Classified versus specific entry in book indexes: guidelines for decision making

Glenda Browne

The author, a long-standing indexer and teacher of indexing, notes that specific indexing is nowadays generally considered to be the best approach for book indexes, but goes on to look at why specific indexing can cause problems to indexer and user alike, and to examine whether a classified approach still has something to offer.

> I always wanted to be somebody, but I should have been more specific.
>
> Jane Wagner (and Lily Tomlin)

Introduction

Choosing the best possible term for indexing is not an easy task. How specific should it be, and which specific or classified term should be chosen? At the cookery and food indexing panel discussion at the 2007 ANZSI conference, Tricia Waters (reported by Russell, 2007) presented a reading from Anne Tyler's novel *The accidental tourist* which perfectly illustrates this dilemma. Rose likes things organized in alphabetical order and her brothers were helping her unpack the shopping.

> Rose stood on a stepstool in front of a glass-fronted cupboard, accepting the groceries which her brothers, Charles and Porter handed up to her. 'Now I need the N's – anything starting with N?' she asked. 'How about these noodles?' Porter asked. 'N for noodles or would that be P for pasta?' 'It's E for elbow macaroni', Rose retorted, 'you might have passed those up earlier'.

Preferred approaches vary between disciplines and change over time. Indexers also make their own judgements based on the content and intended audience of the work they are indexing. A user's knowledge of a topic influences the term they consider to be specific ('elbow macaroni' to Rose; 'noodles' to Porter). This makes it very difficult to identify rules that must be applied, and to know when rules can, or should, be broken.

This article is based on part of a talk about indexing rules given at the ANZSI conference in 2009 (Browne, nyp).[1] That talk, in turn, was inspired by discussions in indexing classes, and examination of early works written when specific entry was not yet generally assumed to be the best approach.

The problems caused by classified index structures have been highlighted by Joel Berson (2007). As he has also discussed modern writings on the topic I have not duplicated them here, focusing rather on a broad exploration of the pros and cons of specific and classified indexing, and some earlier writings.

What are 'specific' and 'classified' entry?

The first task is to determine what we mean by 'specific entry'. There are three main options for specific and classified indexing. Entries may be:

- specific, direct: for instance, indexing snorkelling as 'snorkelling'
- specific, indirect: for instance, indexing snorkelling as 'water sports: snorkelling'[2]
- classified: for instance, indexing snorkelling as the broader term 'water sports'.

In modern indexing parlance, specific, direct indexing is usually referred to as 'specific indexing', and specific, indirect indexing is referred to as 'classified indexing'. For this article I have used the terms:

- specific, direct entry
- classified entry (indirectly specific)
- classified entry (non-specific, up-posted[3])

to distinguish between these three concepts, although in natural language I refer to the first as 'specific entry' and the second as 'classified entry', rarely discussing the third. Below I will also introduce other terms that have been used to describe these concepts.

Specific, direct entry

Specific, direct entry is also referred to as:

- direct entry indexing (Society of Indexers, forthcoming)
- direct entry (Foskett, 1982)
- alphabetico-specific entry (Metcalfe, 1966).

Foskett wrote (1982: 123):

> This leads us to a consideration of another important rule introduced by Cutter. This was the idea of 'specific' entry: a subject was to be entered under its name, not that of an inclusive class. If we consider this carefully, we realize that what Cutter was referring to was direct entry, rather than specific. 'Cats' is the heading to be used, not 'Domestic animals – cats' or some similar indirect entry, i.e. entry under one or a series of containing classes.

Metcalfe (1966: 71, 12.3) wrote:

> This principle is called specific entry. In the dictionary catalogue this specific or alphabetico-specific entry is

> entry of a book under the particular name of a particular subject with which it deals. Entry under Apples in alphabetical order of a book on apples is alphabetico-specific entry. Its entry under Fruit – Apples would be specific, but this is not what is called specific entry in a dictionary catalogue; entry of it under Fruit – Apples, or just Fruit in alphabetical order is called alphabetico-classed entry.

