A Brief Writer's Guide to Indexing

from Potomac Indexing, LLC

I know. You (writer about to publish a non-fiction book of more than 100 pages) are so tired of looking at your text over and over, assessing editing changes, tweaking content; the very last thing you may want to do is take on the indexing.

First choice should be to hire a professional indexer (we can, of course, help you with that), but this is not a pocket-change proposition. It actually takes more time to build the separate entity called the index than to do a copyediting or proofreading pass on your book, so it also costs more. Many authors consider this a worthy investment, but sometimes, especially for self-publishing authors, the cost may be prohibitive.

Indexing involves a certain mindset that I have found is not natural for most people. It's always more than just making an outline of the book's topical structure. It took most of us at PI six months or more of coursework and a natural gift for indexer mind to begin building useful indexes, so, please keep this in mind. You may be able to build a competent index from the author's perspective, but it will still be a beginner's job.

So, here we are. Either your publisher requires an index and doesn't want to pay for it (situation found most often with academic presses), or you really think an index would be useful, but you don't have the capital (and do have the time). How to approach this task and make something competent out of it? We figured that in the interest of better quality indexes overall, we'd come up with a shortish checklist of the basics and a couple of resources for you to make your own index, without hitting you with all the details that a professional indexer would spend time learning.

Tools

The *Chicago Manual of Style*. No, you don't have to shell out $60 for the whole thing. You can find just the indexing chapter _here_. A worthy investment. If you are feeling ambitious, you can also use Nancy Mulvany's _Indexing Books_. Fine primer from a great indexer.

No, you don't need to use index cards, although they do work. Things go a bit faster these days with computer software. Microsoft Word will do, although it may be easier to sort your entries by putting them in Excel (main headings in one column, subheadings in another). You can sort paragraphs in Word, and rows and columns in Excel to get things in approximately the right alphabetical order.

Structure

Index entries are made up of three elements: main headings, subheadings, and locators (usually page numbers). Sometimes a cross-reference is used instead of a page number (e.g., "*See also*" or "*See*") if there's too much information on a topic or subtopic to fit it in one place or if more related information can be found elsewhere at another main heading.

Example of a regular entry with subentries:

assessment

essay questions, 41–48
multiple-choice questions, 34–40
timing of, 54–55

Examples of cross-references:

automobiles. *See* cars

formatting (*see also* alignment; styles)

action buttons, 30
backgrounds, 15–18, 26–27
charts, 12–15, 19
data in cells, 7–10

social studies curriculum, 59, 105–108. *See also* history

Refer to the Chicago Manual for the different variations on style and layout. Cross-references can be put in different places in the entry and formatted in different ways, as you can see from the examples above. Pick a style and just be consistent with it (although your academic institution may have its own style to pass on to you). Note that the dash between page numbers in a range is not a simple hyphen, but an en dash. Look it up in your symbols list—there are keyboard shortcuts available for both Windows and Mac operating systems.

Process

OK. You can make your outline of the book now (yes, indexers read the book, pretty close to word for word depending on the subject matter; we don't just use search to find every mention of a topic; we're looking for significant mentions). But remember that that outline perspective is only the beginning, not the sum total of what an index is. Index users will be looking for both more general and more specific topics *at the main heading level*. Topics you may put in initially as subtopics for, say, a main topic that covers an entire chapter, will also need to be *double-posted* as main headings as well, with all the same page numbers. From one of the examples above, some users may look up "assessment" and find the

subtopics underneath, but some users may be interested specifically in multiple-choice question formation; they are much more likely to look in the "m's." Be nice and give them both, like this:

assessment

    essay questions, 41–48
    multiple-choice questions, 34–40
    timing of, 54–55

essay questions, 41–48

multiple-choice questions, 34–40

timing of assessment, 54–55

Keywords and Aboutness

So, both general and more specific topics as main headings. That practice alone will dramatically improve your index. Keep in mind, though, that not all subtopic terms will make common-sense index search terms. The idea is to make the first term a keyword that says something substantive *about* the subject, so subtopics like "overview" would not make sense as main headings in an index. Common sense is really important here; ask yourself if you would use that term to look up something in a list or enter into a search engine.

Metatopics

Partly in order to save you some time, please don't get stuck on making a duplicate of your index under the topic of the book itself. If your book is about birds, please avoid:

birds, 1–345

I kid you not, this sort of thing appears in indexes (perhaps tongue in cheek, but we don't know). And you don't need to give an outline of every chapter topic under the main book topic (although for how-to books, this might be useful). You will have to decide on the usefulness of a mini-outline under the book topic for yourself, but certainly don't put all sorts of details there. Most of the time, the main book topic or topics will either not appear at all in the index or will have just some very general things that wouldn't go well as main headings for themselves. Here's an example of a metatopic with very general stuff under it:

C++ programming language

    advantages and disadvantages, 3–4
    history of, 1–2

overview of program structure, 4–11
　　　　reusable code as goal of, 153

Now, you could also just put:

C++ programming language, 1–11, 153

but for a technical topic like this one, the 1–11 range is a bit long to provide without further detail. You can also cross-reference using *See also* to the next most specific topics from this book topic, unless you have more than about three of them. Please keep in mind that most index users will be using the index to find things that are not obvious from the table of contents or the title, so you don't need to worry too much about providing super-general topics in the index. I usually start providing index topics at the chapter topic level (if the chapter is about only one thing) and then provide more detailed names, places, and subjects from there.

