THE JOY OF INDEX
A GUIDE FOR YOUR BOOK

Most publishers now require authors of non-fiction books to provide or pay for an index. **Glenda Browne** offers some expert advice.

EVERY NONFICTION book needs an index. While a table of contents shows the overall structure of a book, an A-Z index takes readers to specific nuggets of information within the text. A book with 10 chapters might have a thousand index entries, making the index the ideal way to find detail within the book. A book without an index is hard to revisit, as you cannot easily dip back into the most interesting or relevant bits. And, as a reference tool, such a book without an index is almost useless.

A book index is a list of all of the major topics and people discussed in the book, arranged (nearly always) in alphabetical order, differentiated from other discussions on the same basic topic through the use of subdivisions and linked to related (that is, similar, but not identical) topics through cross-references. The example below shows a main heading ("managing") with a see also reference to a related topic ("leadership") and a number of subdivisions that indicate the aspect of the main topic that is being discussed.

managing 410–36, see also leadership
  barriers to women 133
  by commitment 420
  cultural diversity 123–24
  defined 3, 28
  effectiveness 439–58

And so on.

An index should allow readers to find information whether they have read the book or not. It should also ensure that they are able find all the information on a particular topic. The index should use the same language to describe topics that the text does, but should also include alternative terms (for example, synonyms and abbreviations) to help readers who do not think in the same terms that the book uses.

Where possible, libraries buy books that have indexes, and general readers often use an index to check the suitability of a book they are thinking of buying, making it economically worthwhile for publishers to include indexes with books they publish. Indexing has now extended to children's books, even in those with very few pages or words.

Standard Australian publishing contracts require nonfiction authors to provide indexes. This means paying a professional indexer, doing it themselves, or asking a spouse, neighbour, student, secretary, or other acquaintance to do it. Unfortunately, authors are often not good indexers, and the same is true of most spouses, neighbours, students, and secretaries. On the other hand, professionally created indexes can be expensive and many authors are not willing – or able – to spend the money.

Indexing costs vary enormously, depending on the comprehensiveness of the index, the complexity of the material and the time and charges of the indexer. As a rough guide, an index to a 200-page cookbook or tourist guide might cost $400, an index to a 300-page

trade book might cost $1200, while an index to a 700-page medical textbook could cost as much as $6300.

Until the unlikely event of all publishers paying for the provision of indexes, authors will have to manage the task. This article offers guidance to authors who want to hire a professional indexer and to those who want to learn indexing principles and do the job themselves.

Indexers Available, a database obtainable from the Australian Society of Indexers' (AusSI) website www.aussi.org/IndexersAvailable, is the best place to start. You can search for an indexer for a specific format (for example, book or website), who specialises in certain subjects, or who lives in a certain area. Most indexers are generalists, so subject specialty is not usually important, though it can be for complex works in fields such as law, medicine and literary criticism. Location is also not significant, unless you will be couriering a large amount of hard copy or want to meet in person.

Indexers whose entries are marked with an "R" are registered; that is, an index they have created has been assessed by the AusSI Panel of Assessors as being of a professional standard. According to new rules, effective from February 2001, an indexer will need to have created two published indexes in addition to the index they are submitting in order to become registered. AusSI currently has a committee examining the registration process, so this might change in future. The AusSI recommended

rate is $44 per hour. In practice, indexers earn from $20 to $60 per hour, which translates to between $2 and $10 per page, depending on the number of words per page, the complexity of the book and the depth of indexing, with most books falling in the middle of this range. Indexers can give an estimate based on a sample of the text and can tailor an index to the available budget to some extent (for example, by decreasing the depth of indexing and therefore the size of the index).

Most indexers use dedicated indexing software programs such as SKY Index, CINDEX, or MACREX. These save time on the clerical and stylistic aspects

contact with the author, even if the author is paying for the index. In 13 years of indexing I have only once had direct contact with an author when I was working for a book publisher. When an author commissions an index there are less shared understandings than there are between publishers and indexers, so from the start there must be more detailed discussions about mutual expectations. As an author you should at the least discuss the budget, deadlines, space and stylistic issues relating to the display of the index. You can let the indexer know how much money is available for the job, or you can ask for a quote and see what response you get.