Both Metcalfe and Foskett are discussing library catalogue entries, but the terminology and principles also apply to indexing.

Classified entry (indirectly specific)

One of the problems in discussing classified versus specific indexing is the variation in the language used. In my conference talk, I referred to classified entry (indirectly specific) as specific, indirect (alphabetico-classified) entry. It is specific entry because, despite the classified structure, you end up referring to the *specific* topic (such as snorkelling, or apples) although you do not get there directly. For this article I have changed this to 'classified entry (indirectly specific)' because 'classified entry' is the way it is often referred to in indexing discussions. Classified entry (indirectly specific) is also referred to as:

- alphabetico-classed entry (as discussed in the Metcalfe quote above)
- classified entry
- subtopic categorical subheadings (Stauber, 2004).

Do Mi Stauber notes (2004: 152):

> Subtopic categorical subheadings are often referred to as classified, or subclass, subheadings. I am choosing not to use these terms, because they lead to confusion with terminology that does not apply to back-of-book indexing.

Classified entry (non-specific, up-posted)

In my talk I referred to classified entry (non-specific, up-posted) simply as 'classified entry'. I have made it more precise here, as in natural language 'classified entry' is also used for the 'indirectly specific' approach. Both these approaches are also referred to as alphabetico-classed entry (as discussed in the Metcalfe quote above).

Advantages and disadvantages of specific and classified entry

Advantages of specific, direct entry

Specific, direct entry is (in general) preferred in indexing because it means users can look up a topic under its own name without knowing the broader term (class) selected by the indexer as a classified entry point. For example, the person interested in snorkelling can look up 'snorkelling' directly, rather than having to wonder whether it has been classified under 'water sports', 'aquatic sports', 'swimming' or 'holiday activities'.

Specific entry also makes it easier to keep subheadings logical, and to avoid sub-subheadings.

Some of the advantages claimed for classified entry in the grouping of content, and provision of access from broader terms, are also available with specific, direct entry if *see also* references are created from broader to narrower terms.

Disadvantages of specific, direct entry

Specific, direct entry fails when users or indexers have trouble identifying the best search term for a topic – either because the terms are obscure or otherwise hard to identify, or because they have difficulty finding a term at the appropriate level of specificity.

Difficulty finding the word for the subject

It is not always easy for users or indexers to choose a good term to describe a topic. Sometimes it is relatively easy – you look for wattles at 'wattles' (or acacias or *Acacia*), you look for information on prisoners who were transported to Australia under 'convicts' or 'transportation'; but where, for example, do you look for general discussions on the ability of people to find information? Possible terms include 'access to information', 'findability', 'retrieval of information' and 'information retrieval'. There is no single specific term that clearly describes the topic and is certain to be selected by both indexer and index user. For specific entry to work in cases such as this, the indexer has to think of many entry points, including cross-references from broader terms such as 'information' which may be more clearly identified by users.

Difficulty finding the appropriate level of specificity

It can be difficult to find the appropriate level of specificity. It is easy to assume that indexers can simply choose the level of specificity of terms used in the book, but this is not always the level we judge to be helpful for users.

Knight (1979: 98–9) posed the question 'To what degree am I expected to extend specificity?' and uses Metcalfe's example of a heading such as 'Model T Ford Motor Car'. He suggests that in a book devoted wholly to 'motors' this might be a suitable index heading, but that:

> common sense imposes a limit to the degree of specificity and in a volume of more general literature the indexer might have to invert it into 'Ford motors, Model T', and he could plead in extenuation that it is not necessary to descend to the *infima species* and that in any case Model T is a variety rather than a species.

In this case the inversion makes this into a classified entry, so Knight is effectively promoting the use of classified entry (indirectly specific).

Wellisch (1991: 357) suggests that the specificity of terms is mainly a function of the indexing language being used. For a book index, the 'indexing language' – or collection of allowable terms – is based on the words in the book itself.

