

C1 An American pamphlet on book indexing: J. Ben Nichols's *Indexing: a manual for librarians, authors and publishers* (1892)

C4 *Indexing: a manual for librarians, authors and publishers*

C15 Some early guidance on arrangement and cross-referencing in an index

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# An American pamphlet on book indexing: J. Ben Nichols's *Indexing: a manual for librarians, authors and publishers* (1892)

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*A detailed and well-received pamphlet on book indexing, by J. Ben Nichols, was published in America in 1892. As Nichols explains, it is part of the tradition of alphabetic-specific indexing, as codified by Cutter and advocated by Wheatley in the 1870s.*

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## Introduction

In June 2017, I delivered a paper at the Montreal conference of ISC/SCI, entitled 'Seven types of specificity: the history of alphabetic-specific indexing'. In it, I traced the development of the principles of specific entry indexing from the early 19th to the late 20th century, and illustrated their adoption by a wide range of information professionals, from library subject cataloguers and special librarians, to indexers of various types (including back-of-the-book, periodical, and database indexers), and extending to those involved in developing rules for thesaurus construction.

In my account, I was conscious that my examples of the application of specific entry principles to book indexing (by which I mean what used to be called 'back-of-the-book indexing') were incomplete. My so-called 'seven types of specificity' included only two strong examples from book indexing: Wheatley's rules published in Britain in 1879, and the late 20th-century indexing textbooks exemplified by Knight in Britain in 1979 and Wellisch in America in 1991.

Wheatley was certainly aware and appreciative of the work done by Charles Ammi Cutter (1837–1903), an American librarian who is usually regarded as the codifier of the principles of specific entry. Wheatley recommended that these principles be applied to book indexing. At the time of giving my paper, I did not know of any American publications on book indexing before the mid-20th century.

Immediately after I had delivered my paper, Maureen MacGlashan (who was present, and whom I gratefully thank) gave me a digital copy of an American pamphlet on book indexing according to the principles of specific entry, which to me was a 'missing link'. Here was evidence that alphabetic-specific indexing for book indexes had been adopted in North America by the late 19th century, as later textbooks asserted.

## Nichols's pamphlet

It is a 13-page pamphlet, called *Indexing: a manual for librarians, authors and publishers*, by J. Ben Nichols (1892). I have not found any references to it in the many later works on indexing which I have searched, and can only conclude that while it had a good reputation and influence in the 1890s it was later either forgotten or completely absorbed into book indexers' procedures as common knowledge.

According to a contemporaneous writer, Francis Dashwood Tandy (1867–1913),<sup>1</sup> Nichols's pamphlet was 'probably the best manual of indexing'. Tandy referred to its publication 'by the Library Journal at twenty-five cents, and endorsed by the American Library Association'.<sup>2</sup> Tandy was also appreciative of Cutter: 'Another pamphlet of great value, particularly in regard to the selection of subject headings, is Cutter's 'Rules for the Dictionary Catalogue', which can be obtained, free of charge, from the United States Commissioner of Education' (Tandy, 1897).

The first two pages of Nichols's pamphlet contain many sensible general observations, and show the respect which he accorded to indexers and indexing:

To index a branch of knowledge satisfactorily requires a considerable knowledge of it, of its classifications, of its synonyms, of its species and genera. General qualities required are good taste, good judgment, and a habit of conciseness and of liberal and comprehensive thought. Above all, what may be called the 'index sense' is required – that is, the ability to feel instinctively, at the first glance, what and how subjects should be indexed in all their ramifications; the sense that is in touch with searchers, and appreciates just how subjects will be looked for and how to arrange so that they can most readily be found.

