

Apples, pears and oranges: three important books on indexing

Ruth Pincoe

There are now three books considered to be basic resources in the indexing field. How to choose among them? This article looks at the scope, coverage, design and usability of each one.

Indexing is not a field that has generated a vast quantity of literature. However, we are currently fortunate to have three texts to consider when looking for basic resources on the art and science of indexing books. All three were written by respected experts with much to contribute to the field, and choosing among them is not an easy task. Two of the three volumes are already well-established and widely used by members of our profession.

Nancy C. Mulvany's *Indexing books* (1994) is a tasteful greyish-blue under its straightforward dust-jacket. Although slim and trim, it does its job quickly and efficiently. Chapters one to nine (238 pages) trace the process of book indexing from initial concepts to finished product, while the tenth chapter (about 41 pages) presents a discussion of indexing tools and technology. Additional resources consist of five short appendices plus a list of references.

If you count the first edition published in 1991, Hans H. Wellisch's *Indexing from A to Z* (1995) is the oldest of the three. It is also the heaviest, the longest, the largest and the most entertaining. It consists of 98 articles of varying lengths on a wide array of indexing topics, arranged in alphabetical order like an encyclopedia, followed by an extensive bibliography.

The third book – Pat Booth's – is relatively new, but I have no doubt that it too will gain wide acceptance on both sides of the Atlantic. *Indexing: the manual of good practice* (2001) is easily spotted by its shiny bright-blue plasticized cover (it has no jacket) and the Society of Indexers logo on the spine. In terms of length and size, it falls in the middle of the group. The first five chapters (approximately 185 pages) outline the process of indexing, starting with concepts and ending with editing and presentation of a finished product. The remaining seven chapters (about 260 pages) are devoted to subject specialties, non-book materials, techniques for managing work, and computer technology. There is no separate bibliography or list of resources.

At a glance

No article of this type would be complete without a chart, and one is provided as Table 1.

Comments on content

The Mulvany and the Booth volumes were both written, at least in part, as textbooks. Both are accessible to beginners

and present the basic steps for indexing a book in a logical way. Novice indexers who work their way through either book will gain, at the very least, a thorough understanding of the procedure for indexing a book, but both books are also useful for experienced indexers.

The greater portion of Mulvany's text is devoted to clear, concise explanations of various aspects of indexing. Chapters are arranged in a logical sequence from the beginning to the end of the job. Little room is given to subject specialties and, as the title *Indexing books* suggests, non-book materials such as periodicals are not discussed. The chapter entitled 'Special concerns in indexing' addresses issues such as abbreviations, international characters and symbols, along with multi-author and multi-volume works, multiple indexes and translations. These discussions are informative but do not always address the problems in depth. Readers are directed to other resources through author-date citations for items in the 'References' list at the back of the book.

An entire chapter – 'Names, Names, Names' – is devoted to the subject of personal, geographic and organizational names. This arrangement is handy for readers who want to check a specific point quickly because much of the information on names is found in these pages. The detailed entries for names in the index analyse this material and also provide access to information in other chapters.

The chapter on tools, which is more than 40 pages long, begins with a description of paper-based indexing and then presents a detailed discussion of various computer-based methods, pointing out the advantages and disadvantages of each one. This discussion is supplemented by information in the appendices, including generic codes. The final appendix, 'Resources for Indexers', provides a list of software vendors as well as addresses for various professional organizations, standards organizations, and electronic conferences.¹

One important difference between the Mulvany and Booth volumes is that Booth devotes a chapter to subject specialties (law, medicine, archaeology, genealogy, science and technology, and biography). Two further chapters are devoted to special materials: serial publications, images and sound recordings. In the subject specialties chapter, as elsewhere in the book, most sections are followed by a short list of references where readers may find further information. This system is good in that it places relevant references where readers are most apt to notice them and perhaps

