration – and sometimes I share the horror – like that of one ex-student whose first index was to a 500-page book on Mahler. She was understandably very nervous.

**Time to retire??**

Many times over the last years I have felt the urge to give it all up. The marking can be very arduous, particularly if a batch of three tutorials appear on one day (usually when I have a deadline to meet). Then along comes another enthusiastic beginner whose excitement at having found the perfect occupation is so compelling that I know I can’t stop teaching BIPT.

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**References**


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