(Nichols, 1892: [1])

He also demonstrates his familiarity with then current writings on indexing:

The subject has been well and thoroughly treated from the standpoint of library cataloguers (see, especially, Cutter's Rules for a Dictionary Catalogue) ... but with reference to the actual practical detail of subject indexing in general, aside from this, the literature of the subject is scant, inaccessible and unsatisfactory (excepting, however, Wheatley's entertaining and instructive 'What is an Index?'). The general indexer has comparatively little use for author and title entry, which are the all important factors in library cataloguing, but must base his work pre-eminently upon subject-entry ...

By subject is meant any event, place, person, fact, relation, topic, or anything which may be an object of search. Corresponding to each subject in the text or matter is an entry in the index expressive of the subject and indicating the place where it can be found. Sometimes, for the sake of completeness and compactness, and to avoid unnecessary duplication of entries, instead of making a number of entries under a certain heading, a cross-reference is made from it to another heading where all the entries are made.

(Nichols, 1892: [1]–2)

Nichols goes on to define other terms of art, such as 'heading', 'subject-entry', and 'searching'.

## Nichols's principles and rules

Most of Nichols's pamphlet is taken up with a list of 57 'principles and rules' as a 'practical and rational basis for indexing' which 'will meet many of the cases and difficulties arising in actual practice' (Nichols, 1892: 2). While he says that 'the main principles and rules are presented in a more or less categorical way in the following sections' (1892: 2), the order appears to me to be sometimes rather random. His claim is that 'The methods presented are not merely arbitrary and dogmatic, but, like all the best methods of human arts, are based upon the best and most general and approved practice and the results of experience' (1892: 3).

The subject matter of Nichols's rules may be summarized as follows.

Rule 1 concerns the primacy of the language of the expected user of the index, insisting that indexing terms should be known names in the user's natural language.

Rule 2 insists on a plan of indexing, especially its 'minuteness and detail' (1892: 3).

Rule 3 is on consistency and uniformity.

Rule 4, on the other hand, acknowledges the impossibility of rigidly following any plan or system. 'The judgment of the indexer will be constantly exercised in the discrimination between and settlement of fine points.' (1892: 3)

Rule 5: 'Index every subject, everything relating to every subject, every time it occurs, to the fulness [sic] contemplated by the plan followed ...' (1892: 3).

Rule 6 is about multiple entries and cross-references: 'Index each subject under as many headings as may be necessary to make reference easy and complete, using cross-references where they are in order ...' (1892: 3). This is in accord with Cutter's approach, but out of line with those who preferred classified indexes.

Rule 7: '... The indexer should be practical, and omit entries and headings which will never be looked for and features that will never be used' (1892: 3). Again, the natural language of index users is paramount.

Rule 8: 'As a subject is newly encountered the indexer should first carefully determine just what the exact subject is, and then how best to express it; select the headings and entries – all those under which search is likely to be made – that best express the meaning .... The language of the text, and least of all of titles ... need not be followed ... the entries should be reduced to their simplest form, and, if possible, to a single word ...' (1892: 3). But his Rule 22 (see below) has instructions for dealing with phrases as headings.

Rule 9: 'Index a subject under its specific name (specific entry) rather than under the name of a class which includes it (class entry) ...' (1892: 4). This Rule echoes Cutter.

Rule 10 is more likely to be useful to library cataloguers and periodical indexers than to back-of-the-book indexers: 'When a subject is indexed in several entries, each entry should contain only matter pertaining to itself .... Thus, an item relating to 'Railroads in New York and Pennsylvania' should be indexed as follows:

New York, railroads in,  
Pennsylvania, railroads in,

not

New York and Pennsylvania, railroads in,  
Pennsylvania and New York, railroads in,

This is a warning to those familiar with the still strong tradition of subject indexing from titles.

Rule 11 is about distinguishing homonyms using explanatory phrases in parentheses.

Rule 12 indicates cases where class entry should or should not be used, and warns against entries under (what we now call) metatopics.

Rule 13 concerns the style and wording of entries, advocating the omission of superfluties. For passing mentions, Nichols permits grouping references under the subheading 'Alluded to'. His final comment in this (quite long) rule is: 'Entries relating to vague and indefinite subjects are usually difficult to express with the brevity and conciseness possible when the subjects are more specific and have definite names' (1892: 4).