Table 1. Facts and figures about the three books under consideration

	Booth: <i>Indexing</i>	Mulvany: <i>Indexing books</i>	Wellisch: <i>Indexing from A to Z</i>
Publication date	2001	1994	1995 (1st edn, 1991)
Publisher	K.G. Saur (München)	University of Chicago Press	H.W. Wilson (New York)
Approximate price	£50 (members) + shipping ^a	US\$32 ^b	US\$55–60 ^c
Total pages	489	320	569
Index pages	43	20	45
Index author	Jane A. Horton	Carolyn McGovern	Hans Wellisch
Index style	Indented	Indented	Indented
Table of contents	Titles plus sections	Titles only	Titles + classified list
Chapters (no.)	12	10	98 articles
Appendices and other front or back extras	None	5 appendices: Index specifications worksheet; ASCII table; three summaries of generic codes; Resources for indexers	List of tables; List of figures; Definitions; Abbreviations for standards and rules; Classified list of sections; Bibliography
Bibliography or list of references	Individual lists of references at the end of major sections in each chapter	References: 5 pages (about 60 entries)	References to various standards & publications at the end of most articles; Bibliography: 19 pages (about 295 entries)
Running heads	Chapter title/book title	Chapter title/chapter number	Article title/article title
Approximate type size, measure and characters per line^d	Text: 10/12 sans serif, 25 picas, 78 characters per line; index: 9/11; 1-em indents plus 3-em indent for turnovers	text: 10/13 serif, 24 picas, 65 characters per line; index: 9/10; 1-em indents plus 1-en indent for turnovers	Text: 11/13 serif, 26 picas, 66 characters per line; index: 9/10; indents are 10 and 16 points

^aPat Booth's book can be acquired in North America through some booksellers (it currently lists on Amazon.com for \$99US). However, members of indexing societies may easily obtain it through the Society of Indexers for a special members' price of £50 plus shipping (£3.50 surface, £8.00 air). I had my copy within a week and the SI office was a pleasure to deal with. [See the notice on p. 128 – Ed.]

^bMulvany's book is well known in North America and is easily obtainable (even in Canada) from several online booksellers. It can also be found in some large university bookstores and can sometimes be purchased through organizations. For example, I obtained my copy soon after the book was published from the book table at my local branch of the Editors' Association of Canada. It is worth noting that this book is the cheapest of the three.

^cWellisch's book is available in the USA, but it may be more difficult to obtain elsewhere. I ordered my copy of the second edition through a large university bookstore, but had to wait about eight weeks for delivery and the cost was about CAN\$140. I later found the title listed on a Canadian bookseller's website for \$72 but it was marked 'temporarily unavailable' (which, for this particular bookseller, often means 'probably never').

^dI am indebted to a Toronto colleague, Michael Rowan, an editor and former typesetter, for his help in analysing typesetting details for these three books. The two figures for the type size indicate the size of the type and the leading. Thus 10/12 refers to 10-point type with a line height of 12 points. Measures (given in picas) refer to line lengths.

follow them up. However, there are advantages to the inclusive bibliographies found in the other two volumes.

In comparison to the Mulvany and Wellisch books, Booth's discussion of proper names has a rather low profile. There is no mention of names in the contents page. The major discussion, a sub-subsection of Chapter 4 under the heading 'Index entries', is about 18 pages long. Readers looking under 'names' in the index are directed to 'proper names', where a page range 83–101 appears at the head of a long and detailed entry containing ten subheadings, three sub-subheadings and four cross-references. Booth also includes discussions of names in the chapters on media and subject specialties; this treatment of names in different contexts is welcome. The final three chapters are devoted to the indexing business. Chapter 10, 'Managing the work', includes a detailed and valuable discussion of the various aspects of indexing as a freelance business. Chapter 11 deals with current technology in terms of computer applications for indexing, while Chapter 12 is a survey of indexing societies, internet discussion groups and other professional

organizations. Details such as addresses may quickly go out of date, but the list is nevertheless useful.

It is somewhat unfair to compare Wellisch's book with the other two because it differs substantially from them in terms of coverage, organization and voice. It is longer than the others and the text is generously laced with historical background and other interesting tidbits. If you are in a hurry these digressions can be frustrating, but most of the time they are entertaining and informative. You never know quite what is coming next. Wellisch imparts more of his personality – to say nothing of his personal opinions – to his writing than do the other two authors. Indeed, in the Preface to the second edition, he claims full responsibility for his 'outrageous opinions' (p. x).