This suggests, as a general rule, that if the book discusses Model T Ford motor cars specifically, the index should index them specifically. Any doubt that a user will search for the specific term can be alleviated by the use of a string of cross-references (cars, 15–25, *see also* Ford motor cars; and 'Ford motor cars, 29, *see also* Model T Ford motor cars).

In practice, however, we often rely on Knight's 'common sense' and choose a broader term than the most specific one available to us. In some cases the lack of any entries at a broader term (for instance, having an entry for 'North Queensland' but not one for 'Queensland') may suggest that use of the broader term for the narrower concept is appropriate.

Lilley (1955: 6), in the context of library catalogues, says:

> If one goes far enough along the line of recognizing the lack of specificity in the concept of 'specific' headings, he may verge upon the heresy of wondering just how much of user-failure at the subject catalog can be attributed to the basic rule of the 'direct and specific entry'.

The disadvantages listed here become examples of the benefits of classified indexing, below.

Advantages of classified entry (indirectly specific)

Classified entry (indirectly specific) can be used in a number of ways:

- as the only place for an entry in a classified structure
- as a supplementary place for an entry to replace a cross-reference
- as a non-hierarchical grouping mechanism.

Classified entry as the only location for a topic

Classified indexes, in which most topics are indexed as subheadings under a broader term in the hierarchy to which they belong, have the advantage of grouping similar items and allowing users to browse entries that are related to the topic they have consulted. They work well when the broader term is more likely to be consulted by the index user than the specific one.

It is said that they take up less space,[4] but this is meaningless unless the quality of access points is considered. When equal access points are provided (for example, including *see also* references within the classified structure) the classified index is likely to be larger because of the space requirements of turnover lines from many levels of subheading.

Avoids a cross-reference to a narrower term

Classified entry (indirectly specific) can be effectively used as a replacement for individual *see also* references, thus saving the time of the user, who doesn't have to follow the cross-reference to find what they need. This assumes, however, that the term is also indexed in its own right at its specific alphabetic location.

One of the things that sparked my interest in this topic was a student's comment that the example below (which had been in a class exercise) included a classified subheading ('sentencing: two-stage sentencing'), although I had taught that subheadings should describe 'aspects' of the main heading, and that users should be directed to specific instances or narrower terms using a *see also* reference (as with '*see also* suspended sentences' in the example below).

sentencing, *see also* suspended sentences
  discount for guilty plea, 13–14, 29–30
  parity in, 38–39
  purposes of, 83–84
  two-stage sentencing ,29–30
suspended sentences, 19, 25, 30–32, 35–36
  deterrence aspects of, 39–42
  mitigating factors, 67, 69–71, 74
  new legislation regarding, 76–79, 81
two-stage sentencing, 29–30

The choice to include the classified subheading in this case was the result of a trade-off between the aim to 'save the time of the user' and the desire for a pure set of subheadings. In this case the classified subheading does not cause major problems in the index structure, so it was considered advantageous to use the double entry. On the other hand, the cross-reference to 'suspended sentences' was retained as a cross-reference rather than a double entry as there are a number of subheadings at 'suspended sentences', and duplicating them at 'sentencing' would have led to sub-subheadings as well as a longer index. Along with the rule 'save the time of the user' there is usually a corollary 'so long as it doesn't take up more space (or make the index more complex)'.

Hybrid classified and specific arrangements

Early commentators on classified versus specific arrangements were often especially concerned at the thought that classified and specific subheadings would be combined in the same index. Wheatley (2002: 56) said 'An Index may be arranged either chronologically, alphabetically, or according to classes, but great confusion will be caused by uniting the three,' and Wellisch (1991: 39) agreed, saying, 'Under no circumstances should an alphabetical arrangement of headings be interspersed with a classified array of subheadings.'