Rule 14 concerns the use of abbreviations.

Rule 15 is about alphabetical arrangement and the inversion of phrases.

Rule 16 recommends hanging indentation.

Rule 17 concerns the arrangement of subentries, and the repetition of a heading at the top of a new page.

Rules 18–21 concern author and title entries.

Rule 22 is about multiple word headings, expressing a preference for the natural order of words in phrases.

Rules 23–43 are about the forms of names to be used in indexing. They refer to names of places, persons, institutions, events, and ships.

Rules 44–50 are about cross-references.

Rules 51–53 are about typography.

Rules 54–55 are about indexing multi-volume works.

Rule 56 is about multiple indexes, which generally are not recommended.

Rule 57 recommends ‘a rational system of alphabetical arrangement’ (1892: 11).

## Nichols’s hints

After stating and commenting on these rules, Nichols gives some hints for searching indexes: ‘First, look under the proper designation of the subject in question, and then under its synonyms; second, look for headings that contain the subject; third, for headings which it contains; and last, look under cognate and related subjects’ (1892: 11).<sup>3</sup>

He then divides indexes into ‘three characteristic classes’ (1892: 24), and discusses each in turn. They are (in his terminology) blank-book indexes, card indexes, and printed indexes.

### Blank-book indexes

Blank-book indexes are personal indexes, made and kept by individuals for their own use. The scholars who typically kept them (called ‘virtuosi’ or ‘literati’ in earlier times) developed systems of indexing, some of which I have described in earlier articles (Walker, 2001, 2016). Particularly in the 17th century, British scholars kept commonplace books into which they copied memorable quotations and recorded other useful data; the index would be written on pages at the front or back, to enable the scholars to find information previously copied into the book.

The 19th-century ‘blank book’, or book of clean writing-paper, continues the tradition of the commonplace book, but would not have included the quotations or other detailed information; it would have been likely to contain only index entries and bibliographical references.

Nichols gives instructions about buying blank books, and about how to divide them up into alphabetical sections.<sup>4</sup>

He also gives advice on the best ways to maintain strict alphabetical order, but is dismissive of John Locke’s well-known method: ‘The antiquated “vowel index” needs mention only for condemnation, as being inconvenient and absolutely inferior and unscientific’ (Nichols, 1892: 12).

### Card indexes

Nichols is referring here to library card catalogues (‘A size of about 3 x 5 inches is commonly used’: 1892: 13) and indexes on slips, which can be sorted and filed alphabetically. He prefers cards for open indexes (such as library catalogues) because of their durability, but prefers slips for closed (or temporary) indexes. He applauds the usefulness of cards for open-ended, or continuing indexing systems, and their ability to admit the strictest alphabetical arrangement, but claims that they are more laborious to prepare and search than printed indexes. Nichols says that a card index is ‘practically the only good method of preparing indexes to be printed’ (1892: 13). This is a reminder that, in the late 19th century, even library catalogues (which were beginning to be maintained on cards) were still normally intended to be printed, so that users could be given access to multiple copies of the catalogue.

### Printed indexes

Here Nichols’s description indicates clearly that he is talking about what later came to be called ‘back-of-the-book indexes’. He says:

This designation refers to indexes finally completed, arranged, and crystallized in the best permanent form, such as the printed indexes of books .... Such indexes are compiled from card indexes first prepared. The steps of the process, as of indexing a book, are as follows:

1. Provide a sufficient number of slips of paper, of convenient size ...
2. Go through the book carefully, from beginning to end, and make, as each subject is met, the proper entries, one on each slip. If, as is usually the case, the references are made to pages, this cannot be done, or at least the numbers of the pages cannot be inserted, until the book, in the course of printing, is made up into pages ...
3. When all the entries are made, verify the work by going over the book and slips again and comparing the two ...
4. When verified, arrange the slips alphabetically, and consolidate and revise the entries so as to make the index a harmonious, uniform and commodious whole.
5. To guard against loss or misplacement in printing and proof-reading, number the slips ... or secure them by pasting them in proper order on sheets of paper ... if numbered, they may be sent to the printer simply tied up or fastened in a bundle.

