Passim: is it passé?

John Noble

In February and March 2003, one of the recurring topics for discussion on the Society of Indexers’ email discussion list, SIdeline, once again raised its head. Ann Hudson started the ball rolling with the following:

You may be interested to know that at my Indexing for Editors course at the Publishing Training Centre yesterday I mentioned the use of passim. None of the editors (not all of whom were particularly young) knew what it meant. Which suggests that most index users don’t either.

This was all that was needed to provoke the pro- and anti-passim factions. Before looking at the arguments for and against, we shall see what some of the authorities have to say.

The authorities

The international standard BS ISO 999:1996 states quite clearly:

If a subject is treated repeatedly but not continuously over a consecutively numbered sequence, reference should be made to each element in the sequence, e.g. 3, 4, 5, (not 3–5). The use of the word ‘passim’ is not recommended. (British Standards Institution, 1996: paragraph 7.4.3.2)

Nancy Mulvany (1994) devotes four pages in Indexing books to the discussion of passim, in the course of which she fairly gives both sides of the argument and quotes The McGraw-Hill style manual, André De Tienne in a 1992 Index-L discussion, and the Stanford University Press (SUP). In her final paragraph on this topic she refers to the University of Chicago Press, with whom it has become common

not to make any distinction between continuous and noncontinuous discussion of a topic on consecutive pages. It is thought that using a page range for an entire discussion is an aid for the readers because a page range is easier than a string of separate page numbers to read. (Mulvany, 1994: 92)

She therefore ends by commending indexers to pay close attention to publishers’ style guides as to whether a simple page rage is acceptable in lieu of multiple page numbers, or the use of passim, for non-continuous mentions of a discussion.

I find it interesting that words such as ‘discussion’ and ‘topic’ are used in this context. In my own experience, working in the humanities, it is frequently the name of a person that is recurring over consecutive pages, as he or she impinges on other characters and different events. Perhaps this highlights the different approaches that may be needed for the arts and humanities as opposed to the sciences.
Indexers’ views

There were 29 responses to Ann Hudson’s initial email over six days between 27 February and 4 March. It was pointed out that some publishers forbid the use of *passim*, and yet it was felt that something was needed to indicate that a subject or a person was mentioned on a group of consecutive pages, although not dealt with continuously over that page range.

For those happy to eschew the use of *passim*, the solutions suggested were:

- inventing a term equivalent to *passim*
- using an English phrase to indicate ‘scattered reference’
- using an abbreviation for *passim* – ‘p’
- using an asterisk to replace *passim*
- just ignoring the problem and using either a straight page range 17–27, or the full list of separate locators

As with the recommendations of Wellisch and Booth, it was thought that few people understood Latin and therefore few would understand *passim*, if it was used.

The pro-*passim* arguments followed the line that it took up less space than a long line of locators separated by commas and that it was already in existence and anything new to replace it would have to be mentioned in a preliminary note. Furthermore, doubt was cast on whether or not users would read such a note, or even whether publishers would actually print the note. At the same time it was suggested that a preliminary note could be used to explain the meaning and use of *passim*. Pro-*passim* people were unconcerned about the Latin aspects. If readers are familiar with *e.g.*, *i.e.*, *etc.*, all of which are Latin abbreviations, why can they not become familiar with *passim* as well? *Passim* is a word that appears in dictionaries and therefore its meaning can be looked up.

Between 27 April and 1 May a similar debate occupied Index-L. The solutions and arguments were very similar to those on SIdeline. Symbols were suggested as replacements to *passim*: for instance a swung dash was suggested as a page range concatenator. The problems of arriving at a standardised symbol, acceptable across the publishing world as a whole, were highlighted. No great consensus was arrived at.

**Conclusion**

What is the answer? Is it an internationally agreed symbol across the whole publishing world? Is it to simply accept and obey the strictures of BS ISO 999 and the main indexing authorities as they are at present, and by doing so ignore the problem? Or is it to persuade them to resurrect *passim*? The anti-Latinists would not be happy with that. I suspect that as with other points of disagreement among indexers, the camps separate into those who deal with humanities and those working in the sciences and social sciences. The truth is that publishers will always have the last word. If *passim* is forbidden by a house style, that is the end of the argument, but where there is familiarity with *passim*, usually in the humanities, they will not question, and may even encourage, its use.

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**References**


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**Freud index invoked**

This bittersweet Argentine drama (*Son of the Bride*) heaps all manner of troubles on Ricardo Darin’s fortiethomething protagonist: domestic woes, a failing restaurant business, a heart condition and a beloved old mum suffering from the latter stages of Alzheimer’s. It is this last element that most highlights our hero’s nagging Oedipal condition. ‘I open up Freud’s complete works,’ snaps his Jewish ex-wife, ‘and the index describes you.’

*Film review, The Guardian, 23 May 2003*