They are correct that there are potential dilemmas from mixing these two, but, if we accept the utility of the arrangement above with 'two-stage sentencing' as a subheading, we must also take the risk that this mixed arrangement may cause some confusion. The skill for the indexer is in selecting the situations in which a classified subheading fits easily into the existing subheadings, and to use cross-references in place of double entry where the inclusion of the subheading may cause problems.

Grouping in broad categories

In addition to hierarchical groupings, indexes often use categorical or concept groupings in which subheadings are not aspects of the main heading or narrower terms (as with 'two-stage sentencing') but can usefully be grouped under an 'umbrella' term.

Recipes in cookbooks are often indexed by recipe title (specific entry), main ingredients, and broad category groupings. For example, Summer Fish (a spicy barbeque recipe) may be indexed as a subheading under 'barbeques'. Other common groupings include broad food categories (such as 'breads and pastries') and country of origin (such as 'Southern African cookery').

Grouping is also used where the specific entry is considered to be subsidiary to the grouping term, for example indexing names of books written by an author under the name of the author, or news of judicial appointments under the name of the court. The second example is from periodical indexing, where the group entry allows readers to browse for news of judicial appointments which they would be unlikely to find if they had to know what names to look under.

One of the light-hearted entry arrays in *The indexing companion* (Browne and Jermey, 2007) is at 'indexer confusion', which gathers references to examples in the text of times that human or computer indexers failed to fully understand the content they were indexing. The subheadings include 'endothelins and the telephone' and 'evacuation vs bowel movements'. These subheadings show examples of the main heading, rather than aspects of it.

Grouping may be considered more important than specific entry in some information environments. In a review of *File management and information retrieval systems*, Bella Weinberg (1998) noted that the book advises the creation of broad subject headings, saying, 'The object is to have as few subject headings as possible.' Weinberg noted, 'The advantages of specificity are apparently not recognized in the corporate world.'

Disadvantages of classified entry (indirectly specific)

Difficulties finding broader term/s

The main disadvantage of classified entry (indirectly specific) is that users don't always think of the appropriate broader term to search for. Sometimes it is obvious – such as 'dog' for 'collie dog', but at other times there is no clear option. For example, if a user finds nothing at the term 'microblogging' the broader term could be 'social networking' or 'blogging'. Poole (in Wheatley, 2002: 56) sums it up, saying, 'The fatal defect of every classified arrangement is that nobody understands it except the person who made it, and he is often in doubt.'

Wheatley (2002: 56) agrees:

> The evil of this [that is, classification] is that the consulter is never sure whether the reference he requires may not be lurking in some place that he has missed, but in the case of a single alphabet an answer to the question 'Does the Index contain what I require?' is obtained at once.[5]

Metcalfe (1966: 66, 11.21) unconsciously provides ammunition for the case against classified entry by using the heading STARS – PLANETS – MARS as an example of an entry for an alphabetico-classed catalogue. As planets are not stars, the books on Mars are as good as lost!

The failure of classified entry for the user was clearly demonstrated by Joel Berson (2007), who asked, 'where would you look for "tailors" in a book called "The Complete Tradesman"?', and found the answer to be under 'occupations', not 'trades' (and not under 'tailors'); worse still, you could only find 'tinkers' by looking under the term 'itinerants'.

There has been a discussion on the SIGCR-L mailing list[6] about whether 'metadata creation' is in the class 'cataloguing', or whether 'cataloguing' is a member of the class 'metadata creation'. The fact that people can't even agree about which of a pair of terms is the broader does not give confidence in classified structures.

Although classified entry is common in legal indexes, it is not universally accepted. Green (1989) wrote:

> is it in the purpose of an index to pre-arrange the concepts dealt with in the text? Or is that not the function of a table of contents, while an index is a more democratic instrument, giving rough equality of access to all the concepts?

Green reported on an experiment in which six lecturers at the Law School in Cardiff were given six topics that were found at different levels of subdivision in the index to the *Law Quarterly Review*. None were able to find all of them. So pity the poor beginner who doesn't know that 'defective premises' are to be found at:

> Torts: negligence: duty of care: defective premises.