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of indexing, such as sorting (alphabetising) and layout. Each offers type-ahead features (as you start typing a term they fill in the remainder), allow you to create acronyms and macros and allow for easy duplicating and flipping of entries. For example, flipping

Australia
  history

gives the entry:

history
  Australia

When a publisher commissions an index, the indexer rarely has

For top-quality work you need to allow time for the index. The indexer will estimate the total number of hours needed and work out how many days will be required to complete the task. For an average 300-page book allow at least two weeks. If there are unusual features in the book (for example, case studies or exercises) you should let the indexer know your requirements, as there are often no hard and fast rules.

If you want cited authors to be indexed, you should indicate whether you want the author and subject indexes to be presented separately or combined. Normally, indexers

will assume that they are creating an index for the topical material in the book, covering names of people discussed as subjects, but not names of people whose work has been quoted. Most trade books don't index cited authors, but many textbooks and scholarly works do.

Some authors like to have input into the indexing process, while many indexers don't like this at all, so it's best to discuss it before work starts. Feedback on draft indexes can be useful, as long as the author realises that an unedited index can look quite different from the final one (see sample draft index below). If an author is going to be commenting on the final index it is important that they see an early draft so that disagreements with structural or problems of emphasis can be dealt with.

I indexed a book on wine around the world and learnt that there are many synonyms for the same grape variety as well as many similar-sounding names that refer to different grape varieties. Luckily, I could ask questions of the author (via the editor). One of the responses was that "Muscadelle is grown mainly in Bordeaux and also – as tokay – in Australia. Muscatel is an Australian synonym for zibibbo, which is the same as muscat of Alexandria, muscat d'Alexandria and moscato de setubal ...", and so on. With this information, I could structure the index so that synonyms were grouped and unrelated terms were kept separate.

Authors can create the worst indexes, but they can also create some of the best indexes. The 1996 AusSI Medal was presented to someone who indexed a work she had edited and written parts of. If you commit the time to learning indexing skills, and if you aren't already fed up with the book you have written, you can make a good index. The biggest problem for authors is detaching themselves from the work, both in order to be able to see the content as someone else sees it, and to consider the words other people might use to discuss the same concepts.

PEOPLE OFTEN ASK HOW an indexer chooses pertinent index terms from the wealth of information presented in a book A standard procedure is to check the contents page and introduction to get an overview of the book, then mark the important concepts. This is the easy part – it can be done on the sofa with your feet up, or on the train.

For example, in the paragraph above I would highlight the words "index terms". I would probably also highlight the words "chooses", "information", "mark" and "overview" – not necessarily because I will use them to index this content, but because they might later suggest other links, or give context when I am writing subdivisions. The highlighted concepts then have to be converted into meaningful entries. The conversion involves taking the concepts from the text, considering their essence

(also called subject analysis) and writing them with the key word (often a noun) first. For example, the statement "This newly-discovered compound was used to kill weeds in the fields", might be indexed with the term "pesticides" (and probably "weedkillers" as well). These terms describe the subject of the sentence, even though the terms themselves have not been used in the text.

A section of a book headed "Seven steps to well-behaved kids" might generate the index entries "child rearing" and "disciplining children" even though "child", "rearing" and "discipline" are not mentioned in the heading. The number "seven" is not a useful index entry unless the concepts are commonly called the "seven steps". (You would, however, index the Ten Commandments under "ten" as well as under "commandments".) Similarly, an indexer has to avoid passing mentions where a word is included in the text but not discussed as a subject. For example, the phrase "The plane flew over Singapore, not Kuala Lumpur as it usually did", probably does not need indexing at "Kuala Lumpur" (nor, probably, even at "Singapore", although I am reluctant to say "never" as so much indexing depends on the context).