Interestingly, the arrangement of topics in his 'Classified list of subjects' is similar to the order of chapters in the Booth and Mulvany volumes. Thus, Wellisch has his cake and eats it too. If you are prepared to jump around a little, you can use his book as a textbook. Wellisch also considers international standards to be an important aspect of

indexing and provides relevant citations for a number of publications, including the British Standard, the International Standard, the American National Standard and the *Anglo-American cataloguing rules*, at the end of most articles.

Information access through contents and index

Since many readers will use these three books to look up specific topics, information access points are extremely important, particularly for locating topics that may be discussed from several points of view in various sections or chapters. Needless to say, all three books have excellent indexes that are appropriate for the length of the text and include detailed head notes.

In Booth's book, the contents page includes a list of subheadings for each chapter. This allows users to find specific information (for example, 'Index density') by glancing through the list. However, as noted below, the author's clearly conceived structure within the chapters is almost destroyed by the similarity of the first two levels of subheadings. Running heads identify the chapter title and the title of the book. As in the text, the spacious page design of the index makes for easy readability and quick scanning. Major treatment of a subject is indicated with bold type and subheadings are used generously. For example, 'density of index 19–20, **64–65**' is followed by four page references under the subheading 'assessment for job estimates and planning'.

The contents page in Mulvany's book simply lists the titles of the ten chapters and six appendices, and running heads provide the name and the number of the chapters. While some chapter titles are self-explanatory (for example 'Structure of entries'), others (such as 'Special concerns in indexing') are less obvious. Thus the index is the only tool for detailed access. Unless you are well acquainted with the book and know where to look, you must go directly to the index to locate specific information.

In spite of the small type size used for the index, there is a high occurrence of turnovers; subheadings, words and page ranges are frequently broken, thus further impeding readability. Subheadings are used somewhat sparingly (for example, the 'density of indexing' entry has only a page range: 64–67), but are provided where necessary. Given the lack of detail in the table of contents, bold page references for major treatment of subjects would have been a kindness.

In Wellisch's book, the contents page lists the articles in alphabetical order, as they occur in the book, as well as the extensive front- and back-matter. Both the recto and verso running heads indicate the article titles. There is also a 'Classified list of sections', which groups article titles under headings such as 'Names', 'Indexing techniques' and 'Business matters'. It might be argued that both the alphabetical and the classified lists are unnecessary in a 'dictionary-style' book, but people think and work in different ways. Some may well skim the alphabetical list quickly before heading to the index. For example, a subject such as 'Depth of indexing' is easy to spot. In addition, terms that are dealt with in other articles appear in small caps, giving readers a short cut to

additional information, and allowing them to bypass the index.

The index of Wellisch's book plays a crucial role in linking various articles and locating topics that are discussed in specific contexts in different articles. For example, the 'depth of indexing' entry includes a bold page reference **137–138**, indicating a major treatment of the subject, and several other page references. It is followed by five subheadings pointing the reader to other articles: 'biomedical texts', 'defined', 'in cumulative indexes', 'legal texts', 'and technical manuals and reports.'

Design and readability

The acid-free paper used for Booth's book is a bright white. The design is simple but spacious, with good, if perhaps somewhat excessive, use of white space and an attractive but plain sans-serif font. The one major design flaw concerns levels of subheadings in the text. The first-level subheading is in bold upper and lower case, with all major words capitalized. The second-level subheading differs only in size (it is about 2 points smaller) and in capitalization (only the first word is capitalized). On the page, the two levels are almost indistinguishable from each other, especially with one-word headings. This is a problem throughout the book but it is especially serious in the chapter on 'Subject specialisms', where the same second-level heads (for example, 'Proper names' and 'Indexable content') occur under a number of first-level headings. Consequently, the structure of the entire chapter is unnecessarily blurred. The problem could have been easily fixed by setting the first subheading level in a distinctive style (for example, small caps), a solution that I hope will be chosen in a later edition.