The index is now ready to be printed.

(Nichols, 1892: 13)

## Conclusion

This pamphlet places J. Ben Nichols firmly in the timeline and tradition of those who adopted the principles of alphabetico-specific indexing, as codified by Cutter, and applied them to American book indexing, just as Wheatley had applied them to British book indexing.

## Notes

- 1 Tandy was an American mutualist, or individual anarchist, a member of the 'Denver Circle', a group of men who were associated with Benjamin Tucker and contributed to the periodical *Liberty*. He published a book entitled *Voluntary Socialism* in 1896.
- 2 The fact that Nichols's pamphlet was published by both *Publishers' Weekly* and the *Library Journal* indicates that it was a mainstream publication in both American book publishing and in American librarianship.
- 3 This progression, translated into the abbreviated language of much later thesaurus standards, would be to search under (1) USE/UF (2) BT (3) NT (4) RT.
- 4 He also mentions blank books which are manufactured and arranged for indexing, including alphabetical divisions ready for index entries, available from dealers such as the Burr Index Company, Hartford, Connecticut. (Nichols, p.12)

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# Indexing: a manual for librarians, authors and publishers

*J. Ben Nichols*

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An index is a table or list of references, arranged usually in alphabetical order, to subjects, names, and the like occurring in a book or other matter.

Indexes are useful in all cases in which there is considerable search for particular subjects the finding of which would, without an index, be difficult – in all cases in which a means of ready reference is desirable. Thus, indexes may be necessary for books, for archives and records, files of papers and documents, as in offices; professional and literary men frequently keep indexes of items of information, articles as they appear in periodicals, etc., such indexes being called index rerums or commonplace books. Library catalogues are extensive indexes; and the principles of ordinary indexing apply to the composition of such works as dictionaries and cyclopedias.

Indexes are not needed for such works as novels and poems, where reference to particular topics is never made; nor in cases where the arrangement is such as to be of itself a guide to all the matters included.

The importance of good indexes is apparent and can scarcely be overestimated. The work involved in preparing indexes is repaid a hundredfold in the facilities and saving of time afterward afforded by their use. A book without an index is like a locked chest without the key; each may contain valuable treasures, but neither can be gotten into. The sense of insecurity and uncertainty which the student feels in the use of an index on which he cannot rely is something very annoying. Nothing impairs the usefulness of a

book like the lack of a proper index; and nothing enhances its value so much as being provided with one.

There are few if any branches of clerical work that require higher intellectual faculties for their satisfactory and successful performance than general indexing. To index a branch of knowledge satisfactorily requires a considerable knowledge of it, of its classifications, of its synonyms, of its species and genera. General qualities required are good taste, good judgment, and a habit of conciseness and of liberal and comprehensive thought. Above all, what may be called the 'index sense' is required – that is, the ability to feel instinctively, at the first glance, what and how subjects should be indexed in all their ramifications; the sense that is in touch with searchers, and appreciates just how subjects will be looked for and how to arrange so that they can most readily be found. Experience is the only school in which these qualifications can be gained.

It is remarkable, in view of the manifest usefulness of good indexes, how many books there are unprovided with them; and how many more are provided with indexes of an inferior kind which are inaccurate, insufficient, and unreliable. The trouble is not that the importance of reliable indexes is not generally appreciated, but that the work of indexing is left to inexperienced and unscientific hands. It is not generally recognized that a really good index cannot be made except by persons with special skill and special experience; that indexing is an art in itself, and it is unreasonable to expect satisfactory results from untrained hands. Not