Another difficult area is indexing concepts that might be almost—but not quite—the same. For example, you might have to decide whether to choose one of these terms: "migrants", "non-English-

Children's books

Indexing children's books requires a special sensitivity because although the subject material is usually easily understood, the index needs to be selective and pitched at the appropriate level. For example, a page with a picture of a crimson rosella could be indexed as "crimson rosellas", "rosellas", "parrots", or "birds" (or, for senior secondary school students, "Platycercus elegans"). The choice of terms will have to be made with regard to the age of the readers, the purpose of the book and other terms in the index. For example, if there are other parrots mentioned in the book, it might be useful to group them all and index them just as "parrots", but if the crimson rosella is the only one, it might be more useful to use the specific term, particularly for children who are familiar with the content of the book. The modern primary school English curriculum teaches the use of indexes as early as age eight, so children are growing up more experienced in their use than did previous generations.

The top ten

speaking backgrounds", "NESB", or "people of culturally diverse backgrounds" and to group all page references at that term, or to use all of these terms where they are most appropriate, with "see also" references between them. For example, the older term "NESB" might be needed for policies from the 1990s, or where language is the focus.

Indexing should reflect the language of the text and should be appropriate and sensitive to the needs of users. Many books make assumptions about the norm and treat alternatives as other. For example, a book on engineers might have a section called "female engineers" that compares the proportions of women and men in various engineering jobs. This sort of entry is commonly indexed as

> engineers
>   female

but since women are included in the bulk of the text (that is, the general discussion of engineers includes them, even though they are a minority), and since this paragraph actually lists statistics about men and women, it is more accurately indexed as

> engineers
>   gender differences.

AFTER THE TEXT HAS been examined and the entries have been typed, it is time to edit. Indexers spend about a third of their total indexing time editing the index because they usually list more terms than they will need and

put more detail in their subdivisions than they will eventually use. (It is easier to remove unneeded material at the end than to miss a key point and have to read the book again.) Sometimes themes emerge fully only as you work through a book; some entries that seemed marginal become crucial, whereas others get removed. Detail in subdivisions is also needed so that these can be grouped and worded effectively. Some indexers edit as much as they can during term entry, but there is always tidying up to be done at the end, as it is only when all the listings have been entered that final decisions can be made about what to include and how to group it.

Editing also ensures that terms are used consistently. For example, if you have entries for "Web sites" and "websites" you have to decide on one. Ideally, these inconsistencies should be edited out of the manuscript. But they do occur, especially in multi-authored works. Similarly, you have to make sure that you don't have entries for "vitamin C" listed as "ascorbic acid", its synonym. The solution here is to have a "see" reference from one of these terms to the other (for example, ascorbic acid, see vitamin C) or to include both index terms, each with all of the relevant page numbers.

A raw index might read:

> play with symbols 25–6
> symbolic play 67–92
> symbolic play, pretend 104
> pretend play 66–7
> symbols in play 11
> **mathematical symbols in play** 18
> **cultural symbols in play** 101

This might end up as

play, see pretend play;
symbolic play
pretend play 66–7, 104, see
also symbolic play
symbolic play 11, 25–6,
67–92, see also pretend play
    cultural 101
    mathematical 18

When the editing is done, the indexer does a final check and often has another person check it.

That is usually the last the indexer sees the index before it is irrevocably in print. Some indexers check their index once it has been laid out. New errors can creep in at this late stage, including omission of the last section of the index, failure to add "continued" notes when one term with many sub-divisions is split at the end of a page and page number problems when whole pages or groups of pages are added or removed at the last minute. My father has a cookbook in which he knows he has to add two to every page number to get to the recipe he needs. Not so difficult, but, unfortunately, it is not always that simple, and page number changes can make the whole index useless.

Glenda Browne has been an indexer for 13 years. With Jonathan Jermey, she has written the book Website Indexing: Enhancing Access to Information Within Websites, *Auslib Press, 2001. She teaches website indexing in a Continuing Education course at the University of NSW. Browne is now treasurer of the NSW Branch of AusSI.*