In terms of appearance and design, Mulvany's book is clear and well set out. Both the text and the index are set in a rather elegant serif font, but the print seems small and the letter spacing somewhat cramped. While indexing is anything but dull, the page design of this book could suggest otherwise.² My middle-aged eyes find the print difficult to read, a problem that is not helped by the off-white (although acid-free) paper. The three levels of subheadings within chapters are clearly identifiable. However, the main sections (which are not included in the table of contents) are often quite long. Readers looking for information in a hurry may find the context of a page difficult to determine, since the nearest level-one subheading may be a number of pages away.³

The paper for Wellisch's book is the same off-white colour as Mulvany's, but the texture is smoother and thus more comforting to handle; there is no indication whether it is acid-free. The design is simple but clear, and the text is set in a strong, clear and rather classic serif font (possibly Palatino or a copy of it). Both the page size and the type size are slightly larger than that of the other two books, making for improved readability. The sections are fairly short, in comparison with the chapter-structure of the other two books, and the running heads indicate the section titles. There is only one level of subheading and the context is almost always clear.

Using all three

Because looking up things in *Indexing A to Z* can be entertaining, I often leave it to the last when I am consulting the three books, giving Wellisch the advantage of having the final word. However, his detailed articles usually add valuable perspective to either a controversial issue or a basic element of indexing.

For example, some time last year, I found myself with several indexes for biographies. Since I had not indexed a biography in a while, I decided to warm up for the job by consulting the experts. Booth devotes four and a half pages to biography in her chapter on specialist subjects (pp. 293–7). Sub-subheadings for the subject include ‘Materials and readership’, ‘Indexable content’, ‘Number of sequences’, ‘“Classified” and “direct” headings’, ‘Proper names’, ‘Arrangement of entries’ and ‘Introductory note’. Clearly there is food for thought here, and the 15 minutes I spent reading the section and thinking about it were well worthwhile. Under ‘References’ she lists Hazel Bell’s *Indexing biographies and other stories of human lives*; under ‘Further reading’ she recommends the chapter on names from Mulvany’s *Indexing books*, and the ‘Biographies’ section from Wellisch’s *Indexing A to Z*. (At that time, I had no idea I would be writing this article!) The entry for ‘biography indexes’ in the index gives the page range for the section described above and is followed by six subheadings: ‘abbreviations in headings’, ‘biographee’s entry’, ‘chronological subheadings’, ‘indexable content’, ‘maintaining neutrality’ and ‘medical indexes’. A number of these subheadings include locators outside the main page range. Clearly, Booth addresses most of the pertinent aspects to dealing with biography.

By contrast, the index to Mulvany’s book has only one entry for the subject: ‘biography, subentry order in, 123–25’. Admittedly, the order for subentries is a major issue in biographies, but it left me wondering whether other issues concerning biographies had not been double-posted here. Because Booth cited the names chapter of this book, I looked through the various entries for names in the index but found nothing else. Bear in mind, however, that although Mulvany’s book excludes subject specialties such as biography, this volume is more than a hundred pages shorter than the other two, and is devoted to the discussion of basic issues and concepts that, once learned and understood, can be successfully applied to a variety of subjects and contexts.

Wellisch’s two-page article on biography (pp. 59–60) opens with a comparison between biography and fiction, followed by a short discussion of what readers of biography may want from an index. He also touches on other issues, including names and order of subentries. In the index, the entry for biographies is followed by eight subheadings that point to 20 locators between them. Several involve order of subheads, but others refer to aspects such as illustrations and quotations.

Another example concerns a double dilemma discussed by our local Toronto IASC kaffee-klatsch: (a) whether or not you should have page references for a main entry that is followed by one or more subheadings, and (b) if you do,

what those page references should indicate. By the time I got round to consulting some of the indexing books on my shelf, I knew I was not after a rule. I was seeking guidance or even personal opinion. I was unsure what to look up in the indexes, so I tried various versions of ‘headings’ and ‘locators’. After some trial and error, I found, in Booth’s book, a discussion dealing with a subheading analysis of a main heading for which there is also a page range (p. 115). She presents various arguments and concludes: ‘The most important point is that any sought terms must be accessible as headings...’ – a good point, but not entirely what I was after. I later found that this discussion was part of a larger section aptly named ‘Brainteasers’, a useful collection of odd points concerning locators that I was grateful to have stumbled across.