Betty Moys (1997), an award-winning legal indexer, also comes out strongly in favour of specific indexes, as does Knight (1979), who was a barrister as well as an indexer.

Complicated structure/overuse of subsubheadings

Another problem with classified indexes is that they often largely mimic the structure of the table of contents, thus wasting the opportunity to provide an alternative set of entry points. In doing so, they also overuse sub-subheadings, and lead to a complicated index structure and wasted space caused by turnover lines.

Wellisch (1991: 40) points out that the use of classified structures in indexes makes it difficult to index associatively related (non-hierarchical) aspects of any subheadings.

Advantages of classified entry (non-specific, up-posted)

Classified entry (non-specific, up-posted) is useful in two related areas: where the specific term is too obscure to expect users to think of it, or where it is not likely to be selected as a search term; and where the grouping function of the index is considered more important than specific access.

Specific terms not important or not known

Classified entry (non-specific, up-posted) may be useful in cases where the specific terms are not likely to be known and

consulted, or where the specific detail is not important. Two recipes might list 'rotini' and 'fusilli' as ingredients, but if you don't envisage your users searching for those you could index them both at 'spiral pasta'. At times the indexer won't even know the names of the specific topics (for instance, if all they had seen was images of these pasta varieties).

Another situation in which the specific term may not be important is when there is no entry under the broader term, and the specific term is only mentioned casually. For example, in a book on knowledge management with no entry for 'libraries', an entry for 'corporate libraries' may be too specific. (On the other hand, if the specificity is warranted, the solution is to add a *see* reference from 'libraries' to 'corporate libraries' (or to put the page number at both 'libraries' and 'corporate libraries').

Indexing at different levels of granularity

Classified entry (up-posted) is also useful when indexing the same content at different levels of granularity (detail). For example, you may use 'indexing' for a whole chapter, and 'strip indexing' for one page within that chapter. This is not really up-posting, however, as 'indexing' is the most specific description when considering the whole chapter.

Disadvantages of classified entry (non-specific, up-posted)

Classified entry (non-specific, up-posted) is less useful than specific entry because it stops you going straight to the topic of interest. Assume that one discussion of 'micro-blogging' is indexed at 'blogging' along with four other references to blogging in general. The user won't know which of those five entries refers to micro-blogging rather than blogging, and in fact won't know that *any* of them do.

Of the two options below, the second one is clearly the more useful.

> blogging, 15, 25, 77, 189, 266, 354

and

> blogging, 15, 25, 77, 189, 354, *see also* micro-blogging
> micro-blogging, 266

Similarly, the Australian *Yellow pages* business telephone directory has a category 'Editorial Support Services', to which indexing belongs. I used to have my phone number listed there. Because it is a classified entry (non-specific, up-posted), however, there was nothing to show a user what type of support service I offered – that is, indexing – so I got a lot of phone calls from locals who had written a book and needed help getting it published.

The art of being specific

Earlier writings on specific entry show passionately held views – probably because people were arguing against the entrenched position of classified entry in some areas. Now that specific entry is generally accepted as inevitable (except in some specialized areas), the approach is more relaxed.

In general, modern indexers consider specific indexing, with the use of double entries and cross-references from broader to narrower terms, to be the foundation of an effective, user-friendly index, supplemented by judicious use of classified entries.

Even passionate advocates of specific indexing acknowledge that an entry can be too specific. In general the specificity of language in the book determines the specificity of index terms; however, this may be tempered by the indexers' expectations of user behaviour.

It is interesting to note how writers over the years have had trouble setting the appropriate degree of specificity for indexers and cataloguers, with Wellisch (1991) admonishing us to 'Be specific, be specific – don't be too specific!' and Lilley (1955) saying 'How specific is "specific"? Well, it all depends!'

Endnote

Indeed, it does all depend.

Notes

1 The remainder of the paper challenged two pseudo-rules – that you shouldn't include chapter headings in the index, and that you shouldn't write the book in the index.

