

## Addendum: A publisher's perspective (FB)

- The index is a vital component of many nonfiction books. It would be unthinkable for a university press not to include an index in most books.
- Publishers need to bear in mind that a good index takes time and give indexers sufficient time, in terms of both schedule and hours, to do the job properly.
- Indexers need to bear in mind that that publishing budgets are being squeezed, and that by the time a book is ready for indexing it is often running late. It is not that publishers don't appreciate the value of a good index, it is just that they really need it to be compiled quickly.
- An index is for use. A hastily compiled index with long number strings and few subdivisions or cross-references can be almost useless. On the other hand, an overly elaborate index can add considerable time and cost without being much more use than a simpler index.
- Sometimes the author knows best, because they know how the field is structured; sometimes the indexer knows best, because they know how to structure information. The publisher/editor has the casting vote.

## Contributors

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# Reflections on the Wilson Award judging for 2012

## Margie Towery, Wilson Award Committee chair in 2012

As you may have surmised by now, there was no Wilson Award winning index this year. Nonetheless, in my continuing attempt to make the process transparent, I want to share some details about the judging day and reflect a bit on the committee's conclusions.

The Wilson Committee's work is both collegial and collaborative, so it is appropriate that I first thank those who were part of this year's committee. We could not have had a more diverse and experienced group of indexers, and I really appreciate their efforts. I also want to thank Caryl Wenzel who ably took on the registrar's role. My gratitude extends to EBSCO Publishing which has continued and will continue to support the award.

I want to emphasize three points. First, the registrar is the only person who knows who submitted indexes. None of the judges knew before, during, or after judging. That includes me. With no winner, every sealed envelope containing that information went back unopened to the registrar. This is how we maintain anonymity.

Second, this is not a 'Best of Show' award. It is given only if an entry meets the Wilson criteria.

I suspect we would all agree that there is a fair level of subjectivity in indexing. That is, if three indexers indexed the same text, they would produce somewhat different indexes.

But my third point is that the Wilson judging process is not subjective. Each judge uses the same criteria to look at each submitted index, as well as using their specialized indexing knowledge. I argue that this process provides the most objective result possible.

We started the judging about 9 am. The first step is for every judge to evaluate every submission using the Wilson criteria (available on the ASI website). We each found a spot where we were comfortable and set to work at our own pace. There is no discussion of the submissions during this process or at lunch. With every submission that we turned to, each of us hoped to find a Wilson winner.

By mid-afternoon, we gathered together to discuss each submission, with every judge having an opportunity to comment. After discussing each submission, we decided whether it would remain on the table as a possible winner or whether it was out of the running. At the end of the day, there were none left standing, so to speak. We sat and looked at each other as we all realized that there was no winner this year. Disappointment showed on every face. These were by and large OK indexes, but none of them were Wilson-winning quality. Our next step, then, was to summarize the kinds of problems we were seeing. Let me assure you, in the strongest terms, not a single submission was rejected for ticky-tack

things like a typo or two, or something minor like one or two missed cross-references or incomplete double-posts.

A few of the entries might have been considered after the first round if they had had one more careful, substantive edit. Overall, we found a lack of application of indexing standards, or best practices. All evidenced systemic problems in at least two of following areas:

- metatopic handling and structural issues
- missing topics that, as users who had perused the table of contents and the book, we expected to find
- usability issues in general
- poorly handled and incomplete cross-referencing
- incomplete double-posting (or flips)
- clunky phraseology
- awkward main headings
- subheadings that were puzzling or that did not clarify the relation of subheading to main heading
- unbalanced analysis (overanalysis of some things and underanalysis of others of similar importance)
- strings of undifferentiated locators as well as unruly locators
- and problems in readability, such as single entries that went on several pages and lack of continued lines.

Not every submission had every one of these problems, but each had two or more. And the thing is, these are all interconnected in the structure of an index. This is not to say there were not some good qualities in the submissions, because there were, but never enough to overcome the negatives.

So there you have it. We did our best. We really hoped for a winner but there wasn't one.

I would like to share very briefly some thoughts in response to this. We felt several of these problems might be caused by a lack of understanding of the essence of the book's subject. That argues strongly for indexing within your knowledge base. That is not to say that most experienced indexers could not produce a reasonable index for a book outside of their knowledge base, especially if the book is fairly well structured. But it does suggest that to produce an excellent index, the underlying knowledge must be there. I was thinking about this in relation to the Renaissance cartography book I did. I didn't know anything about, say, island books or globe gores, but I had a substantive background in European history and literature on which I could draw, as well as a fascination with maps, not to mention a willingness to look stuff up if needed during indexing.

The other conclusion we came to was that not many indexers know how to evaluate an index. This was evident in last year's judging, too. Evaluating an index is an entirely different process than editing an index. But when you know how to carefully evaluate an index, you put that skill to work in your everyday indexing practice.

In relation to this, I would like to suggest two things. First, have a highly experienced indexer take the proverbial red pencil (or track changes in Word) to one of your best indexes, using the Wilson criteria (which are a summary of best practices plus elegance) and indicating not just what might be wrong or could be improved, but also why. That is

certainly how I learned to index. Completion of an indexing course is simply not enough. You must continue to fine-tune your skills, learning to implement those best practices with each index you create.

Second, take time to evaluate two indexes: one of your own and one off the shelf. For one of your own, choose one that is not too recent. For the off-the-shelf one, pick one that at first glance looks good. For each of these, take time to work through the criteria checklist item by item. Make notes as you go, so that at the end of the process you can review them. Try this evaluation with a colleague, trading indexes and evaluating the other person's index. Have a dialogue about the choices each of you have made. I guarantee that as you learn to evaluate indexes, your own will improve as well. My ultimate hope is that next year we will have a Wilson Award winning index!

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The 2013 Wilson award was won by Kate Mertes for her index to Montesquieu's *My thoughts*. She is centre photo here with left, Beverly Pajer, EBSCO Publishing representative, and right, Patti Ordower, the Liberty Fund production editor for *My thoughts*.