

# It's all in the index



**THOSE LISTS AT THE END OF BIOGRAPHIES NOT ONLY ADD AUTHORITY TO THE BOOK, THEY ENHANCE ITS SALES. GLENDA BROWNE LOOKS AT THE QUIRKY BUT IMPORTANT WORLD OF INDEXING.**

Indexing is an inconspicuous activity, and most people have never thought about how indexes get made.

Because of this, the American Society of Indexers chose kohlrabi as their official vegetable: no-one knows what that is, either. Yet indexes are a vital part of non-fiction books.

ANZSI (the Australian and New Zealand Society of Indexers, <http://www.anzsi.org>) has over 200 members. The ASA recommends that publishers pay for professional indexing as a production cost, but in trade publishing the author usually provides the index, either creating it, or paying someone else to. The publisher may organise the indexing and take the money out of the author's royalties. In educational publishing the publisher may pay for the index, at the expense of lower royalties.

Authors often prefer to index their own books because they are the ones with subject expertise, but they must

also be able to stand back and index from the point of view of the user. Other authors index while writing, saying that this reveals omissions or duplications.

While many writers and readers tend to take the index for granted, they are a crucial sales tool for online booksellers. Amazon lets users 'Search inside the book', including the index, if the publisher allows this. Google Books also displays indexes – their extract of *The Indexing Companion* has linked entries for pages in the online sample.

## HOW TO INDEX

Good indexers tend to be hybrids: analytical (breaking down the text to useful components) but synthetic (building them up again into a useable structure); rigid (to important rules) yet flexible (to the nuance of each book); meticulous yet able to focus on what really matters.

When reading a document, the indexer has to select the key concepts. Section headings help, as do italicised or bolded

words, but in most cases topic selection depends on close reading of the text.

The next step is wording the entries. The first choice is to use the ‘language of the book’, often with changed order or deletion of unnecessary words. Novice indexers usually have trouble with this, indexing fixing a printer at ‘t’ for ‘troubleshooting’, or ‘h’ for ‘how to’.

Concise, descriptive subheadings are essential. An old-fashioned discussion of the way teachers shape their students could be indexed as ‘students: moulded into ladies’ while a paragraph on buildings in the Macquarie period might be indexed as “public works: as ‘monuments to order’”.

Here is a possible index structure (with page numbers omitted)

**imprisonment**, see jailing of journalists

**jailing of journalists**

- for criminal libel
- for national security issues
- for refusal to reveal sources

**journalists**, see also jailing of journalists

**prison**, see jailing of journalists

**writers**, see also journalists.

It’s nice to be playful with an index. A discussion of plants that kangaroos will leave alone was indexed as “plants: eschewed not chewed by kangaroos”. In *The Indexing Companion* I enjoy the flow of the entry ‘The Indexer: indexing indexing in’, which refers to a discussion about whether a journal on indexing should have any entries starting with the word ‘indexing’.

Indexers also have to remain professionally detached. A comment that Rupert Murdoch was like Attila the Hun was indexed at both ‘Murdoch, Rupert’ and ‘Attila the Hun’, but, despite the temptation, no cross reference was made between the two.

**BIOGRAPHY INDEXING**

Biography indexing has a few special features. The indexer has to determine the themes in the text, which often won’t be explicitly stated, and sub-headings may be indexed in chronological instead of alphabetical order.

Names are the biggest problem. In older works you have to decide

whether ‘May Jenkins’ is the same as ‘Mrs Alan Jenkins’. In a biography of James Milson (after whom Milsons Point in Sydney is named) there are three Alfreds, four Alices, five Florences and ten James, all needing to be distinguished by middle names, nicknames or birth dates. A family tree is a great aid for the indexer.

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Often there is only one name, as in Abednego and Abraham (Abram) – in a book on the Bible; or Tit and Troy – in a book on selling sex. You also need to think about changed names (eg, single, married and divorced). Foreign names cause problems as you need to know whether and where to invert them. Rules are inconsistent across countries – you sort ‘van de Merwe’ at ‘v’ in South Africa, but at ‘m’ in the Netherlands. There is advice on names at the website for *The Indexer*.