2 In this article, a colon is used to indicate that the following text is a subheading which would be indented on a new line in a real index.

3 Up-posting refers to the indexing of a concept at a broder term than the one that most specifically describes the concept.

4 Moys (1997) writes:

> It is also held by some that the classified structure produces shorter indexes, with less need for see also references and double entry. There is considerable truth in this claim. . . . Incidentally, at least two lawyers saw the increase as an advantage: 'Not surprisingly, the new index is very much longer (139 pages as opposed to 82) but rarely can so great an increase in the length of a legal text have had so beneficial an effect' (Mathis 1994).

The problematic assumption here is that classified structures need fewer *see also* references – this is only true if you can assume that all readers understand the classification, and the evidence is that this is not so.

5 Not so, in fact. This page is indexed at: 'Classification v. the Alphabetical Arrangement .....56' but not at 'Specific' or 'Alphabetical'.

6 SIGCR-L mailing list discussion 29 May to 11 June 2009, thread titled 'New thread – Year of Cataloging Research as topic for 2010 SIG', http://mail.asis.org/pipermail/sigcr-l/2009-June/thread.html

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For want of an index . . .

From David Crystal's review of A. P. Cowie's *Oxford history of English lexicography* (*Times Literary Supplement* of 9 October 2009):

> A. P. Cowie . . . has performed a great labour of lexicographical love. A lexicographer of no mean repute, he has organized a team of thirty-five lexicographers to write about several hundred others who have written about their work as well as performing it. This is meta-meta-meta-lexicography. And the result is informative, illuminating, fascinating, and – in one respect – frustrating. . . .
>
> There is a huge amount of information in these two volumes – if you can find it. This, I'm afraid, is the source of the frustration I mentioned earlier. The index to the OHEL badly lets us down. There are seventeen pages of index for 887 pages of text – less than 2 per cent. I wouldn't expect an index for a book of this scale to be less than 5 per cent. In particular, for a book focusing so much on people, I would expect to see a comprehensive index of every person mentioned. And hardly anyone is. I repeatedly found myself wondering, as I read, if someone was going to be mentioned – the Anglo-Saxonist William Barnes, for instance, or Laurence Urdang. I looked them up in the index and didn't find them, and assumed not. Then, as I read on, I came across them.
>
> I learnt my lesson. I did a couple of random samples, and found on each page only one out of the dozen or so names listed in the index. The story of the redoubtable Moore, Meech and Whitehall of Middle English Dictionary fame is told over a couple of pages, but none is in the index. If you wanted to check the points I made earlier about the mention of publishers, you wouldn't be able to do so, as they aren't listed. Dictionary titles are only sporadically indexed. It is immensely frustrating. I wanted to check a point about the *Cambridge international dictionary of English*, but I didn't make a note of the page where it was mentioned, and it is not in the index. I never knew there was another Samuel Johnson who wrote a schools dictionary in America in the late eighteenth century. I have just remembered that, and I'd like to check the exact date before including the fact in this review. But again, he isn't in the index and I'm not going to read the whole book again.

Gabriel Egan (Department of English and Drama, Loughborough University) commented (Letters, *TLS*, 21 October 2009):

> Sir, – David Crystal looks forward to someone making "an index supplement" to A. P. Cowie's *Oxford History of English Lexicography* (October 9). It has already been done: Google Books is giving away the index on its website and there Crystal can find out just where Cowie covers "the redoubtable Moore, Meech and Whitehall" and the American Samuel Johnson, who wrote a schools dictionary in the late eighteenth century.

Yes, but . . .

Google Books does indeed offer a searchable version of the *History*, which would probably go some way to meeting David Crystal's immediate requirements, but a searchable version is not an index, in the sense of a principled selection of items ordered thematically. Fine if you know exactly what you are looking for in strings identical to those in text but not much help if you're using terms slightly wide of the mark, or the concept that lies underneath the word on the page.