When I turned to Mulvany with my problem, I did not find much more help. There are plenty of index entries for main headings, subheadings and locators but none seemed to address my question. Finally I turned to Wellisch, and went directly to his lengthy article titled ‘Locators’ (pp. 277–94). In a subsection titled ‘Locators after modified main headings’ I found exactly what I was looking for:

Should locators be listed after a main heading that is modified by subheadings, and if so, what do they mean to users? Are the locators after ‘Copernicus’ ... the most important references to his life and work, or are they those minor references that could not be adequately characterized by subheadings? (p. 283).

He devotes a page and a half to a discussion of various options for solving the problem, ending, in true Wellisch style, with a quotation from the index to Peter Schickele’s *The definitive biography of P.D.Q. Bach*, which I will leave you to enjoy on your own. Wellisch not only addressed my question but also brightened an otherwise grey April afternoon.

Readers of Wellisch know that sooner or later he will bring a smile to your face. Smiles and laughter are important, and often a point made with humour is remembered long after a thorough but perhaps dry discussion on the same subject.

Nancy Mulvany also has a good way with words. In *Indexing books*, her writing abilities are exhibited mainly in her concise, clear style, but there are nuggets too. One of my favourites is:

Three tenets to keep in mind when dealing with multivolume indexes are (1) planning for indexing is necessary, (2) your plans will be incomplete, and (3) every step will take longer than anticipated’. (Mulvany, 1994: 146)

Another caution is found in her preface:

Indexing is something you will either enjoy or detest; there is no middle ground.

The last word goes, appropriately enough, to an index entry. When two colleagues and I were eagerly examining the first copy of Pat Booth’s book we had seen, we came upon the entry ‘“wiggles” (curly brackets)’ in the index. It somehow struck us as funny, but our uproarious laughter drew us further into a book that we have since grown to value and appreciate.

In conclusion: how big is your bookshelf ?

If you were looking to this article for a recommendation on which book you should buy, you will be disappointed. In my opinion, you should own all three.⁴ All the volumes have weaknesses; they also have significant – but different – strengths. The fact that one was published in Europe (for the British market) and the other two in the USA is an advantage; style preferences differ according to author and publisher requirements, and indexers need to be familiar with the conventions used on both sides of the Atlantic. All three have an important place on my bookshelf, and I consult them not only for specific rules or points of information, but also for larger questions of style and philosophy.

A beginning indexer will likely start out with only one of the three. Readers differ. No one book – and no single approach – will work for everyone. I hope that the preceding paragraphs will help beginners and their instructors choose the one most appropriate for their individual needs. I also hope that this article will encourage indexers to enlarge their bookshelves and to make the best use of all the volumes they own.

Acknowledgements

I am indebted to a number of my colleagues in IASC/SCAD for suggesting this topic, goading me into writing the article, suggesting new and interesting angles, waiting patiently for me to finish it, and putting up with hours of discussion on these three books. In particular, my deep appreciation and thanks go to Noeline Bridge, Christine Jacobs, Elaine Melnick and Rachel Rosenberg.

Notes

1. While useful, some of this information is now out of date. For example, the address for the Indexing and Abstracting Association of Canada has changed, and the French portion of the name – Société canadienne pour l'analyse de documents (SCAD) – is missing. Unfortunately, the old address for IASC/SCAD also appears in Pat Booth's book.
2. Indeed, a colleague who examined sample text and index pages for all three books remarked that this book 'looked as if it was going to be boring'.
3. For example, in chapter 9, the section 'Editing by the indexer' is ten pages long. An argument could be made for including major section titles in the running headers for both the Mulvany and the Booth volumes, but such a practice might prove cumbersome. I suggest the problem would be best addressed by a more imaginative page design, with more attention paid to the specific needs of the text.
4. You may want to take this recommendation with a grain of salt. I truly believe that it is *impossible* to own too many books.

References

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