You may not need subject knowledge to index a biography, but you do need cultural knowledge. Indexer Madeleine Davis checked whether she should index Rip Curl as Curl, Rip, analogous to Torn, Rip. Her editor replied ‘Madeleine – you Mountain Troll – Rip Curl is a surfwear company!’

**INDEXING SOFTWARE**

Dedicated indexing software is indispensable for indexers as it removes the clerical burden of indexing – it speeds editing, puts entries in alphabetical order, structures them, checks cross references, and outputs different styles. There are three main

programs: SKY Index, CINDEK and Macrex, and all produce a standalone index document.

With embedded indexing, index terms are inserted into the text to which they refer. This means that if the text is moved or deleted, the index terms will move to the new location with the text (or will be deleted), and a regenerated index will refer to the new page numbers. Embedded indexing is increasing in importance with the publication of books in a selection of formats.

Embedded indexing is essential for indexes to ebooks if they are to maintain their functionality. Many ebooks that started as print books have no index, or have a static index with page numbers that worked in print, but are irrelevant in an ebook.

A recent article by indexer Pierke Bosschietter examined 19 ebooks, and found that only two had fully functional indexes with links. One of the books with a linked index was *The Indexing Companion*, which is appropriate. Bosschietter also notes with frustration that it isn’t possible to tell before purchasing a book whether the index it claims to have is linked or not.

**AUTHORS AS INDEXERS**

Sometimes an index tells a story by itself. The subheadings at ‘authors as indexers, in the index to *The Indexer*, indicate some of the concerns that indexers have about author-created indexes.

**authors as indexers**

- alphabetical order, difficulties with ‘author does/does not do it best’ principle
- professional input, desirability long strings
- measuring the quality of natural language order, preference for
- over-indexing, tendency towards ‘Perilous power in authorial hands’
- poor author indexes, handling of training/guidance for

Academic authors often use the concordance generation feature in MS-Word. They create a list of keywords for

important topics, and then automatically generate an index showing the page numbers of all instances of those words. This is a quick approach, but doesn't provide a quality index, and it is not possible for a professional indexer to efficiently 'tidy things up'.

As John Ruskin said: 'It is easy enough to make an index, as it is to make a broom of odds and ends, as rough as oat straw; but to make an index tied up tight, and that will sweep well into corners, isn't so easy.'

### THE FUTURE

It is hard to predict the future of book indexing. The web has led information seekers to depend on search engines, and publishers may question the value of an index for a book that is available electronically. On the other hand, the inability of a search facility to replicate the analysis and structuring that goes into the creation of an index, and the importance of indexes as online marketing tools, both bode well for the future of indexing.

### BOOKS AND INDEXES ONLINE

Publishers supplement printed books with information on the web including appendixes (with links to them from the print index) and indexes. For *The Indexing Companion* the name index is on the web (<http://tinyurl.com/TICNameIdx>), thus saving space in the book, and allowing the creation of a more light-hearted index.

#### Christie, Agatha

indexing plotting books of 139  
[on her attempts to index her notebooks, which was unsuccessful as the ideas for plots were intertwined.]

#### Dessaix, Robert

on filing 'Lenin' first 109  
[on the expectation when he studied in Russia that his bibliographies would start with Lenin, Marx and Engels, and only then move on to the traditional A to Z.]

#### Galsworthy, John

grumblings upon determinism 139  
[on Thomas Mallon's wish that *The Forsyte Saga* had been indexed, so that he might have avoided Galsworthy's 'grumblings upon determinism'.]

#### Hartnett, Sonya

'ride a wild pony' approach 42-43  
[on her description of writing by throwing all the ideas together as they arrive, rather than her later 'dressage' approach where everything is tightly controlled. The same two approaches are relevant in indexing.]

#### Manutius, Aldus

'index copiosissimus' published by 200  
[on the competition between publishers in 1518 on whose edition of *Livy* had a bigger index]

**GLENDA BROWNE is the author or co-author of three books on indexing (*Website Indexing; The Indexing Companion; The Indexing Companion Workbook: Book Indexing*. See [www.webindexing.biz](http://www.webindexing.biz)).**

**She won the 2007 Ig Nobel Award for Literature for an article on alphabetising index entries that start with 'The'.**

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