To Sub or not to Sub....

Main headings are your primary access points for your readers. If you just give priority to that, you'll be headed in the right direction. There are situations, however, where it would be useful to provide a more detailed breakdown, but let's not get carried away with that concept. Indexers spend quite a bit of their analysis time dealing with subheadings, so I'm making this the sole topic of this part.

Too Much Detail?

Remember that an index is designed to take the user to the page or pages where the topic is discussed, not to the word or sentence, so you don't have to put a bunch of subheadings under a topic when they all fall on the same page. If those detailed subheadings are important, make them their own main headings instead. Please avoid:

dragons

　　　　bones, 34
　　　　digestion, 28
　　　　food choices, 28
　　　　scales, 34
　　　　teeth, 35
　　　　tongue, 35
　　　　wings, 36

Try this instead (assuming the book is about just dragons—the metatopic):

bones, 34

digestion, 28

dragons

    anatomy, 34–36
    eating habits, 28

food choices, 28

scales, 34

teeth, 35

tongue, 35

wings, 36

If the book was about other fantasy creatures and not just dragons, you might be able to get away with (assuming this was all that was covered for dragons):

dragons, 28, 34–36

A longer index is not necessarily more useful just for being long and detailed. Overly detailed main headings with many detailed subheadings can make it slower and more difficult for the user to find things. Besides, all this unnecessary detail is time-consuming for you to put in.

Not Enough?

And then there are the folks who just concentrate on main headings and leave the user with things like this to deal with:

operators, 37, 57–58, 63–77, 100–102, 166, 168, 171, 190, 215–217

Please spare us. Assuming this is a printed book and not an ebook with links for the page numbers (and even then!), the user will be required to go back and forth looking at each one of these locators to find what they are looking for (in this case, discussion of arithmetic and logical operators in formulas). Not fair! After about six flippings back and forth, most users will give up. So, we indexers have a rule of thumb to seriously consider subentries if there are more than six locators. This rule can vary depending on our client publisher's needs, but it's a good general rule to go by. Here's how you could make something like the above situation easier on your index user:

operators

    address of (&), 166, 171
    assignment, 68–70, 100–102
    calculation, 63–77, 190
    delete, 215–217
    dereference (*), 168

dot (.), 37
increment/decrement, 66–68, 101–102, 190

Long Page Ranges

This one is a little more debatable. One could send a user to a continuous discussion of a large-scale topic that covers more than 10–15 pages (like a chapter topic), but if the range is longer, it's a courtesy to break that main heading down into the next level of specificity (but avoiding the too-detailed scenario). I usually make subentries for the page ranges for main subtopics under the main chapter topic and leave it at that.

So, do yourself and index users a favor and leave out unnecessary detail, and do your users a favor by giving just enough when it's necessary. That will make for a nicely balanced index.

Double-posting vs. Cross-references

Posting different versions of your indexable term or using cross-references to other related terms is very much like the hyperlinking function used to link topics on the Web. And in ebooks, the index (yes, indexes are useful for ebooks) entries themselves directly link to the text.

For a traditional printed book index, double-posting and cross-referencing provide similar alternate methods for finding the information in your book faster (you just flip back through to a page instead of clicking a link).

As you are deciding on topics to put in your index, you'll run into some that are synonymous or closely related to one another. Just keep this concept in mind: don't make the user go to more places than necessary to find what they're looking for. The main reasons we have cross-references are to force users to go to our preferred vocabulary and more usually, to send them to entries that have a bunch of subentries and thus save space by not double-posting in both places. So, your first choice is to double-post synonymous terms as main headings with their locators, so if the user goes to either one, they will find what they are looking for. Second choice is to use a cross-reference to steer the user to the main spot in the index where the information will be given, or to provide connections to related topics that are also covered in-depth.

If you can keep these basic principles in mind when creating an index for your readers, you will make it much easier for them to find more detailed topics that they kind of remember from reading, or get a basic idea of what your book is about if they are browsing to buy, or find that discussion they want to cite when they are using your material in their book.

Just ask yourself, "Is this a useful term displayed in a useful way for someone to find what they need in my book?"

And if you are still overwhelmed by the indexing process and would like some pro help, we're right here (joanne.sprott@potomacindexing.com).